

An Analysis of the Pragmatic Implicatures of Selected Advert Billboards around Jos Metropolis in Terms of Grice (1975) Maxims of Cooperative Principle

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Abstract

The essence of utterance in discourse, whether spoken or written is that it should elicit some response from the listener (addressee). At times we wonder why people do not behave in conformity with the message intended by the speaker or writer. Could it be due to the non-adherence of the communication to certain pragmatic, syntactic and semantic rules among other things? It is on this basis that this paper focuses on the analysis of pragmatic implicatures observed on selected advert billboards around Jos metropolis in Plateau State, Nigeria. It is primarily aimed at ascertaining the extent of adherence or otherwise of these advert billboards to Grice (1975) Maxims of Cooperative Principle (CP). The study reveals that the strength of the Cooperative Principle lies in the distinction between the Gricean Maxims. In trying to observe a Maxim they violate another. But this does not make the writers poor writers since at times they violate certain maxims in order to arouse the interest of the public to that which is advertised. The paper concludes that CP is important to our understanding of language use in the society because it enables us to know why communication: spoken or written quite often fails and how it can be more successful. Therefore, this paper suggests that advert billboards writers must always note that informativeness is what the public desires.

Keywords: Maxim, implicature, flout, violate, advert, billboard

1. Introduction

Advert billboards are a common means of information dissemination the world over. In other words, they are the mediums through which advertisements are made. Often the simple most spontaneous sounding advertisements are clearly the results not only of ingenuity but also of reflection (writing). The aim of advertisement is quite specific and that is to capture the attention of the members of the mass audience – by means of a short message often verbal but sometimes visual (written) to persuade them to buy a product or to behave in a particular way. Adverts also provide people with information on the place of purchase and nature of the products. Odebunmi (2007) observed that advertisement often shortened as advert is the means by which the consumer accesses the product. Advert messages whether spoken or written get across to a vast number of audiences.

The success or failure of an advert to achieve desired results depends on the language involved. That is whether the writer takes the public into consideration bearing in mind the cooperative nature of communication. It is on this basis that this paper seeks to analyze each of the advert billboards selected in terms of Grice (1975) Maxim of Cooperative Principle.

2. What is Pragmatic Implicature?

This investigation will be impoverished without a résumé of the term pragmatic implicature since it is on this premise that the evaluation of the billboards is made explicit using Grice's maxims of cooperative principle(CP).

Scholars have defined implicature in several ways. Mey (45) sees pragmatic or conversational implicature (as he calls it) as something which is implied in conversation, that is, something which is left implicit in actual language use; the way we understand an utterance in conversation in accordance with what we expect to hear.

For example:

- Speaker A – I have not paid my school fee
 Speaker B - Am I your father? (implicature)
 Speaker C - My book has been stolen
 Speaker D - Then go and look for the thief (implicature)

Grice (1975) uses the term implicature to account for what a speaker can imply, suggest or mean as distinct from what the speaker literally says. By far, conversational implicature is subsumed to mean an implication or suggestion deduced from the point of an utterance. A conversational implicature uses the cooperative principle, which governs the efficient use of conversation. For instance, if someone says “look, the train!” while approaching a railway station, the implicature is “we must hurry”. And not to say “what a lovely color it has”.

Kempson (1984) identifies four characteristics of conversational implicature. They are as follows:

- i. They are dependent on the recognition of the cooperative principle and its maxims.
- ii. They will not be part of the meaning of the lexical items in the sentence since their interpretation depends on a prior understanding of the conventional meaning of the sentence.
- iii. The implication of an utterance will characteristically not be the sole possible interpretation of that utterance. There may be more than one possible assumption, which will reinstate the cooperative principle in the face of an apparent breakage. Since these assumptions are not explicit, they are often indeterminate. For example the interpretation of “you are the cream in my coffee”. Someone hearing such an utterance may be in difficulty of interpretation since it is a metaphorical usage. One may be tempted, in an effort to interpret such, breaks one of the maxims Grice upholds.
- iv. The working of an implicature will depend on assumptions about the world-which the speaker and the hearer share. For example, the interpretation of an utterance: “The police came in and everyone swallowed their cigarettes”. One must have shared knowledge of the world view of the utterance before deducing the meaning.
- v. They are cancelable. That is, an interpretation which is not part of the conventional meaning of the utterance can be explicitly denied without contradiction.

It is thus seen that in actual use sentences will not be restricted to an interpretation determined by the form and meaning of the sentence itself and that these interpretations may vary accordingly as the assumptions made by the speakers and hearer vary.

3. Methodology/Procedure

In order to obtain desired data for the study, five advert billboards were randomly selected across Jos metropolis. They included MTN, Nasco Beauty Soap, P.A.Y.S Unity Bank Plc, Malt Royale and OMO. The inscriptions on each of these boards were copied down and later analyzed bearing in mind the topic of discourse. That is, the data were analyzed on the basis of Grice’s Maxims of Cooperative Principle: Relation, Quality, Quantity and manner.

Also semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifty members of the public and three staff in each of the organizations that wrote the adverts. The questions asked bothered on the topic under investigation. Also, the interviews were conducted in standard English since those interviewed were people with some appreciable degrees of competence in English Language.

4. The Maxims of Cooperative Principle

The Maxims of cooperative principle (CP) as mentioned earlier were propounded in 1975 by a philosopher of language called Paul H.P. Grice. He argues that all speakers regardless of their cultural background adhere to a basic principle governing conversation which he termed the cooperative principle. That is, we assume that in conversation the participants will cooperate with each other when making their contributions.

Levinson (1985) observes that the Gricean Cooperative Principle is constructed as a theory of communication, it has the interesting consequence that it gives an account of how communication might be achieved in the absence of any conventional means for expressing the intended message. A corollary is that it provides an account of how more can be communicated, in his rather strict sense of non-naturally meant, than what is actually said.

Mey (2001) buttresses this by saying communication; furthermore, requires people to cooperate, the “bare” facts of communication come alive only in mutually accepted, pragmatically determined context.

Suffice it to say that the general principle underlying understanding efficient communication is through the CP. That is, communication whether spoken or written is a joint effort. The speaker/writer and the addressee must follow certain pragmatic, syntactic and semantic rules in order to communicate effectively. They have to cooperate.

Grice’s maxims of cooperative principle are conversational implicatures and are a complementary approach to Speech Act Theory. Also, the maxims are social communicative ones and are important in everyday conversational exchange but often impinged for some social purposes, for example politeness for one’s guest.

Brown and Yule (1983) cited in Kolo (2007), maintain that the notion of “implicature” introduced by Grice (1975) is to account for the distinction between what is said and what is implicated by a speaker or in other words what the speaker can imply, suggest or mean as distinct from what the speaker literally says.

According to Peccei (1999) Grice sums up the Cooperative Principle into four conventional maxims namely, relevance (relation), quality, quantity and manner.

4.1 Relevance: Be Relevant

This means that in every conversational situation the speaker/hearer should adhere to the topic of their conversation. They must always ensure that they give only information that is related to the conversation and in their interaction with each other. Grice illustrates as follows:

... if I am mixing ingredients for a cake,
I do not expect to be handed a good book, even cloth...

The implication here is that ‘book’ and ‘cloth’ are irrelevant in the context. So in communication, it is unnecessary to include issues not related to the topic under consideration. Avoid padding and circumlocutions.

4.2 Quality

This maxim calls for honesty and sincerity on the part of participants in a discourse. They should not say or give information which they believe is false or which they do not have adequate evidence or are not sure of. In other words, they should try to make their contributions truthful. In fact, the maxim of quality has some form of moral tone attached to it.

Grice speaking about this maxim says,

I expect your contribution to be genuine and not spurious. If I need sugar as an ingredient in the cake you are assisting me to make, I do not expect you to hand me salt...

4.3 Quantity

The maxim means every speaker should be informative in a discourse by saying the right amount of what is required. A speaker should not say more or less than what is necessary for the moment. Verbosity and redundancy weakens the interest of the listener and makes the reader confused. However, being brief does not entail leaving out vital points as this will affect the hearer’s or reader’s understanding.

Grice puts it as follows:

If you are assisting me to mend a car, I expect your contribution to be neither more nor less than is required; if for example, at a particular stage I need four screws, I expect you to hand me four rather than two or six.

Leech (1983) supports this by quoting O’ Hair as follows:

Unless there are outweighing good reasons to the contrary, one should not make a weaker statement rather than a stronger one if the audience is interested in the extra information that would be conveyed by the latter.

4.4 Manner

Peccei (1999) calls this maxim of clarity. Grice uses it to mean participants in a discourse should not make their contributions obscure, ambiguous or difficult to understand. It is a call for parties in any communication discourse to be perspicuous (clear). Besides, they should be very brief and organized. High sounding and jaw breaking as well as

complex words and phrases should be avoided because the essence of communication is that the hearer should be able to understand. A speaker should not use words for self aggrandizement or to earn cheap praise. Furthermore, the maxim requires politeness (treat your listeners as you would like to be treated).

Mey (2001) sums up the four maxims in these words:

Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

Suffice it to say that there are instances whereby some or a maxim is broken in conversation. That is there are times when that happens, it does not mean that communication has broken down rather it means the maxim have been flouted. This is captured by Peccei thus:

Grice pointed out that these maxims are not always observed, but he makes a distinction between ‘quietly’ violating a maxim and openly flouting a maxim. Violations are quiet in the sense that it is not obvious at the time of the utterance that the speaker has deliberately lied, supplied information, or been ambiguous, irrelevant or hard to understand.

Grice holds that these violations might hamper or distort communication but they do not lead to implicatures. What leads to implicatures is a situation where the speaker flouts a maxim. That is, it is obvious to the hearer at the time of the utterance that the speaker has deliberately and quiet openly failed to observe one or more maxims. He argues further that there are instances in which a speaker knowingly fails to fulfill the maxim.

1. A speaker may quietly and willingly violate a maxim. If so, in some cases, he will be liable to mislead.
2. He may opt out from the operation both of the maxim and the CP. This, he may do, by indicating clearly that he is unwilling to cooperate as the maxim requires. He may say, for example, “I cannot say more, my lips are sealed” etcetera.
3. He may be forced by a clash of maxims as he may violate a maxim in the attempt to fulfill another. For instance, in his attempt to be as informative as is required, he may be violating the maxim of quality: have adequate evidence for what you are saying.
4. He may flout a maxim blatantly.

These instances of violation may be grouped into “quiet” violation and “open” flouting. A speaker violates a maxim quietly when the violation is not obvious at the time the utterance is made. Hence, it will not be obvious that the speaker has deliberately told a lie, given insufficient information or being ambiguous. These types of violation Grice argues do not have implicature but they distort communication.

A speaker openly flouts a maxim in such a way that is obvious to the hearer at the time the utterance is made. The speaker gives a signal called hedges to show that he is aware of the violation and the hearer by implication is able to infer the meaning due to some shared condition for conversational implicature. The conversation below explains further.

A: Where is the car?

B: Daddy has gone out.

The second speaker above has violated the maxim of quality and relevance because his information is not as informative as is required. Besides, his response has no relevance to the question asked by the first speaker. But by the previously shared knowledge that Daddy always goes out with the car and the second speaker’s presupposition that the first speaker is aware, the statement of the second speaker by implication means, Daddy took the car out.

Even though the Gricean Maxims in question pertain mostly to verbal or oral communication, this paper attempts to analyze written texts (advert billboards) to ascertain whether these maxims are violated or upheld as seen below:

5. Analysis of the Billboards

This section discusses each of the advert billboards in relation to the Maxims of cooperative principle postulated by Grice (1975).

5.1 Billboard Number 1

MTN

Everywhere you go.

Looking at the billboard above, it is clear that the writer violates the maxim of quality which requires him to write only what he believes to be true and have evidence for whatever he writes. The statement ‘Everywhere you go’ attests to the writer’s insincerity. How true is it that everywhere you go you will find this network? Take Nigeria for instance do we find MTN in every nook and cranny? What evidence has the writer that the network is everywhere? Has he traveled to all places? In fact, everywhere could mean all places across the globe which is sweeping.

Maxim of quantity is also violated. The information is less than what is required or necessary for the moment. The adverb everywhere is indefinite. What about places where MTN is not available? The writer has employed brevity at the expense of clarity which has adversely affected the communication or message intended.

There is a violation of maxim of manner. The advert is to some extent obscure. Is the writer saying MTN goes everywhere or that everywhere people go they will find MTN? The message is not perspicuous or intelligible in the sense of conveying the intended illocutionary goal to the addressee (public).

5.2 Billboard Number 2

NASCO

Beauty Soap

Brings out the beauty in you.

At a glance we discover that the billboard violates the maxim of quality. How true is it that the soap in question brings out the beauty in its users? What evidence has the writer for making such a claim or statement? Does it mean that an ugly person who uses the soap will become beautiful?

There is violation of the maxim of manner. Even though the writer has maintained orderliness void of repetition, the expression “Brings out the beauty in you” is figuratively used. An average reader might not understand it. So, clarity is not achieved as expected. It would have been more appropriate for the writer to say “Beauty soap smoothens your skin”. In fact, “How what is said is to be said” is not considered by the writer.

The advert also violates the maxim of quantity. The information given is not adequate enough to facilitate the understanding of the audience. In trying to be brief the writer says less than necessary.

5.3 Billboard Number 3

P.A.Y.S

I don’t have to wait forever

It’s now!

It’s Easy. It’s flexible

It’s convenient. It pays!

Unity Bank Plc.

P.A.Y.S

The advert above is by Unity Banks Plc. On the billboard we find some elements of graphology- a woman in purdah, car, television set and other valuables. But the writing is not explanatory enough to make the public know and understand what the bank is advertising. The reader of this analysis may wish to know that because of the obscure nature of the billboard the researchers had to approach one of the staff of the bank for an interview.

Relating this advert to the Gricean Maxim of manner for instance, we find out that there is a violation. The advert is vague. Its content is not perspicuous. The ‘Lexeme’ P.A.Y.S leaves the public in confusion. Does it refer to the word pays or an acronym for a policy? The information here is concealed. For the public, it does not seem to have any meaning. Besides, the statement ‘I don’t have to wait forever’ is not explicit since one might ask – wait for what? Its vagueness might cause the public to assign varying interpretations to the advert. The violation of Maxim of manner is obvious as in the advert of Coca-cola – “it’s the taste”- (<http://grammar.about.com/od/c/g/cooperativeprincipleterm.htm>).

There is a violation of the maxim of quality. Most of the words and sentences used by the writer are relative in nature. They point to the insincerity of the writer. Even if the public understand the message, how true is it that it is ‘NOW’, ‘flexible’, ‘convenient’ and that it pays? What evidence does he have to justify these claims? Who has tested that which is advertised to ascertain the extent to which it is flexible, convenient and that it pays?

From the fore-going discussion we deduce that the writer also violates the maxim of quantity by including at the same time, too much and too little information; too much information for the public who do not know anything about P-A-Y-S. A statement such as “P-A-Y-S Savings Schemes now available” would have been more informative.

The maxim of relevance is also violated since the claim about the immediacy, flexibility and convenience of that which is advertised is not necessary. There is violation of Maxim of relevance as in:

Mom: Have you done your home work?

Son: My bicycle is broken.

(<http://grammar.about.com/od/c/g/cooperativeprincipleterm.htm>).

5.4 Billboard Number 4

Non-Alcoholic

Malt

Royale

Vitamin Enriched

The Nourishing Family Drink Everyone Enjoys

The advert violates maxim of quality, we tend to wonder whether the writer has enough evidence to substantiate some of the utterances like ‘Vitamins Enriched’ and ‘the nourishing family drink everyone enjoys’. What is the writer’s basis for using these words ‘nourishing’ ‘everyone’ and ‘enjoys’? How many people or families has he experimented with that informed his conclusion? Besides, does everyone take MALT ROYALE? The truth of this generalization cannot be ascertained even by the writer.

There is no violation of the maxim of manner since the information is not obscure, ambiguous or difficult to understand.

In terms of quantity there is no violation since brevity is observed. Besides, the writing is informative enough.

Maxim of relevance is not violated here. Information supplied relates to the context.

5.5 Billboard Number 5

OMO

The road to success is full of stain

Maxim of manner is not observed in the billboard. This is evident in the statement: “The road to success is full of stains”. Does it mean that ‘OMO’ is the road to success and that it is full of stains or what? What is the relationship between ‘omo’ and ‘road’, and even ‘success’? The statement is figuratively used which is a violation of the maxim under consideration. Success could be used in diverse fields- academics, sports, politics, religion etcetera. ‘Stain’ is relative as there are some stains that are not visible; for instance, an individual behaving hypocritical.

We can argue too that the maxim of quantity is violated. The writer says the road to success is full of stains but he has not told us what omo does or will do to the stains. It is clear that he wants to achieve brevity but he leaves out what we may refer to as the most vital information.

The billboard also violates the maxim of quality, if the writer’s claim is that the road to success is full of stains and that only omo can wash the stains off, what evidence does he have for making such a claim? If omo does it, why do people use bleach and other stain removers even when they have omo at their disposal?

From the discussion so far, it is deducible that the billboard also violates the maxim of relevance. Since the statement “the road to success is full of stains” is figuratively used here, it is uncalled for. A straight forward sentence with simple words which are related to the detergent being advertised should be used in its place.

6. Conclusion

From the analysis of the billboards, based on Grice’s Maxims of Cooperative Principle, it is observed that the strength of the Cooperative Principle lies in the distinction between the sense of an utterance and its force. The illocutionary force of an utterance cannot be accounted for absolutely by semantic rules but in the totality of previously shared values and presuppositions of the speakers and hearers.

It is deducible that most advert billboards tend to violate the Gricean Maxims. In trying to observe a maxim they violate another. As shown earlier, in attempting to give information up to the required measure the billboards may be violating the maxim of quality. This constitutes a pitfall to the Cooperative Principle because if the observance of a traffic rule will lead to the violation of others, how often shall we experience accident on our highways.

In spite of the violation of the Gricean Maxims by advert billboard writers, we cannot say they are poor writers. We must be conscious of the fact that violation can be 'quietly' or 'openly' done. In adverts, at times writers flout the maxim of quantity by giving little information so as to arouse the interest of the public towards that which is advertised or to keep the public in suspense. Another reason is that the advert has to obey certain textual rules Slobin (1975) outlines as follows:

1. 'Be humanly processible in ongoing time';
2. 'Be clear';
3. 'Be quick and easy';
4. 'Be expressive'.

Slobin argues that these precepts are observed by languages themselves, rather than by the users of languages. Leech however observes these principles in the exercise of 'stylistic preference' in language use. He labels Slobin's principles as follows:

1. Processibility principle
2. Clarity principle
3. Economy principle
4. Expressivity principle

6.1 The Processibility Principle

Recommends that the text should be presented in a manner which makes it easy for the hearer to decode in time. A text is essentially linear and time-bound: thus in encoding we are often presented with choices as such:

- a. how to segment the message into units;
- b. how to assign degrees of prominence or subordination to different parts of the message; and
- c. how to order the parts of the message. These three types of decisions are interrelated.

6.2 The Clarity Principle

Is broken down into two maxims:

- a. Transparency maxims:** a message which is perspicuous or intelligible in the sense of conveying the intended illocutionary goal to an addressee
- b. Ambiguity maxim:** an utterance must not generate more than one meaning. Leech (1983).

6.3 The Economy Principle

('Be quick and easy') can be regarded as a valuable precept not only for the hearer but also for the speaker. If one can shorten the text while keeping the message unimpaired, this reduces the amount of time and effort involved both in encoding and in decoding.

6.4 The Expressivity Principle

The Expressivity Principle is concerned 'with effectiveness in a broad sense which includes expressive and aesthetic aspects of communication rather than simply with efficiency' Leech (1983). It is essential to note that these pragmatic principles do not exist in isolation and by asserting all these maxims it is not intended that all speakers are required to adhere to them strictly on a superficial level, as this seems quite impossible to achieve. Levinson believes that it is the listeners who ought to interpret what the speakers say as conforming to, flouting or violating the maxims to a certain degree.

In conclusion, Grice's Cooperative Principle is invaluable to our understanding of language use in the society in view of the fact that it enables us know why communication: spoken or written quite often fails and how it can be more successful.

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