

‘I just said It, I didn’t mean anything:’ Culture and Pragmatic Inference in Interpersonal Communication

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Abstract

Socio-cultural practices and the economy of expression, which generally characterise human communication, significantly widen the gap between linguistic meaning and speaker’s meaning. What the hearer does is to construct hypotheses about the speaker’s meaning based on contextual and background assumptions and the general principles that speakers are supposed to observe in normal circumstances (Kecskés, 2009, p.106). Drawing examples from spoken data selected from interpersonal interactions and analysed within the relevance-theoretic framework of inferential pragmatics, this paper demonstrates how cultural considerations function as inputs to the cognitive process, and how the human capacity for inference is crucially important in interpersonal communication.

Keywords: culture, pragmatic inference, interpersonal communication, relevance, cognition.

Introduction

This paper is essentially an application of pragmatics to the study of interpersonal communication and its main focus is on how cultural norms and the human capacity for inference bridge the gap between encoded linguistic meaning and speaker’s meaning which are often at variance. It is based on the Relevance-theoretic framework of pragmatics and as such, it emphasises the cognitive aspects of interpersonal communication. It argues that within specific communities of practice, cultural considerations are necessary inputs to the cognitive process, and that the human capacity for inference is crucially important in interpersonal communication in these contexts. Generally, communication involves ‘the transmission of messages between individuals acting consciously and intentionally for that end’ (Harder, 2009, p. 62). It is an integral part of our

daily lives and it is so pervasive that we often do not realise how much we depend on it for survival. As Wood (2010, p. 57) has argued, 'we communicate to develop identities, establish and build relationships, coordinate efforts with others, have impact on issues that matter to us, and work out problems and possibilities.' In an interpersonal communication, participants relate with one another in a face-to-face context and the contents of their interaction, according to Hartley (1999, p. 20), should 'reflect the personal characteristics of the individuals as well as their social roles and relationships.' Arundale (2013) explains that interpersonal communication is a sub-discipline of Communication that has flourished in North America since the 1970s. He describes it as 'a complex interactional process of at least two participants placing utterances adjacent to one another's in sequence' (p.21).

The foundation of interpersonal communication is built on human relations, a situation in which participants recognise the personhood and the uniqueness of the individual within the ambit of the interaction (Stewart, 2009). It has also been noted that research in interpersonal communication is currently pushing the boundaries, going beyond traditional notions of creating social relationships to include conflict and cooperation and even the use of technologies in interaction (Knapp & Daly, 2011).

As illuminating as these studies on interpersonal communication might be, most of them have not emphasised the significance of cultural peculiarities and the role of pragmatic inference in the communication process. Yet, these are essential in creating understanding and appropriate responses that facilitate the achievement of interactional goals. Antos et al. (2008, p. 9) explain interpersonal communication as a means by which 'interactants manage to exchange facts, ideas, views, opinions, beliefs, etc. by using the linguistic system together with the resources it offers.' But apart from the exchange of facts, ideas, views, etc., participants in interpersonal encounters create contexts or situations that reflect the fact that communication is a form of action, and that understanding such actions requires appropriate inference. According to Sperber and Wilson, 'human beings are efficient information-processing devices' (1995, p.46). Such processing capability leads to the emergence of meanings not previously conceived or prefigured. The ability to attribute intentions, attitudes and thoughts to the communicator in a given instance is a necessary condition for effective communication. Crucially, the entire process is mediated by the cultural practices which form the background in which participants interact. As Knoblauch (2000) has also observed, 'it is by way of interactions that cultural meanings are negotiated. Since these negotiations are performed by communicative actions, the social-cultural world of everyday life is not only being continuously constructed, it is essentially cultural' (p. 24). This study explores the role of culturally-conditioned practices and pragmatic inference in interpersonal communication. Although it draws insights from other notions

such as (im)politeness, face (work) and the Gricean principle, its main focus is the cognitive aspects of interaction as mediated by cultural considerations in a given community of practice (Senft et al, 2009)

The data analysed in this study are a part of collections mainly based on personal experiences of the authors', as documented over time and recreated for the present purposes. They represent diverse situations and experiences, among family members, commuters and colleagues in the work place. Three texts are selected, the third constructed from authors' knowledge of local conversation in a specific context. Two of them are situated within domestic settings, where participants know each other well. The other has a non-domestic setting, conflictual in nature, and the participants have less knowledge of each other. The outcome of the analyses is the product of the researchers' intuitions based on the pragmatic theory applied. The procedure is also emergent in nature because the conclusions drawn from the analyses of the data simply emerge in the process of theoretical application and analysis. In the sections that follow, we examine the nature of culture, communication and pragmatic inference; the notion of interpersonal pragmatics and its relationship with interpersonal communication; our theoretical framework and finally data presentation and analyses.

Culture, Communication and Inference

Culture is a notion with multiple meanings. Spencer-Oatey (2000) explains culture as some fuzzy set of attitudes, beliefs and patterns of behaviour including basic assumptions and values which a particular group of people share and which ultimately influence how they see and interpret the world. Culture is a cognitive as well as a social phenomenon. As a cognitive phenomenon it enables us to interpret the world (Knoblauch, 2000, p.24). As a social phenomenon, culture includes all the valuations and systems of orientation that come into the communicative act. In this regard, it embodies 'discourses, texts, symbolic practices and communicative events that constitute the on-going stream of social life' (Knoblauch, 2000, p. 25). This presupposes that culture is inseparably linked to interpersonal communication. Hill et al. (2007) argue that:

the communicative process is an integral part of the culture in which it takes place. The signs, symbols and codes that are the building blocks of the interpersonal communication process are located in cultures. The meanings they convey rely to a considerable extent upon shared cultural understandings. (p. 1)

As this study demonstrates, many of the elements that inform interpersonal communication are invariably motivated by cultural understandings. For example, the notions of face, (im)politeness, self-identity construction and the like are developed 'within the larger web of culture' (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 28).

In normal communication encounters, meaning is often generated through an inferential process which combines new information with the information already stored in memory. Weber (1998) refers to the information stored in the mind as 'cognitive models or schemata.' These are simply sets of beliefs, assumptions and expectations, and they are stored in chunks or modules, not individually (p. 115). Generally, a schema is 'a structure in semantic memory that specifies general or expected arrangement of a body of information' (Carroll, 2004 p. 171). As 'well-integrated packets of knowledge about the world' (Eysenck & Keane, 2010, p.401), schemata are usually derived from experience and they vary from person to person. Shared cultural experiences can result in the overlap of schemata in some people, which ultimately influences discourse processing (Culpeper, 2011 p.11). Speaker and hearer find it easier to communicate when their schemata are similar, when they share many or a set of assumptions. For this reason, we can say both belong to the same 'interpretative' community. Weber (1998, p. 115) states that 'such a set of shared presumptions, assumptions, beliefs, values and cultural practices constitute a world-view, a version of reality which comes to be accepted as common sense within a particular community,' and which, in remarkable ways, facilitates interpersonal communication. Divergent schemata or cognitive models are products of differences in cultural orientation, and these naturally lead to communication breakdown in many conversational interactions (Peeters 2015; Sharifian 2015; Storey 2015; Kecskes 2015).

The Notion of Interpersonal Pragmatics

As works by Stewart (2009), Baxter and Braithwaite (2008), Locher and Watts (2005, 2008), Locher and Graham (2010), Spencer-Oatey (2007, 2011), Arundale (2006, 2010a, 2010b, 2013), O'Driscoll (2013) show, interpersonal pragmatics and interpersonal communication interface in many ways and research in both areas has flourished within the last decade. From a lay person's point of view, the etymology of the word 'interpersonal' which modifies the two concepts presupposes some form of relationship or relating between two or more entities. Interpersonal pragmatics captures the essence of linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour of participants in the context of one-on-one interaction. Locher and Graham (2010) explain it as the study of the ways in which 'social actors use language to shape and form relationship in situ' (p. 1).

According to Arundale (2013), the present interest in interpersonal pragmatics can be traced to Leech's (1983) concept of interpersonal rhetoric, Brown and Levinson's (1987) polemic on politeness, and Locher and Watts' (2005, 2008) relational work approach to the notions of face and politeness, to mention but a few instances. Like the general field of pragmatics itself, the ideas in interpersonal pragmatics have emanated from several areas of interest. This perhaps accounts for the divergent notions and perceptions about the workings of interpersonal pragmatics. For instance, Locher and Bousfield (2008) view the

interactions that occur in interpersonal pragmatics within a relational context (p. 5). They share the same notion with Locher and Watts (2008) who explain relational contexts as ‘all aspects of the work invested by individuals in the construction and transformation of interpersonal relationships among those engaged in social practice.’ (p. 96). Spencer-Oatey (2007) views this relationship in terms of rapport management while for Jim O’Driscoll (2013), language is secondary in the analysis of interpersonal pragmatics. He stresses this fact by providing a defamatory account of language in his analysis of an interpersonal encounter. According to him, ‘if we are serious about a participant perspective on interaction, our analysis need to remove words from their traditionally central position,’ as the ultimate aim of analysing interpersonal encounters should not be ‘the understanding of language but rather that of human social relation’ (p. 174, 175). Arundale (2010) conceptualizes interpersonal pragmatics in terms of ‘Face Constituting Theory’ (FCT). Most importantly, he argues that since there is much overlap between research in interpersonal communication and the research interest in (im)politeness, face (work) and the like, interpersonal pragmatics should not be conceived of as a sub-discipline independent of interpersonal communication, which Fisher and Adams (1994, p.18) define as ‘the process creating social relationship between at least two people by acting in concert with another.’ Arundale (2013) proposes an interpersonal pragmatics which primarily offers ‘a pragmatics perspective on interpersonal aspects of communication and interaction,’ an interpersonal pragmatics directed at building ‘bridges between the fields of pragmatics and communication and other related fields’ (p. 2). To this extent, interpersonal pragmatics is conceived of as interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary.

To echo Arundale here, this study actually offers a pragmatics perspective on interpersonal communication. Although the notion of face and its many manifestations, including relational work and identity construction are important elements in interpersonal pragmatics and communication, this study privileges cultural and even familial expectations and norms from which participants draw inferences that regulate linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour and interactions in specific contexts.

Relevance

Relevance theory is a cognitive theory of meaning which explains how we comprehend and interpret information in given contexts. It is inspired by H.P. Grice’s inferential communication model and it shares Grice’s intuitions that utterances raise expectations of relevance (Grice, 1989, pp. 30-31). In Grice’s view, communication is a rational and cooperative endeavour, and the reasoning process is governed by this cooperative principle and four maxims, which he termed Quantity, Quality, Relevance and Manner (1989, pp. 30-31). Speakers may fail to adhere to these maxims in many different ways and thus, produce

‘implicatures’ (Lindblom, 2009, p. 153; Grundy, 2008 p. 92).

Relevance theory questions the rationale behind Grice’s Cooperative Principle (CP) and the maxims, especially the role of deliberate maxim violation, and the treatment of tropes as violation of the maxim of truthfulness. Relevance theory argues that the expectations of pertinence raised by an utterance are precise enough to guide the hearer towards speaker’s meaning (Wilson & Sperber, 2002, p. 250). The major claims of the theory are that the decoded sentence meaning is capable of being interpreted in a number of different ways in the same context. Further, it argues that these interpretations are not equally accessible to us and that we rely on a rather powerful criterion when selecting the most appropriate interpretation – that is, the most accessible, which ultimately cancels out other interpretations in the context (Wilson & Sperber, 2002, p. 250; Yus, 2009, p. 854). As a cognitive theory of meaning, relevance is arguably best suited for the interpretation of inferential processes. The theory is anchored on two principles: the cognitive principle, which states that human cognition is designed to maximize relevance, and the communicative principle, which states that every ostensive communication comes with a presumption of its own relevance (Wilson & Sperber, 2002, p. 254).

Sperber and Wilson (1995) further state: ‘a communicator who produces an ostensive stimulus is trying to fulfill two intentions... the informative intention, to make manifest to her audience a set of assumptions... and the communicative intention, to make her informative intention mutually manifest’ (p.163). Relevance theory sees communicative interaction as a matter of adjusting mutual cognitive environment. The claim here is that since meaning is associated with the speaker’s intention, it is the speaker’s duty to make manifest his or her intention to communicate a particular piece of information in some way. What the hearer does then is to pin down the speaker’s meaning based on the evidence that conveys the speaker’s intention as provided in the utterance. These are the principles on which interpersonal communication and pragmatics are anchored. The section below is on data presentation and analysis.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Text One: ‘I didn’t mean anything, I just said it.’

(In the text below, a woman reports an encounter with her mother-in-law a few hours before she (the daughter-in-law) came to the office. For convenience, participants in the encounter are renamed as follows: the woman as NGOZI, her mother-in-law as MOTHER and the third participant as EZE. The utterances are numbered for ease of reference.

1. EZE: You don't look happy this morning, Ngozi. Hope everything is all right.
2. NGOZI: Well, I don't know. (*Whispers*) Let me tell you something. My mother-in-law made me afraid this morning. I'm terribly worried. In fact, I don't know what to do.

NGOZI apparently loved her mother-in-law who was already 87, and had been visiting for about four weeks. It was time for the mother-in-law to go back to Lagos where she lived. That morning she called her daughter-in-law and began:

3. MOTHER: I still remember what happened during your marriage to my son – everything your family did. I love them all... When I'm gone, please take good care of my son. Be a mother to my son. He should also be a father to you. Never allow anything to come between both of you...
4. NGOZI: Okay Mama. But why are you telling me all this?
5. MOTHER: Don't worry. Just continue to be good. Let me go and pack my bags.

6. NGOZI (*to EZE*): I'm afraid. This kind of talk seems to show that she may not be long with us. Is she going to die soon? What do you think?
7. EZE: Well, I'm not in a position to know such things, but what actually happened between both of you before this solemn advice? What did you say to her?
8. NGOZI: (*She paused, and then sighed*) I only told her to come and pose for a photograph, and then I remarked that when Papa (her husband) died it was difficult for us to find a good photograph for his obituary publication. But I didn't mean anything, I just said it.

Before we examine what transpired between these two women, which is our main focus, we need to briefly look at the beginning of NGOZI'S meeting with EZE. The first pragmatic inference is made by EZE, and this happens before she even uttered a word. It is based on EZE'S observation of her looks as he wondered whether everything was all right with her (1). This shows the close

relationship both share as colleagues and explains the reason she could stop over in EZE'S office for a chat. EZE'S inference here is based on his observation of her emotions which is part of the requirement of interpersonal communication - to treat interactants as *persons* or unique individuals as opposed to communication that is 'based on social roles and exchanges that minimise the presence of the communicator's personal identities' (Stewart, 2009, p. 32). In 2, 'well, I don't know' is an indication of her inability to interpret her feelings at the time. Then, she *whispers* as if to avoid being overheard; meanwhile, there was no third party around. This again indicates the level of her fears. In this community, for some unknown reason, certain important matters are often discussed in whispers even where there is no threat of a third party or someone listening in. Such linguistic behaviour, however, produces in the hearer, a sense of gravity with which to regard the matter at stake. A similar action is repeated in 8 as '*she paused and then sighed*, 'this time, as a kind of anticipation of her probable culpability in the entire drama. These situations appear to support O'Driscoll (2013), who stresses the preeminence of actions and moves over the use of language in interpersonal interactions.

Now we come to what transpired between NGOZI and MOTHER. As Wilson and Sperber (2002) argue, "our perceptual mechanisms tend automatically to pick out potentially relevant stimuli, our memory retrieval mechanisms tend automatically to activate potentially relevant assumptions, and our inferential mechanisms tend spontaneously to process them in the most productive way" (p. 250). Generally, photographs are meant to preserve memories and they are often delightful objects among family treasures. This is the real world knowledge which the participants share. But photographs could also be a source of worry. For example, sometimes they remind you of how old you have become and how powerless you are against the aging forces. They can even recall memories you wish to forget. For the elderly, especially in the Southern part of Nigeria, where the death of old persons is celebrated with pump and pageantry as part of the culture, asking an old woman to come for a photograph (especially if the request is made by her children) could be a reminder of her mortality. So, ordinarily, in the above case, NGOZI'S request could give rise to a few contextual assumptions by her mother-in-law:

- a. My daughter-in-law loves me very much and wants to remember me.
- b. Everybody in the family wants to cherish the times we have had together.
- c. Perhaps my daughter-in-law thinks my time is near.
- d. This gesture is part of the preparation for my death and funerals.

In a normal communicative situation within this culture, a-c could be activated to a certain degree, with c most likely to be more relevant to the speaker's meaning. But the situation here is rather marked because of the remark about her late father-in-law and the difficulty of finding a suitable photograph for his obituary announcements. We observe here that whether old or young, we all do have the ability to attribute mental states, thoughts and intentions to the speaker in the process of interpersonal communication. This is part of our cognitive endowment. The intention of NGOZI matches the interpretation of MOTHER in d, and naturally leads to the parting words in our text which became a source of worry to NGOZI.

We are looking at communication as an inferential activity that is somewhat mutual in the sense that both the speaker and the hearer are engaged in the process. Although NGOZI'S remark about her father-in-law was an aside, it was intended for the addressee to recognise and process in order to see the urgency or even the necessity of the action requested. MOTHER recalls the marriage of her son and this woman with some nostalgia. She does not say what happened on the occasion, or what her in-laws did. But by saying '*I love them all*', NGOZI can infer that they did well. Next, we observe the remark, '*when I'm gone*.' Two contextual assumptions may be relevant to NGOZI here and she is likely to make her inferences accordingly. (a) "when I have returned to Lagos" (b) "when I am dead." Although MOTHER was preparing to return to Lagos that morning, (a) is likely to be less relevant to NGOZI than (b). Once again the idea of culture comes into play. In this part of Nigeria, death is seen as a journey to another world, where life continues. This is why, during traditional burials, so much sacrifice is made to pave the way for the dead. And if there is any suspicion that the cause of death is not natural, weapons are provided in the grave - weapons the dead person could use to attack his/her killer. So, based on the context of the utterance, NGOZI should understand it as in (b). Furthermore, the utterance, '*Be a mother to my son*' also shows she was speaking of her death. Since it is not naturally possible to have two mothers at the same time, NGOZI should see this responsibility as something that should come after the death of her mother-in-law.

Finally, we come to NGOZI'S last statement: 'I didn't mean anything; I just said it.' We begin by enriching two indeterminate items in the utterance namely, 'anything' and 'it'. In relevance-theoretic terms, enrichment picks a particular lexical item in the context and strengthens the concept it encodes (Carston, 1996, p. 62; 2002, p. 57; 2010, p. 217). Put mildly, 'anything' here means anything harmful, so that the sentence could read: 'I didn't mean anything harmful.' 'Anything' could also mean 'death'. Then, 'it' in the context anaphorically picks up her remarks about her father-in-law, and thus identifies the main bone of contention. A cognitive view of culture sees culture as a learned behaviour, as one's knowledge of the world. This means that members of a particular culture

share some things in common – patterns of thought, ways of understanding the world, making inferences, and predictions (Duranti, 1997,p. 27). Following Wilson and Carston (2008), we can schematise the inferential process of MOTHER as follows:

Hearer's Interpretive Assumptions	The Bases for the Assumptions
(a) NGOZI has said to her mother-in-law: ‘When Papa died it was difficult to find a good photograph for the obituary announcements.’	<i>Decoding of NGOZI'S utterance</i>
(b) NGOZI'S utterance is optimally relevance to the hearer	<i>Expectation raised by the recognition of NGOZI'S utterance as a communicative act, and the acceptance of the presumption of relevance it automatically conveys.</i>
(c) NGOZI’S utterance will achieve relevance by providing a reason why the hearer should accede to the request for a photograph of hers to be taken.	<i>Expectation raised by (b), together with the fact that such explanation would be most relevant to the hearer at this point.</i>
(d) Good photographs are necessary for obituary announcements.	<i>First assumption to occur to the hearer which, together with other appropriate premises, might satisfy (c)</i>
(e) At present she does not have a good phonograph.	<i>Accepted as implicit premise of NGOZI'S utterance</i>
(f) When Papa [her husband] died and the children needed to make his obituary announcement, they could not find a suitable photograph [of his] for the announcement, [a situation her daughter-in-law does not want repeated]	<i>(An explanation of) the first enriched interpretation of NGOZI'S utterance as decoded in (a) to occur to hearer which, together with (d) and (e), might lead to the satisfaction of (c), interpretation accepted as NGOZI'S explicit meaning.</i>
(g) She needs this photograph for her own obituary announcement.	<i>Inferred from (d) and (e), contributing to the satisfaction of (b) and (c), and accepted as an implicit conclusion of NGOZI'S utterance.</i>
(h) She needs to begin to prepare for her death/ her daughter-in-law believes the hearer’s time is near/ her daughter-in-law is unfeeling to remind the hearer of her mortality.	<i>Inferred from (e), (f) and (g), contributing to the satisfaction of (b) and (c), and accepted as some of the several weak implicatures arising from NGOZI'S utterance.</i>

As Wilson and Sperber (2002) argue, the comprehension process such as the one just described need not proceed sequentially. Interpretation is often carried out ‘online’, and usually begins ‘while the utterance is still in progress’ (p. 237). What the hearer does is to continue to make hypotheses and adjustments of the line of interpretation provided by the speaker as the process continues. One principle that guides the entire process here is ‘accessibility.’ The more accessible a particular interpretation is in relation to others, the more relevant that interpretation is to the hearer. On the whole, the emergence of meaning that ultimately meets the hearer’s expectation of relevance is a function of the interaction of cultural sensibilities and cognitive dispositions, which, as we have seen, are crucially linked. Many of our utterances acquire their meanings from these domains, whether we are conscious of it or not. In fact, we are hardly aware of how far or how much our thought patterns, ways of seeing the world, things we say or do, are moulded or influenced by our culture or our collective consciousness or what Weber calls ‘cognitive models or schemata.’ No matter how different the effect of our utterances seems to be from what we think we intended originally, chances are that the so-called cognitive models have such powerful influences on our intentions so that the outcomes of our utterances are nearly always what a member of the same speech community thinks them to be, even though they do not have direct access to our intentions. Therefore, NGOZI’S motivation for the ostensive behaviour of asking her mother-in-law to take a few photographs, her actions in the context, and the remarks about her father-in-law, lies buried in her consciousness as a member of a culture in which certain inferences about old persons and death are made salient (Underhill 2012).

Text Two: The Bus Conductor

In Nigeria, bus conductors are generally despised by members of the public. This is because many of them are considered rude, mercenary or even crime-prone. On this particular occasion, one of them had a clash with a young woman in the bus as they commuted from one part of the city to another. In the transport system, fares are usually negotiable. The encounter is recreated here.

1. CONDUCTOR: Woman, your money.
2. WOMAN: I’ve paid already. Let me have my change, please.
3. CONDUCTOR: What change? I told you it’s a hundred naira before you boarded.
4. WOMAN: No! You never said anything.

5. CONDUCTOR: But you're supposed to know even if I don't say anything.
6. WOMAN: This short distance? (*standing up*) Please my change.
7. CONDUCTOR: Woman, behave yourself. Don't disturb my job.
8. WOMAN: (*long silence, just staring*) Useless people. This is what you always do.
9. CONDUCTOR: I'm doing my job, if you disturb me you'll regret it (*begins to sing*).
10. WOMAN: Job indeed! Bus conductor. So you call this a job. Can't you see your mates?
11. CONDUCTOR: At least it's better than prostitution.
12. WOMAN: (*furious*) What? Who are you calling a prostitute...eh? It's your grandmother that is a prostitute...
13. CONDUCTOR: Woman, you know where you dey come from?
14. WOMAN: Where I dey come from? Nobi market I go? Na your grandmother dey come from hotel (*brothel*).

This verbal assault continued from both sides with greater and more damaging invectives as passengers drew close to the last bus stop. 13 and 14 are rendered in the local Pidgin. 13 ('You know where you are coming from?'); 14 ('Where am I coming from? Isn't it a market that I went to? It's your grandmother that's coming from a brothel').

This is a conflictual situation and it is typical of what many people encounter daily as they commute from one place to the other. Sometimes, such encounters even result in physical assault. In this encounter, the verbal mechanism or strategy that initiates the conflict is crucial, as also is the role of pragmatic inference in exacerbating the conflict. This verbal strategy is impoliteness, described as communicative strategy designed to attack face, and thereby cause social conflict and disharmony (Culpeper et al., 2003, p. 1546). In 1 above, the conductor addresses her as 'woman.' Most young women here consider this offensive, apart from the fact that the speaker does not employ any politeness strategy to mitigate his direct request. Although her preferred self-image has been harmed in some way, her response in 2 is polite. The conductor does not argue the fact that she has paid as she claims in 2, giving rise to the inference

that he may have intended to extort money from her by requesting her to pay again. 'Anything' in turn 4 simply means *anything like a hundred naira as the fare*. This is an example of explicature occasioned by the indeterminacy of the expression (Carston, 2002). In 7 the conductor issues out a threat: 'Woman, behave yourself...', a 'face-aggravating act' (Locher & Bousfield, 2008, p.3), which prompts the lady to use an all-inclusive impolite expression, 'useless people' in 8 (referring to a class of people known as conductors) thereby completing the cycle of the verbal aggression. Thereafter, there is a gradual rise in the tempo of the verbal aggression. Threat is repeated in 9: '...if you disturb me you'll regret it' and in response to this the young lady attempts to maximise her social harm by attacking the credibility of the conductor's job as well as his personality in general (turn 10). As Tedeschi and Felson (1994, p. 171) have argued, social harm involves damage to the social identity of the target persons and a lowering of their power or status. The lady demeans not only the conductor's job but also his person as the situation becomes competitive and creative. According to Culpeper (2011), there is some element of creativity in the verbal assault in a conflictual situation which makes it entertaining. 'If one is attacked, one responds in kind or with a superior attack. And to achieve a superior attack requires creative skills' (p. 234). Needless to say that the other passengers felt entertained as they listened in carefully and perhaps anticipated the turn from which would eventually emerge the 'winner' of the conflict.

The last four turns form a climax in the interaction, and here pragmatic inference plays a crucial role. In response to the scorn of the young woman, that is, to the idea of he being a mere bus conductor and being a non-achiever as a result, the conductor says in 11: 'At least it's better than prostitution.' How does the young woman connect what she said in 10 with the idea of prostitution in turn 11? According to Relevance theory, in comprehending an utterance, the hearer must find an interpretation which the speaker must have expected to be optionally relevant to the hearer, and this involves the 'setting up of a context of assumptions within which to access the cognitive impact of the utterance' (Carston, 2002, p. 43). Some background information is necessary here in accessing the meaning intended by the speaker. This encounter took place in the Nigerian city of Benin which is believed to be notorious for trafficking young ladies for the purpose of prostitution. The trade is held in utter disdain by members of the public who spare no effort to ridicule those involved. To call any young woman there a prostitute is a most demeaning and devastating verbal assault. But the speaker does not overtly call the young woman a prostitute in turn 10. He merely states that even if his job has a very low regard, it is better than prostitution. However, she is able to arrive at his meaning by making inferences based on the principle of relevance. First, she assumes she is the target of the utterance. Second, she assumes the conductor is not referring to himself as not being a prostitute, because in Benin men are not known to practice the trade.

Third, she also assumes the utterance is not a mere contrast between the two jobs as that would negate the spirit of communicative aggression which it intends to achieve in the context.

For the young woman, the most plausible interpretation therefore is that the conductor thinks that she is a prostitute. In terms of processing efforts and cognitive effects, this inferential path is less costly, more accessible, and relevant in the expected way, leading naturally to her vituperation in 11. Now to counter the effect of 10, she takes her invectives way beyond the conductor, bypassed his mother, and went straight to his grandmother. The attack on the grandmother is a way of finding the strongest word ever to ease the pains she feels, and an attack on the conductor's extended positive face. Turn 13 echoes 11 as the conductor implicates the woman is coming from a place where, many believe, prostitution is practised. This puts the lady on the defensive as she asks in desperation: '*where I dey come from? Nobi market I go?*' Once again through pragmatic inference she arrives at the conclusion that the conductor thinks she is coming from a brothel thus reinforcing the accusation that she must indeed be a prostitute. In retaliation, she transfers that conclusion to the conductor's grandmother. Thus the interplay of cultural sensibilities and pragmatic inference could be observed at the background of the interaction.

Text Three: *O bughi ihe n'eche* (It's not what you think)

It was about 8 pm. Nneka, a female student, had not returned from her tutorial class that ended at 5 pm. Her mother, Ogechi, was waiting impatiently in front of their apartment. There had been some shooting at the end of the street, and people had begun to shut their doors out of fear, as cases of gang fights were not uncommon in the area. Then suddenly, she sighted Nneka crossing over to their gate. They are Igbos. Code-switching is a common phenomenon in Igbo conversation.

1. OGECHI : (*furious*) Nne, *Kedu ihe jidere gi nilo rue ugbua?* (What kept you outside till this time?).
2. NNEKA : *E nwetaghim taxi n'oge.* (I... didn't get taxi on time)... and when I got there I had to hide somewhere for sometime...*maka egbe agbara*(because of the shooting).
3. OGECHI : *Unyahu o bu mmiri zoro, taa o bu taxi.* (Yesterday it was rain, today it's taxi). What if any stray bullets had hit your enemy? Eh? Together with what we are in now...*Nne bia, I ghaghi egbum n'ulo a* (Nne, come. You will not kill me in this house.)

4. NNEKA : *Ozuela* (It's enough). Am I not here now? (*She attempts to walk past her mother.*)

5. OGECHI: *Nneka bia ebe a* (Come here). By the way, who was the man that walked you down to this gate and then turned back?

6. NNEKA : <*silence*>...

7. OGECHI : Yes, I saw both of you. Was that the taxi?

8. NNEKA : *O bughi ihe n'eché* (It's not what you think). I just met him there.

9. OGECHI : (*hisses*) 'There' indeed! *Eziokwu* (truth).

The above text is a conversation between a mother and her teenage daughter. Ogechi is angry and tired of Nneka's excuses for returning late every day from her tutorial classes, especially in view of the security challenges in their area. Once again, culture, pragmatic inference and the common knowledge shared by these participants are crucial elements in understanding their utterances. As expected, Ogechi demands to know why Nneka has stayed late. Nneka equivocates. First, she quickly blames the transport system, and then her vague employment of spatial deixis, *there* and *somewhere*, and unspecified time, *sometime*, all raise some suspicion and help Ogechi to infer that she has made up the stories. Her conclusion is evident in 3 when she says: 'Yesterday it was rain; today it's taxi.'

How does the hearer understand the second sentence in 3? '*What if any stray bullets had hit your enemy?*' The answer is located within the culture of the participants. It is generally believed, especially in the southern part of Nigeria that one should not associate oneself with evil or misfortune, because by doing so, that evil or misfortune will eventually happen to the speaker. As a result, instead of saying, for example, 'they planned to kill me,' members of this culture would say, 'They planned to kill my enemy, or they planned to kill a tree in the forest.' Therefore, in this context, Nneka should understand 'your enemy' here as a kind of 'euphemistic irony' which indirectly points to her. This indirect way of referring to an interlocutor could pose a big problem to hearers from different cultural backgrounds.

Still in turn 3, we take note of the utterance, '*Together with what we are in now.*' A non-participant hearer of this utterance, who perhaps does not share the same encyclopedic knowledge with Ogechi and her daughter, might find this extremely difficult to comprehend. But Nneka in this context can infer that her mother refers to the present problem in their family, caused by her father's stroke which has left him bedridden. If a stray bullet had met her daughter that would

have been too much of trouble for her in view of her husband's illness. In response to that imagined situation, she exclaims: *I ghaghi egbum n'ulo a* (*You will not kill me in this house*). Again, this is another way of avoiding the attribution of misfortune to herself according to their cultural practice. Following the Speech Act tradition, this statement should serve as a warning to her daughter not to create situations that could exacerbate her troubles and frustration in the family.

Finally, we come to turns 5-9 where pragmatic inference plays a major role. A young man had walked Nneka down to the gate and then sneaked away. Ogechi asks: *'By the way, who was the man that walked you down to this gate and then turned back?'* Nneka's silence in the next turn indicates that she has been completely taken unawares. Ogechi's next turn is sarcastic: *'Was that the taxi?'* In other words, was that the taxi you couldn't get on time and therefore returned late? The attribution of thoughts and attitudes in this conversation is mutual. Ogechi thinks her daughter is being dishonest and that is reflected in the echoic, *'Was that the taxi?'* This utterance echoes turn 2: *Enwetaghim taxi n'oge* (*I didn't get taxi on time*). According to Noh (1995, p. 109) and Radford (1988, p. 463), generally, an echoic utterance repeats what was said in a previous sentence within the discourse situation. In the relevance-theoretic framework, an echoic utterance is a representation that reports what someone else has said or thought, and that expresses an attitude to it (Carston, 1994, p. 332). The echoic utterance achieves relevance by conveying the speaker's attitude to the thought expressed (Wilson, 2002, p.148). Such attitudes range from agreement to complete disagreement. The speaker may be puzzled, angry, amused, intrigued, skeptical, sarcastic, etc. or any combination of these. Given their reflexivity, echoic utterances enhance communicative actions which produce the appropriate contexts in which meanings are negotiated.

Nneka's response in turn 8: *Obughi ihe n'eche* (*It's not what you think*) expresses a deeper level of attribution of thought to her mother. In this case, she does not report verbatim, her mother's words, but attributes to her what she thinks her mother thinks about her in a metarepresentational way, and negating that thought and also expressing an attitude to it (Carston, 1994, p. 323). These processes are entirely inferential. In turn 9, Ogechi upholds her disbelief and skepticism as she once again echoes her daughter's vague reference *'there'* in turn 8. Ogechi's last word, *'Eziokwu'* is ironical. In relevance theory, verbal irony is a variety of echoic, interpretive use, specifically, echoic dissociation or rejection of attributed thought (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/95). Ogechi knows her daughter is lying, yet uses the word *'truth,'* thereby ending the discussion without faith in her daughter's explanations.

Concluding Remarks

We have just examined some of the ways in which the process of interpersonal communication is mediated by cultural norms and practices that form the background on which participants interact, using examples from specific socio-cultural settings in Nigeria. Interpersonal communication is a highly inferential activity that is mutual in operation because both the communicator and the listener are involved in the process. As listeners in a particular communicative interaction, our powerful cognitive endowments together with the overwhelming influence of the culture in which we are immersed can lead to the generation of meanings that may not have been fully anticipated by the speaker, but which none the less cannot be wished away. Moreover, every communicative encounter comes with its own unique expectation of relevance and appropriateness of language, which if violated in any way may create problems similar to those found in inter-cultural situations. Therefore, understanding the influence of culture and the workings of our minds as we have shown in the Nigerian situation is crucial for a successful interpersonal communication.

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