



The Role of Language in Human Conflict: The Pragmatic Implication of Statements

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Abstract

Conflicts are inescapable aspects of our social lives. It is of no huge debate that a good percentage of human conflicts stem from misconceptions of ideas and intentions. Flaming of conflicts and managing them are all dependent on language use, as language is used to build and reconcile, so can it also be used to destroy. It is however imperative to examine the functions of language in conflict and how different communicative acts relate to speaker's motivational goals and conflict outcome. Therefore, the paper seeks to situate the concept of "abusive statement" within the pragmatic environment. It explores the role of language in shaping the way conflicts unfold and resolve. It ventures into exploitations of what qualifies a statement as abusive and the criteria for such judgements, as well as how a statement may be positive at one stance and negative in another. It makes use of the Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory to x-ray how language, psychology, and context come to play when a statement is made and how this affects human relationships. (Word count: 177)

Keywords: Language, conflict, meaning, context.

Introduction

Language and conflict presents a fascinating exploration of the pleasures and pitfalls of language in everyday life. It offers a delightful tour of how words can create both harmony and conflict. In the everyday life of a man, he dabbles in between the continuous use of verbal and non verbal modes of communication in the course of communicating with people. According to Ezikeojiaku, P. (2004) "Language is a part of our everyday life, it is an indispensable part of our lives without which we cease to function. It enables us perform our most mundane human functions. Humans are so engrossed with language, what is said and how it is said, that they never sit back to think of how language makes all these possible. Only when

communication breaks down, do we actually understand the importance of language and communication". It is however important to note that irrespective of the usefulness of language in communication and social relations, it can also act as a tool of sowing discord among people. This happens when people intentionally or unintentionally use language negatively to hurt others. According to Taylor, P. (2014), "Conflicts are ubiquitous part of social life". It is impossible for one to live his life peacefully without consciously or unconsciously offending or being offended by another. Once there is communication between two or more people, and language is used, there would certainly be provisions for misgivings and intended or unintended abuse. Man cannot run away from conflict, and of note is the fact that ninety percent of conflicts are caused by word of mouth, even the bible warns against the tongue and the havoc it can wreck in human relationships. Janicki, K. (2015) asks some pertinent questions relating language and conflict, he says, What role does language and communication play in conflict? Why do people engage in or get drawn into quarrels? How can our awareness of social rules of language use prevent disputes? This research therefore seeks to unveil the different ways language can be used to hurt and stir up conflict. It examines some words with various synonyms including fair and unfair ones and tries to ascertain why people would prefer to use a negative synonym when there is a milder one, the purpose for such usage and the context. According to Nelde P. (2010) "Problems often viewed as political, economic or sociological in nature are often actually rooted in linguistic conflict". This means that all forms of conflict stem from the use of language whether verbally or non-verbally. This work is housed in the aspect of Linguistics called Pragmatics. This field of Linguistics studies meaning in context. It is a subfield of linguistics and semiotics that studies the ways in which context contributes to meaning, unlike semantics that examines meaning that is conventional or coded in a given language, pragmatics studies how the transmission of meaning depends not only on structural and linguistic knowledge of the speaker and the listener, but also on the context of the utterance, any pre-existing knowledge about those involved, the inferred intent of the speakers and other factors. In this work therefore, attention would be given to some careless statements often made in context situations without any consideration of their pragmatic implications, which are often the main causes of conflicts.

Research questions

- 1 What is the basic qualification for an abusive statement?
- 2 How can we talk differently about the same thing to ensure politeness?

- 3 What are the roles of euphemisms in social settings and conflict situation?
- 4 What are the pragmatic justifications of statements?

Language and Conflict: Other factors in sentence interpretation

Language is not just part of us, it defines us. It is necessary that at certain times in life, we sit down and imagine how significant social, intellectual, or artistic activities would take place without the opportunities for communication offered by language. This opportunity to communicate with people however, should be maximized and handled with care to avoid conflict outburst, this is because there is always the problem of accurate interpretation of what is said by one to another.

According to Carlyle (1987) “ In every object there is inexhaustible meaning”. The statement on its own is quite singular and at the same time ambiguous. He asserts that in everything said, there is a room for thousands of interpretations. This is why a statement addressed to Mr. A might not receive the same attention or cause the same problem that might arise when used on Mr. B and C, this is because of the interpretation each addressee got from the statement. Looking at it from another perspective, an object of non-verbal communication would not have the same meaning across cultures. Carlyle’s statement is full of wisdom and is imperative when conversing in a social setting. This is therefore one of the reasons why one needs to be careful of what he says in a social setting as all men are accountable for their words. O’Grady (2011) explains that “Long before linguistics existed as a discipline, thinkers were speculating about the nature of meaning. For thousands of years, this question has been considered central to philosophy, more recently, it has come to be important in other disciplines as well, including of course linguistics and psychology, as meaning and emotions are significantly intertwined”. This is so because the meaning one deduces from what he is being told often times than not have significant emotional impact on his social life, and forms an unhealthy tie in societal relations. Our goal in this section would therefore be to consider in a very general way what this research would reveal in human language. According to O’Grady and Katamba (2011) “ syntactic structure provides only some of the information needed to interpret a sentence. Other necessary information comes from pragmatics, which includes the speaker’s and addresses’ background, attitudes and beliefs, their understanding of the context in which a sentence is uttered and their knowledge of how language can be used to inform, to

persuade, to mislead, and so forth". However, in addition to all these things they mentioned, there is at least one major type of information that enters into the interpretation of utterances. This information has to do with the rules of conversations ie identifying the acceptable and non-acceptable communication norms and adhering strictly to it.

As speakers of a language, we are able to draw inferences about what is meant but not actually said through the knowledge we have about our language and how people in our linguistic community carry out their speech acts.

Four conversational maxims exist; Maxim of relevance, quality, quantity and manner.

- Maxim of Relevance: It gives the listener a hint or idea to infer the intent of the speaker. For example, when you ask someone, "Have you sent your LAN abstract, yet? And the person replies-"Didn't you hear that I lost my father? His response wasn't a direct answer to the question but it was a sure way to let you know that the upcoming LAN conference is not one of his relevant thoughts.
- Maxim of Quality: It requires that statements used in conversations have factual basis. For example, asking someone in Nigeria, How is the Weather? And she replies- "Its snowing". When you know Nigeria is not associated with snowfall.
- Maxim of Quantity: This deals with the required amount of information the speaker tends to acquire from the addressee. For example; Where is the Ignatius Ajuru University of Education located? A knowledge of what the speaker intends to do with the information would determine if you should just stop by saying "Port Harcourt" or whether to give detailed description of the location.
- Maxim of Manner: It deals with sincerity and declines ambiguity. It expects a speaker to genuinely give a straight forward answer, other than one that beclouds suspicion. For example: He just found out that the lady living with him had a child for his friend. This sentence poses a question on the mind of the hearer- Does it mean the lady staying with him, is not his wife? If she is his wife, why didn't the speaker just say- He found out that his wife had a child for his friend.

In 1983, a Linguist, Leech proposed a pragmatics principle called “The politeness principle”. By politeness, he meant “tact”. He maintains that in communication, the people involved should avoid speaking or behaving in a thoughtless and inconsiderate manner or being deliberately obnoxious to one another for no good reason. According to him, “politeness is an important device for mitigating power and protecting face, by which is meant a person’s self-esteem, which is based largely on their sense of the way others see them”. This is why speech acts that involve insults, preemptory commands, embarrassing remarks and those that undermine the hearer’s self-worth should be avoided.

The proposed politeness principle includes; the tact maxim, the generosity maxim, The approbation maxim, the modesty maxim, the agreement maxim and the sympathy maxim.

- The Tact maxim advises a speaker to minimize the expression of beliefs which imply cost to others but rather maximize the expression of beliefs which imply benefit to others.
- The generosity maxim advises the speaker to minimize the expression of benefit to self but rather to maximize the expression of cost to self.
- The Approbation maxim recommends that the speaker minimize the expression of beliefs which express dispraise of others, but should maximize the expression of beliefs which express approval of others.
- The modesty maxim urges the speaker to minimize the expression of self praise and to always use every opportunity to make the other think well of himself and not confiscate the day with stories about you.
- The Agreement maxim advises speakers to minimize the expression of disagreement between one self and another but maximize the expression of agreement between self and other.
- The Sympathy maxim upholds speaker to minimize antipathy between self and others and maximize sympathy.

If therefore all these maxims are put to play, one would wonder how language would still be used to ignite conflict, because it is the poor consideration of how one’s speech would negatively or positively affect others that spark up diverse conflict situations.

Theoretical framework

In the fields of pragmatics and semantics (among others), relevance theory is the principle in the communication process that involves not only encoding,

transfer, and decoding of messages, but also numerous other elements, including inference and context. According to Sperber and Wilson, the code model only accounts for the first phase of linguistic treatment of an utterance that provides the hearer with the linguistic input, that is enriched through inferential processes in order to obtain the speaker's meaning." This he meant by trying to explain that a statement might be made, but what the addressee understands as the meaning of what was said to him may in fact not be what the speaker means and also what a speaker might have in mind to say may not be what he ends up saying as no two words no matter how synonymous mean the same thing. Like most pragmatists, Sperber and Wilson emphasize that understanding an utterance is not simply a matter of linguistic decoding. It involves identifying (a) what the speaker intended to say, (b) what the speaker intended to imply, (c) the speaker's intended attitude to what was said and implied, and (d) the intended context (Wilson 1994). Thus, the intended interpretation of an utterance is the intended combination of explicit content, contextual assumptions and implications, and the speaker's intended attitude to these. In relevance theory, the notion of mutual knowledge is replaced by the notion of mutual manifestness. Sperber and Wilson (1995) argue that it is enough for the contextual assumptions needed in interpretation to be mutually manifest to communicator and addressee in order for communication to take place. Manifestness is defined as follows: 'a fact is manifest to an individual at a given time if and only if he is capable of representing it mentally and accepting its representation as true or probably. The communicator and addressee do not need to mutually know the contextual assumptions required for interpretation. The addressee does not even have to have these assumptions stored in his memory. He must simply be able to construct them, either on the basis of what he can perceive in his immediate physical environment or on the basis of assumptions already stored in memory." They insist that the interpretation of a statement should be drawn within the immediate environment, by environment here, they mean the psychological context (the issues or mind-set already existing in the mind of the speaker before the statement was made) and the physical context (place and audience involved). On this framework however, would the analyses of statements be based to show that most times conflicts arise not really based on the literal meaning of what is said but the psychological and physical context which gives a deeper meaning that is often impolite and out of the ordinary.

Methodology

This work makes use of interview and questionnaire, the interview basically centered on a question- *What has been the cause of your major conflicts with people?*. Out of the 100 people that were interviewed 95% asserted that it was due to poor choice of word directed to them, which prompted the researcher to design the questionnaire. The Researcher made use of 100 respondents, which included 50 males and 50 females, of the University of Calabar Graduate school, selected via random sampling for the questionnaire. The questionnaires were however divided into 2 sections, A and B. Part A contained information about the respondent, part B housed the 20 synonymous options for respondents to choose out of five options, the synonym they prefer to be addressed with on one part and on the other part to identify the ones they would rather not be associated with, giving reasons for their choice. The words chosen for the two parts were analysed alongside the reasons for the preference and were used to answer the research questions.

Data presentation and Analysis

Table 1

S/N	Synonym 1	Synonym 2	Synonym 3	Synonym 4	Synonym 5
1	Failure	Loser	Incompetent	under-achiever	never-do-well
2	Disabled	Crippled	handicapped	Retarded	physically challenged
3	Slim	Skinny	Thin	Tiny	Slender
4	Cheap	Frugal	Miserly	economical	Inexpensive
5	Young	Immature	Childish	Juvenile	Youthful
6	Fat	Chubby	Plump	Flabby	Overweight
7	Confident	Secure	Proud	Egotistical	Sanguine
8	Talkative	Conversational	Lively	Chatty	Nosy
9	Barren	Unfruitful	Infertile	less productive	Childless
10	poverty-stricken	Impoverished	Needy	Wretched	Pauperized
11	Sad	Gloomy	Down	Blue	Unhappy
12	Mean	Unfriendly	bad-	Difficult	Wicked

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			tempered		
13	Lazy	Idle	Lethargic	Indolent	Lackadaisical
14	Prostitute	Whore	sex-worker	call-girl	white-slave
15	Witch	Sorceress	Hex	Hag	Enchantress
16	Dirty	Filthy	Smudged	Smearred	Unwashed
17	Smell	Stench	Stink	Odour	Reek
18	Gobermoch	poke nose-into	barge-in	busy-body	Thwart
19	Mad	mentally ill	Psychotic	Lunatic	Unbalanced
20	snout band	know-it-all	Braggart	Intellectual	smart aleck

Table 2

S/N	Synonym 1	Synonym 2	Synonym 3	Synonym 4	Synonym 5
1	30%	20%			50%
2	50%			50%	
3		50%	50%		
4	40%		60%		
5		30%	70%		
6	20%			70%	10%
7	70%	25%			5%
8	45%				55%
9	70%				30%
10	37%	3%		40%	10%
11		100%			
12	5%		25%		70%
13	40%	10%	10%	10%	30%
14	32%	59%	9%		
15	100%				
16	10%	90%			
17		30%	50%		20%
18	40%			40%	30%
19	20%			80%	
20	20%	80%			

Table 3

S/N	Synonym 1	Synonym 2	Synonym 3	Synonym 4	Synonym 5
1			100%		
2					100%
3	70%				30%
4				70%	30%
5	100%				
6		60%	40%		
7	100%				
8		20%	80%		
9				100%	
10			100%		
11			60%		40%
12		100%			
13		50%	50%		
14				100%	
15					100%
16					100%
17	100%				
18			100%		
19					100%
20				100%	

The tables above show the data collected for this research. Communication is an essential attribute of man, however not everyone of us possesses the attribute to rightly communicate with others. This is the main reason why there are people who have more friends and associates than others, as people tend to relate with you more based on how you treat them. The way one addresses another would determine if a relationship would be established or not as some people attach special importance to the words used on them and at such rate their worth to the person based on how they are addressed, on these criteria also, the words used to address someone cause a misunderstanding or fuel a conflict situation. However, table 1 shows several synonyms relating to the same meaning. It must be pointed out here that words can have similar meanings but no two words share exact meaning as one would definitely have a deeper, concise or negative meaning more than the other, and at such a speaker has a choice to make as to which words have the shade of meaning he clearly wants to express, and also which

is likely to be less offensive. Table 2 shows the percentage of the respondents in accordance to which word they abhor and at such would not tolerate anyone using on them. The percentage written against each word signifies the population who abhor the usage of such words, as the spaces which do not have percentages, are the ones the population can tolerate when used on them Table 3 shows the population which accept or tolerate the usage each of the words while the spaces without percentages show that no one at all tolerates the use of such words.

Example 1 From table 2, we can see that based on the first group of words which have 5 synonyms (failure, loose, incompetent, under-achiever and never-do-well), 50% abhorred the use of “never do well” on a fellow being, while 30% opine that the word “loser” is the most offensive and cannot be tolerated by them, and the remaining 20% asserts that the word “failure” is an emotionally destabilizing word that should never be used on anyone and that any addressee for which the word is used on should not take it lightly with the speaker. However, from table 3, it could be seen that the whole population preferred a person is called “incompetent” than failure, looser, or never-do-well, as one cannot loose, fail, or not do well in all aspects of his life, and at such the incompetence should be relegated to the actual situation or context in which the addressee did not succeed.

Example 2 In the group pf words in word-list 17, we have- smell, stink, stench, odour and reek. The respondents wondered why someone wouldn't be polite enough to say one has an odour but can be vulgar to the extent of saying another stinks, reeks, or has a stench. They saw it as the height of politeness and something they wouldn't want anyone to attribute to them. From the data, 50% asserted that the use of “stink” was the most unacceptable, while 30% argued that “stench” is the worst and the remaining 20% said “reek” is the most offensive , but the entire population agreed that that the word “smell” is neutral and has the least offensive connotation.

Example 3 In word list 15 that has the following synonyms-witch, sorceress, hex, hag and enchantress, and all meaning a woman that possesses magical powers to harm people. The respondents assert that even if there is such a person around us, it would only be fair and polite to use the word “enchantress” instead of ‘witch’ which also connotes blood sucking, and paints such person as dreadful. The essence of the study is to ensure politeness and the establishment of good relationship to ensure a peaceful environment, as all minor and major conflicts stem from improper language use or poor word choice.

1 What is the basic qualification for an abusive statement?

To decipher the basic qualifications for an abusive statement, one has to consider the concept of Communicative competence and the possibility of misinterpreting other people's linguistic behavior. Different things bring people together, and as they come together, communication becomes imperative as feelings, knowledge, and ideas are exchanged. Communicative competence is a term in linguistics which refers to the users grammatical knowledge of syntax, morphology, phonology and the like, as well as social knowledge about how and when to use utterances appropriately. From these, it can be understood that it is one thing to know the meaning of a word and another thing to know how and when the word should be used. Any word that sends off a negative meaning to the addressee qualifies as abusive. The pragmatic content of a word determines its negativity or positivity, and at this juncture the distinction between connotation and denotation is made. Connotation represents the various social overtones, cultural implications or emotional meanings associated with a sign while denotation represents the explicit or referential meaning of a sign.

Examples:

1. The words; Skinny, slim, thin, and slender
These three words all mean having less weight on one's body than what might be considered average. But the use of 'skinny and thin' tend to be offensive as people opined, as they prefer to be called "slim or slender" than associated with skinny or thin which they likened to being malnourished or 'not well cared for'.
2. consider the words; cheap, inexpensive, low-cost, economical, affordable, in the sentence- She wore a cheap gown to the party
This statement automatically evokes a low-class status on the owner of the gown, as the use of cheap or low-cost portrays poverty as compared to 'inexpensive'
3. Talkative, chatty, conversational, nosy, as in - His wife is a talkative
Even the man, whose wife is being referred to, would not take it lightly as it portrays the wife in the negative light and as a gossip, whereas if such words as chatty or conversational were used, it would portray her as an extrovert respectfully without degrading her personality. In essence, choice of words is necessary. The surface value of the word, ordinarily means "one who talks a lot" but looking deeper one understands it takes a jobless and irresponsible person to possess this attribute, and this can stir up a conflict situation.

2 How can we talk differently about the same thing to ensure politeness?

Synonyms are different words with same meaning. This is one of the language tools that make communication easier, as one has many alternatives to expressing the same idea, and therefore can actually choose a softer or better word from the alternatives depending on whether he intends to make his speech polite or otherwise. Therefore, depending on one's addressee or audience, it is important to consider the connotation of the word because some synonyms can inject a different meaning than the one intended, to avoid a conflict situation. Looking at all the synonyms in the wordlist, one has to be extra careful in their usage in order to maintain peace and cordiality with people, there are words which when used to address someone automatically classifies the speaker as rude, lousy and insulting, whereas someone else could still say the same thing to another and no offence will be taken.

2 What are the roles of euphemisms in social settings & conflict situation?

A euphemism is generally innocuous word or expression used in place of one that may be found offensive or suggest something unpleasant. Some euphemisms are intended to amuse while others are bland and inoffensive terms for things the user wishes to downplay. The reasons for using euphemisms vary by context and intent, and can include avoidance of day to day social interactions, or at the extreme evading responsibilities for war crimes.

According to Schneider (2011) "a euphemism is the substitution of a mild, indirect or vague term for one considered to be harsh, blunt, or offensive". She goes ahead to say that a euphemism acts like a "double speak", "it pretends to communicate but it doesn't". It makes the bad seem good, the negative seem positive, the unnatural seem natural, the unpleasant seem attractive, or at least tolerable. It is a language which avoids, shifts or denies responsibilities.

Consider the discussion that ensued between a father and son.

Son: Father, I received the worst insult of my life today. A friend told me I am a poor, broke guy who has just been fired and lives in a slum.

Father: Your friend is quite unreasonable, he felt to understand that you are not poor, but economically disadvantaged, you are not broke but have temporary negative cash flow, your company did not fire you, rather you have an early retirement opportunity and you do not live in a slum but in a substandard housing. These are two different things my son and what you believe affects you, do not believe him.

Considering this conversation, one would note that both what the friend said and what the father explained were different shades of the same truth. The difference being that the latter was downplayed not to be a harsh reality like the former.

Schneider (2011) writes “in light of the recent demise of Osama bin Laden, several politicians have stressed that it was the *enhanced interrogation methods* which caused the informants to squeal and give up the nickname of the courier, which we then followed around until he led us to the compound of OBL. This is one of my personal favourites, not the process it refers to of course, but the ludicrousness of this particular phrase, the ultimate of euphemism. It is torture, folks! Torture, and you can’t sugar-coat it, and you can’t make it sound nice. Torture”.

By her statement, she argues that no matter how the Government wants to downplay their means of retrieving the information by using “enhanced interrogation methods” instead of torture, it doesn’t still prevent the fact that people were illegally tortured, which was wrong.

According to King (2015) euphemisms are “linguistic devices which occur in everyday social interactions across the world. They are used mostly as an alleviative strategy to soften or neutralise unpleasant expressions and concepts, replacing them with an alternative, more neutral wording or phrasing in order to remain polite and potentially save the speaker or hearer from embarrassment”. This is actually the essence of this work, to ensure that words are properly filtered and coated to avoid offence. Euphemisms are therefore linguistic tools used to alleviate the pain hurtful words would have caused a hearer, as it embellishes the words and makes it better sounding and more acceptable.

4 What are the pragmatic justifications of statements?

Consider the following sentences;

A See how fat you have become

B This guy is bad

In sentence A, ordinarily, this can mean that the person is looking better than before, especially when the speaker is coming from a background where additional flesh is sought for and appreciated in a woman, meanwhile an addressee from an entirely different culture would find it derogatory. Depending on the context and audience, the connotation of a word choice can change the meaning of a sentence considerably.

Sentence B made in the presence of elderly people, actually means that the person in question is a bad person, but before youths, it means an entirely different thing, it can mean he has the latest swags, it can mean he is smart, it can mean he has certain admirable qualities, which all tend to depart from the original definition of the word 'bad'. Likewise, there are statements that are offensive not only based on context but based on the relationship with the speaker. The respondents gave exemption to some curse words used by their parents which might not hurt them much but might make them to give a shrug or struggle to be more determined, but would necessitate exchange of words or fist if uttered by another. For example;

- You foolish boy
- Look at your mates and how they are so better than you
- After training you for four years in the university, what do you have to show for it?

According to them, these statements can be annoying, devastating and demoralizing, but a consideration of relationship with the speaker may just make one overlook the comment despite being annoyed, unlike the reaction that would ensue if it were another.

Conclusion

From the work, it was observed that offensive statements arise due to a number of reasons, including-

- Outright intent: wherein the speaker intentionally wishes to hurt, offend or humiliate the addressee.
- Ignorance; a situation where the speaker is actually unaware of the extra meaning his statement connotes, and at such might not have understood how gravely his speech would impact negatively on the addressed.
- Interpretation: In which case the meaning the speaker has in mind uttering the statement would not be understood by the addressee who ends up giving a different interpretation, which in most cases would be in the negative.

This work is an interesting and thought provoking polemic on the potential consequences of the unturned phrase, the slip of the tongue, the careless word, the perceived joke or the contrived comment and how it instigates conflict situations. The use of language is most times seen as ‘the last straw that broke the camel’s back’ in situations where a polite statement would have changed the cause of events, and instead, a very offensive one was uttered. It is therefore recommended that speakers always put themselves in the shoe of their addressees before making any utterance, as a lot of wars could have been averted if men had their tongues under control, and the study of pragmatics is recommended to be incorporated in peace, conflict and resolution studies, as the use of language as a tool of indictment, instigation of conflicts and resolutions go beyond the domestic environment to national and international conflicts.

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