



## **A Pragmatic Analysis and Interpretation of Verbal Offers by Vendors of Consumer Products in Jos Metropolis**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Language as a communication system is concerned with meaning as a function of the interaction of code and context of situation so that the significance of what people say transcends the significance of the words they use to say it to include its meaning in a context of situation. This paper investigates the verbal expressions used by vendors of consumer products in Jos metropolis. The purpose of the study is to identify pragmatic meanings associated with verbal expressions used by these vendors. The study aims at demonstrating the fact that the interpretation of vendors' utterances go beyond their linguistic choices to include the context of situation. The data used is elicited with the aid of recording and direct observations. The findings provide empirical evidence to the view adopted by Levinson (1983) with regard to the Cooperative Principle and its four maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner. It is justified that the maxims are not absolute rules that has to be strictly obeyed in order to make a verbal interaction go smoothly. Rather, they should be deemed as common assumptions shared by both the speakers and the hearers when they are engaged in verbal interaction. The Politeness Principle and the Textual Rhetoric of Processibility, Clarity, Economy and Expressivity principles are correlated in the study.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Scientific interest in human speech in relation to its use in context has gathered momentum for the past few decades. Scholars have increasingly realised that the physical and social environment in which utterances are delivered significantly shapes their meanings as interpreted by the participants of an exchange. This equally applies to the spoken language articulated by vendors who are desirous to promote what they sell while moving along the streets of Jos metropolis. This study examines their verbal

### *Analysis of Verbal Offers by Vendors in Jos Metropolis, Nigeria*

expressions of offer, but discussion is confined to the language spoken by vendors who sell a selected number of items: 'Indomie' noodles, Milo food drink, 'Maggi Mixpy', 'Nasco' cornflakes, biscuit, detergent and 'Plus' soap.

It has been proposed that language as a means of communication serves two functions, namely transactional and interactional functions (Brown and Yule, 1984). When language is used to transmit content or information, it is mainly transactional in nature. Conversely, it fulfils interactional function if it is spoken to establish or maintain social relationship. Trudgill views language thus:

Language is not simply a means of communicating information ... it is also an important means of establishing and maintaining relationships with other people (126).

Similarly, McCarthy (1998) observes that spoken language contains a large number of lexical items which are mainly interactional. This concurs with the phenomenon examined in this study. The vendors' language can be said to have an interactional function as it does not only inform the customers (hearers) about what the vendors are selling, but also attracts the customers' attention so that an act of purchasing the goods will expectedly follow from the verbal offer. Thus, it is obvious that the vendors attempt to establish a good social relationship with the customers. Therefore, in the conception and description of the language used by vendors in Jos metropolis, the researcher took into cognizance the mutual understanding of the underlying linguistic features used by these vendors.

Arguments are in favour of pragmatics by means of Grice's conversational principles. The study combined other principles such as the politeness principles (PP). The textual principles of possibility, clarity, economy and expressivity are also combined with other principles aforementioned as these pragmatic principles do not exist in isolation.

### **Analysis and Interpretation**

#### ***Sample A***

Let us consider the following verbal offers uttered by vendors selling cornflakes, 'maggi mixpy', biscuit, 'indomie' noodles and 'milo' food drink respectively.

1. *Mummy, see fast breakfast.*
2. *Oga make I bring how many?*
3. *Grab your own now! Or you no go see am again.*
4. *This one na super pack.*
5. *Mummy, see perfect lunch pack for your pickin.*

It is obvious from the samples above that the vendors did not provide any explicit statements about what they sold (i.e. the products mentioned above) as no reference is made to the name of the products in question. The vendors expected that the context of situation will foster the communicative meaning

***Pam Keziah Jonah***

to their hearers, thereby flouting the maxim of quantity. The vendors did not make their contribution as informative as required because the name of the product they sold was not mentioned at all in their offer. As to the absence of information on the name of the products in the offering expressions, the interpretation of these sentences required the hearers to make assumptions with the help of the physical environment i.e. seeing the vendors raising high and pointing the products, selling the goods aforementioned and hearing the utterances. The hearers were expected to be able to fill in the gaps by deriving implicature (Grice, 1989; Yule, 1996a; Brown and Yule, 1984). The utterances are also not clear thereby, flouting the textual pragmatic principles of clarity. For instances, the vendor selling biscuit said:

*Grab your own copy now! Or you no go see am again.*

One may feel that the vendor was selling books, films etc. for referring to biscuits as ‘copy’.

The clarity principle requires that the utterances we make be clear. Clarity principles may be broken down into two maxims:

a. ***Transparency Maxim:*** *This implies framing a clear message, i.e. a message which is perspicuous or intelligible in the sense of conveying the intended illocutionary goal to an addressee.*

b. ***Ambiguity maxim:*** *This implies the use of unambiguous syntax and phonology of the language in order to construct a clear text. Ambiguity can be perceived as a linguistic phenomenon whereby an utterance is capable of generating more than one meaning. (Leech, 100).*

It can be deduced therefore, that clarity goes beyond the linguistic units used, to the context of use. This maxim is interwoven with the cooperative principle in the sense that it is only when a text is free from ambiguity, obscurity, falsity, and disorderliness that it will be clear.

***Sample B***

Sample B consists of utterances by vendors selling plus soap, ‘Omo’ detergent, ‘milo’ food drink and biscuit.

6. *As you dey come so, see how dirty don dey shiver for cloth wey dey house.*

7. *Make you put omo and dirty for one ring see wetin go happen. You know sey na omo go definitely win because i be oga patapata.*

8. *Buy this omo and do some experiment in the lab of your bucket.*

9. *Come buy milo drink cos I go soon leave town or you go find me tire.*

10. *I dey come from biscuit factory. If you no buy, I go vex. I fit loose my temper oh!*

The samples above appear too wordy. From every indication, the samples disregard the maxim of manner, especially the sub-maxim that advised against excessive use of words. This is obvious because of the Nigerian context where excessive use of words is not considered important in certain

### *Analysis of Verbal Offers by Vendors in Jos Metropolis, Nigeria*

context i.e. selling. Because of the use of too many words, the vendors had to practically go after the hearers dancing. The maxim of manner was deliberately flouted in samples 6, 7 and 8 as indicated by the ambiguity of their meaning, to produce humorous effect. 'Cloths' do not 'shiver', likewise, 'omo' and 'dirty' cannot be put in a box ring for a competition though, 'omo' (detergent) may be used in the laboratory for an experiment. A bucket is not a laboratory as indicated by the vendor in sample 8. However, an in-depth analysis on the part of the hearers could result in the apprehension that the choice of words actually meant a different thing and not the semantic meaning. Such an analysis in turn would disambiguate the expression of offer. Sample 6 despite its wordiness, flouts the maxim of quantity. Reference is not made to the name of the product sold. This vendor did not make his contribution as informative as is required.

Sample 8 employed the use of deixis. Lyons (636) observes that 'Deixis' is now used in language study to 'refer to the function of demonstrative pronouns, of tense and a variety of other grammatical and lexical features which relate utterances to the spatio-temporal co-ordinate of the act of utterance'. Palmer (60) also says that deixis has to do with 'the identification of objects, persons and events in terms of their relation to the speaker in space and time as these affect meaning'. Sample 8 used the demonstrative pronoun 'this'. It is made to sound as if; "if it is not 'this omo'" it cannot be another! So you have to buy it.

At a superficial level, such expressions as sample 6 and 7 seemed to gravely flout the maxim of relevance as these 'expressions' bore no relation at all to the goods the vendors sold. As a consequence, there could be an impression that they were not truthful in offering what they sold, resulting in the flouting of another maxim, i.e. quality. In relation to reference (Yule, 1996a), the expressions provided evidence that a single referring expression (i.e. 'Omo' in a box ring with 'dirty' 'cloth' 'shivering' etc) can be used to identify various entities. Literal interpretation would result in the understanding that the words referred to different things entirely. However, such misunderstanding could be avoided because of the existence of accompanying co- text (Mey, 1993), i.e. the linguistic form and the context.

Because of the unnecessary prolixity, the expression in sample B flouted the Processibility principle which recommends that the text should be presented in a manner, which makes it easy for the hearer /reader to decode in time. It guides the language user to ensure that what he writes, says or describes is done in processible time. The Processibility principles 'require that every language user keep to the requirements of matching the delivery of the content(s) of utterances to acceptable or expected (sometimes legislated or prescribed) time' (Ajulo, 8). This explains why some of the vendors had to dance following the hearers because their expressions could not be uttered in processible time.

It is obvious that the economy principle ('be quick and easy') was flouted. 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.

### *Pam Keziah Jonah*

However, it is essential to emphasize that the vendors were still cooperative by employing prolixity because the additional words played a significant role in attracting the customers in order that the vendors fulfilled the interactional function of language (Brown and Yule, 1984).

#### *Sample C*

Sample C consist of utterances by vendors selling indomie noodles, maggi mixpy and cornflakes.

11. *Indomie – buy indomie*
12. *Maggi mixpy – mixpy maggi*
13. *Cornflakes – flakes corn*
14. *Omo*
15. *Milo drink*
16. *Glucose biscuit*
17. *Plus soap*

It is clear from the samples above that the maxim of quantity was not observed as the information supplied about the products sold was not sufficient. Only names of the products sold were mentioned by these vendors and occasionally modified as seen in samples 12 and 13. These vendors (12 and 13) offered their goods by mentioning the name of the product in reverse order. Samples 12 and 13 were offered in reverse order though it was done differently. Sample 12 indicates that the name of the product which constitutes a compound word i.e. ‘maggi’ and ‘mixpy’ was interchanged to be ‘mixpy’ and ‘maggi’. Sample 13 hinted the vendors’ tacit morphological knowledge by breaking the name of the product he sold into syllables (i.e. cornflakes) and interchanging positions (flakescorn) to create humorous effects.

However, a phonemic diversity existed: they pronounced these words differently; some with a prolonged final vowel i.e. milo drink – miloo drink and some with a prolonged initial syllable i.e. Glucose biscuit - gluucose biscuit. Some of the vendors uttered the name of the goods they sold without performing any phonemic or morphemic modification. Interestingly, a particular vendor who sold ‘*omo*’ pronounced it in an exceptional fashion: he invariably mentioned the word ‘*omo*’ five times in rapid succession, resulting in perception by the hearer that he articulated only a single word, i.e. ‘*omoomoomoomoomo*’. In addition, he consistently prolonged the first vowel / / as he uttered *omo*. This vendor who uttered *omo* appeared to flout the maxim of manner to a slight extent by repeating the word ‘*omo*’, thus demonstrating prolixity, while still attempting to be cooperative. The utterance 11 – 17 conformed to the maxim of quality and relevance because they were truthful and relevant. The vendors did not offer the goods using utterances they had no adequate evidence for, since they were only marketing the goods for companies. The textual principle was observed because the information supplied was processible, clear and expressive. The economy principle was upheld because the utterances were shortened. Ajulo, (10) however observes that “the principle of economy in the use of utterance in

### *Analysis of Verbal Offers by Vendors in Jos Metropolis, Nigeria*

language requires that we say or describe in as few words as possible, but never at the cost of clarity". Some of the vendors sold at their pace.

#### **Sample D**

Below are verbal offers by vendors selling indomie noodles and glucose biscuit:

18. *You miss indomie, you miss out.*

19. *I dey come from biscuit factory. If you no buy, I go vex. I fit loose my temper oh!*

The verbal offers (18 and 19) adopt the hard-sell tactic which urges the consumer to buy a particular product and offers one or more 'reasons' why this particular product should be bought. The utterances were expected to win people over and persuade them to buy things they would not have ordinarily bothered to buy. Bolinger (1980) emphasizes what he calls the colossal flaw of gross exaggeration that abounds in the modern language of advertising. He says advertising 'turns a time piece into a jewel, a motor car into a symbol of prestige, and a mosquito swamp into a tropical paradise'. Sample 19 however flouts the politeness principle (PP) especially the tact maxim which states that;

i. *minimize cost to other*

ii. *maximize benefit to other*

The vendor in (19) while offering his product creates offence (i.e. I will be angry if you do not buy my goods). He does this to produce a humorous effect. The utterance in 18 and 19 above also flouts the maxim of relevance and manner especially the sub-maxim which states that one should be orderly.

#### **Sample E**

20. *Buy indomie chicken flavour at promo price.*

21. *Buy omo multi-action at just ₦15.*

22. *Mummy, make you buy milo drink for your pickin.*

23. *Oga come buy glucose biscuit, it is good for the body.*

24. *With ₦50 you can wash your clothes clean with Nasco plus soap.*

25. *Aunty, buy improved cornflakes.*

Samples E (20 – 25) are highly cooperative as they obeyed the four maxims of the cooperative principle. These vendors obeyed the maxim of quantity even to a higher degree than others in data 1 – 19 as they seemed to be more informative in communicating what they sold to the customers by detailing the name of the products they sold and the amount as data 21 and 24 shows. Their utterances also conformed to the maxim of quality and relevance because they were truthful and relevant. Some of the vendors however, switched from Pidgin English to English in their utterances i.e. Sample 23, '*Oga come buy glucose biscuit, it is good for the body*'. It was noticed that the first part of the utterance was pidginize and the second part in English.

The language of advertising is one of precision. Thus, the quantity of information in the content should be one that can be processed within a limited time. This implies that vendors' utterances of offer should be relevant, true and free from ambiguity, obscurity, wordiness and disorderliness. It should not cause offence. This shows the intersection between the politeness principle, textual principle and the cooperative principle.

In some cases, utterances may conform properly to the maxims as indicated in samples E. In some others, however, utterances may disregard one or more of the maxims by infringing, opting out of, flouting or violating them (Thomas, 1995). Undoubtedly, however, the infringement of the maxims occurs due to the imperfect linguistic performance of the speakers, e.g. low mastery of a language. This explains why most of the vendors use Pidgin English in their expressions of offer. Only few expressions were in English. This is evident considering the data gathered for this study. When asked why the choice of Pidgin English, some vendors agreed that Pidgin English is a trade language while others claimed that it is the most understood language especially when dealing with a semi-literate society.

## CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the vendors were highly creative in inventing expressions to promote the goods they sold and to attract the customers. While some of them utilized the conventional ones, some others manipulated words or phrases, resulting in surprisingly original expressions of offer. Most utterances were in Pidgin English and a few in English. Words used by vendors which cannot be found in the English vocabulary are enormous;

*Pickin, sey, dey, loose my temper, I go vex, enter trouble* etc.

The study has also shown that vendors offered their goods differently, i.e. by mentioning only the name of the product sold (*indomie, omo, milo drink*) without performing any phonemic or morphemic change, mentioning the name of the products in reverse order (*Cornflakes – Flakes corn*), mentioning any other words except the name of the products sold (*Oga, this one na super pack*) and by using successive repetition (*omoomoomoomoomo*). This study has also shown that the vendors employed prolixity because this is accepted in the Nigerian context.

As a final note, some expressions used by the vendors turned out to obey the pragmatic principles to a higher degree than others. However, all of the vendors could be considered as cooperative in offering their goods as long as other relevant pragmatic tools were used, such as identifying reference and drawing the appropriate implicature. Misunderstanding could also be avoided because of the existence of the accompanying co-text (Mey, 1993). Consequently, the verbal offers either observed or flouted the rhetoric and none of them infringed, opted out of or violated them. The speakers opt out of observing the maxim if they decide not to cooperate in a conversation.

### *Analysis of Verbal Offers by Vendors in Jos Metropolis, Nigeria*

For example, they prefer to say 'I don't think I can give you any information about it' or 'I can't tell you' even though they know the truth. The flouting of the maxims happens "when speakers appear not to follow the maxims but expect hearers to appreciate the meaning implied..." (Cutting, 37), so the speakers deliberately break the maxims while still attempting to be cooperative in an exchange. The violation of the maxims, on the other hand, means the speakers intentionally disobey them, and are fully aware that the addressees will fail to perceive the real truth and interpret the speakers' utterance literally. As a consequence, the hearers falsely assume that speakers are cooperative while in fact there is lack of cooperation on the part of the speakers, resulting in misleading interpretation.

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