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DISPREFERED RESPONSES IN ADJACENCY PAIRS: IMPLICATURES IN STUDENTS' UTTERANCES

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Abstract
This paper was informed by recognisable violations of the Gricean maxims in the patterns of question-answer adjacency pairs in students' communications. Samples of students' natural conversations were unobtrusively collected on campus by the writer and subjected to pragmatic analysis. It was observed that the second pair part of their tests and performance essay contained dispreferred responses particularly when their performance was unsatisfactory. The analysis revealed that students manipulated words with the intent of shifting blame. The recurring implicatures in their language use underscored a disinclination to assume responsibility for their poor academic performance. The concluding section highlighted the need to help students become more academically responsible.

Key phrases: dispreferred responses, adjacency pairs, Gricean maxims, conversational implicatures.

Introduction
Man is a social being and communication is a form of socialization. This is conducted in so many forms: both linguistic and non-linguistic. The basic form is via utterance. The complexity of an utterance emanates from the following:
- Speakers may communicate their intention directly or indirectly and literally or non-literally.
- Hearers may interpret the same utterance differently from the speakers' intended meaning.
- Contextual factors which include the relationship of interlocutors also determine how an utterance is decoded.

Unlike sentences, the interpretation of utterances is tied to contextual considerations. As linguistic terms, there is a subtle difference in the meaning of an utterance and a sentence. In Finegan's (2004) parlance, 

"...a sentence is a structured string of words carrying a certain meaning. By contrast, an utterance is a sentence that is said, written, or signed in a particular context by someone with a particular intention, by means of which the 'speaker' intends to create an effect on the addressee (295)."

The analyses of the definitions put forward by Denham and Lobeck (2010), and Syal and Jingal (2010) equally emphasize the role of contextualisation and decontextualisation in the meaning of utterances and sentences respectively. The context of an utterance comprises the speaker(s), hearer(s) and utterance. Holmes (2008) concurs that context is crucial in interpretation of meaning for it incorporates the analysis of word meaning, grammatical meaning as well as the relationship between the participants and the background knowledge about the situation. Akmajian, Demers, Farmer & Hamish's (2008) notion of context is more graphic. It includes previous and anticipated utterances, physical and social environment and general knowledge about life and the topic under discussion. Without recourse to context, the interpretation of an utterance would be restricted to its grammatical meaning. This strait jacket approach is susceptible to occasional misinterpretation because it implies a fixed interpretation of all utterances irrespective of context. Although words or lexical items are the building blocks of sentences and utterance, word meaning is different from sentence meaning. Semantics is the study of lexical meaning or the meaning encoded in words while sentence meaning derives partly from its constituent lexical items (which provides the lexical meaning) and partly from the arrangement or structure of the content words and the function words (which provides the grammatical meaning). Because sentence meaning operates at the levels of - lexical meaning and grammatical meaning - ambiguity in a sentence is equally traceable to these two levels. Although sentence meaning is literal or direct, utterance meaning includes unspoken or indirect meaning. It is noteworthy that words per se do not fully determine the meaning of an utterance. Interpretation of sentences and utterances go beyond semantics particularly when nonliteral expressions such as idioms and proverbs are employed in communication. Their meanings are not dependent on their constituent words or
syntactic structure. Besides, the wisdom expressed in proverbs is oftentimes culture specific.

Grecian Maxims

The ability of a hearer to decode a speaker's intention is attributed to a 'shared system of beliefs' and 'inferential strategies' (Akmal et al 2008). This concept is propounded in the Inferential Model of linguistic communication. Unlike the Message Model, which ends with processing structural properties (sound, syntax and meanings) to successfully decode a message, the Inferential Model is preferred because it accommodates the following:

- The use of ambiguous expressions
- Real-world reference
- Communicative intentions
- Nonliteral communications
- Indirect communication and
- Noncommunicative uses of language (p.388)

This model proposes that learning how to speak and communicate in a language involves acquiring a variety of shared beliefs or presumptions and inferential strategies. Thus we presume certain helpful things about potential hearers (or speakers), and the inference strategies equip interlocutors with short, effective patterns of inference from utterances to what a person might be trying to communicate. They jointly make for successful linguistic communication. The areas of presumptions are linguistic, communicative, literal and conversational.

The conversational presumption mirrors Paul Grice's 'Cooperative Principle' in speech communication. According to Grice, the meaning of an utterance is not dependent on the expression alone. Both the speaker and the hearer owe each other some obligations in the course of a conversation. The speaker expects the hearer to base his interpretation on the communicative context just as the hearer assumes the speaker is telling the truth. Failure of either or both interlocutors to cooperate with each other or demonstrate an understanding of the convention of verbal interactions is the primary cause of misrepresentation and misinterpretation of messages. The Cooperative Principle is an antidote to this problem. For practical purposes, the theory is encapsulated in four maxims of conversation:

- Maxim of Quantity or Informativeness – give only the necessary information
- Maxim of Relation or Relevance – be relevant
- Maxim of Manner or Style – avoid obscurity or ambiguity
- Maxim of Quality or Truthfulness – be truthful

Although they are commonly referred to as rules, Syal & Jindal (2010) posit that the maxims are not rules but guiding principles and are therefore often violated by speakers. According to them, some people often give more or less information than required, or make irrelevant contributions. Holmes (2008) adds that people do not always follow the rules because they may deliberately want to mislead the other person and to avoid responsibility for saying something unpleasant. Spencer-Oatey and Zegarac (2010) maintain that the main import of an utterance may, in fact, lie not with the thought expressed by the utterance but with what the hearer assumes the speaker is implicating or hinting at indirectly.

Conversational Implicatures

Conversational implicatures according to Crystal (2008) refer to "the implications which can be deduced from the form of an utterance on the basis of certain cooperative principles" (p.238). In plain language, implicature is the act of communicating one thing while saying another. For instance a speaker may mean for someone to Put on the AC (where there is one) or Open the windows (to let in air) by saying it's hot in here. The antonym is explicitation which refers to the explicit assertion or proposition made by the sentence regardless of context. In this case, the explicitation is the literal statement that the room is hot. The worst breech in Fishagin's (2008) assessment is being untruthful because 'all lies are false' however brief, relevant or orderly. When this happens, some implied meanings arise as a result.

Although Grice's approach is adopted in this paper, there is evidence that the quality maxim or maxim of truthfulness is exempted in some cultures. For instance, Holmes (2008) reports that in the Malagasy Republic, for a variety of reasons people are systematically uninformative...they deliberately avoid providing precise information about their relatives and friends, since by doing so they believe that they may attract the attention of evil spirits. The same goes for the Igbo of Southern Nigeria, as expressed by an unnamed character in Arrow of God who was compelled to lead the police to Ezeulu's compound by a combination of violence and threats: 'It is not our custom to show our neighbour's creditor the way to his hut' (Achebe, 1964). Others before him were equally evasive:
"Where is Ezeulu’s house?" asked the leader, Corporal Matthew Nweke. The man looks suspiciously at the uniformed strangers. "Ezeulu," he said after a long time in which he had seemed to search his memory. "Which Ezeulu?"

"How many Ezeulus do you know?" asked the corporal irritably. "How many Ezeulus do I know?" repeated the man after him. "I don’t know any Ezeulu." "Why did you ask me which Ezeulu if you don’t know any?"

"Why did I ask you?"

"Shut up! Bloody fool! shouted the policeman in English.

"I say I don’t know any Ezulu. I am a stranger here." (p.151)

In these instances, no conversational implicatures are generated since it is the convention in these specified settings.

Figurative expressions such as irony and exaggeration suggest that speakers can mean the opposite of what they say or mean less than what they say. Speakers can also mean exactly what they say or mean more than what they say. Grammatically speaking, it’s hot in here is a statement. Uttered by a boss to his subordinate, the latter would most likely interpret it not as a mere remark about the room temperature but as a request to put on the fan or air conditioner or even to let in air by opening the window. The boss means more than he actually said. The difference underscores the distinction between linguistic (grammatical) meaning and speaker meaning. Speaker meaning is by and large determined by the context of the utterance.

1: It’s hot in here. = The temperature is high. (A statement)
2: It’s hot in here. = Put on the AC. (A request)

Structurally, the sentence/utterance are the same but one is literally a statement and the other is an indirect request. In a different context, say in a kitchen, the speaker would most likely mean exactly what he says. In which case, his communication will be described as direct and literal as in 1.

Similarly, I can eat a whole cow said to a wife by her husband who is just back from work can hardly be taken on face value. The meaning is nonliteral for he does not mean what he says. The exaggeration is used to convey the message that he is very hungry and would like to have his meal right away. In this context, the wife knows that the response expected from her is not a speech act but a physical act – provision of meal. Was she to reply

A whole cow? It would be understood as a joke unless of course their relationship is not cordial.

John Austin’s speech act theory posits that in communication, a speaker by his utterance must intend to produce some effect in an audience, a belief or an action. The intention or communicative function (illocutionary act), however, is distinct from the effect (perlocutionary acts). The continuum of actions starting from the speaker’s utterance or linguistic expression (utterance act or locutionary act) to the intention or communicative function (illocutionary act) and its impact on the hearer (perlocutionary acts) constitute speech acts. The illocutionary act which in essence is the act performed in saying something can be interpreted as a statement, a request, a threat, a question, a promise, an order, a suggestion, a reprisal or a proposal etc. The hearer can also determine when the speaker is merely telling, reporting, commanding, proposing, questioning, promising, apologising, threatening or asserting. These acts have a direct relationship to the classification of sentence types which in functional grammar are based on their function. Hence we have statements, imperatives and interrogative sentences.

An illocutionary act is considered successful to the degree that the speaker’s intention is recognised. Many a time, a hearer misses certain implicatures, primarily because it is not everything we say that is straightforward, and sometimes due to pragmatic presuppositions. In other words, a speaker might structure his utterance or even lie in order to hide his real intention. Though this in itself is a breach of the cooperative principle, the ability to read in between the lines can bare covert communicative intentions.

Data Presentation
In the light of the above discourse, typical samples of question/answer adjacency pairs or dyads made by students in the context of their academic performance are presented in this section. They constitute the raw data collected unobtrusively by the writer while listening to the conversations of tertiary students on campus.

Dialogue A
1A: What did you score in GS 101?
1B: The lecturer failed me.

Dialogue B
2A: Did you pass Prof Ebong’s course?
2B: He gave me a C even though I bought his book.
Dialogue C
3A: So you flunked LIT 222?
3B: Almost everybody in my class is carrying that course over.

Analysis and Findings
Structurally, the first part of each dyad is the question while the second part is the response. We may begin by identifying the circumstances that led to the question in Dialogue A. Since 1A is also a student, perhaps the question was motivated by peer rivalry or sheer curiosity or even genuine interest in another's progress. The question is explicitly stated but the answer is not. It violates the cooperative principle by breaking all the four maxims. A statement disclosing the exact score or grade directly and literally is all the principle requires, no more nor less. The indirect answer implicates an unwillingness to reveal the score though the exact words do not communicate this unwillingness. Besides, The lecturer failed me is an ambiguous statement. On one level failed means disappointed, on another the utterance means that the lecturer caused the student's failure. If the second option is explored further, then the question has been answered albeit indirectly and partially.

By virtue of the word order in the statement, the subject, The lecturer is put on the spotlight. Thus, the role of the speaker in his own failure is downplayed. The illocutionary act is stating who failed who. The passive construction would read I was failed by the lecturer -- a synonymous sentence that is intended to absolve the student from blame and academic responsibility. The implication is that his failure should be blamed on the lecturer.

With reference to Dialogue B, it is noteworthy that C is a pass grade worldwide, hence the interlocutor's question is as good as answered in the given context. The answer, however, contains excess information. Like 1B, 2B flouts the conversational maxims of quantity and relevance -- even though I bought his book conveys additional information that is equally irrelevant especially for a polar question.

A threefold grammatical ambiguity is operational here: I) Is Prof Ebong the author of the book that the student bought? II) Did Prof Ebong sell the book to the student(?) and III) Is Prof Ebong both the author and vendor of the book which the student bought? The conjunction even though heightens the presupposition that purchasing his book will fetch the speaker a higher or better grade than C. He gave me makes Prof Ebong the agent. The implied meaning, therefore, is that the professor is responsible for the student's performance.

In Dialogue C, 3A is seeking 3B's validation of his utterance. The question is direct and literal. Rather than proffer an explicit answer, 3B shifts the attention from himself to everybody in his class. On the surface his response appears inconsistent with the question but its relevance in the context of communication suggests that he does not want to admit that he flunked LIT 222. The import of the unsolicited report about the performance of his class is an indirect reference to his own performance. Although the constituent words do not express in linguistic terms that he flunked LIT 222, the implied meaning is that the failure was general.

According to Bills (2010), the second speaker in the interaction usually has two options for responding. 'One is the preferred reaction, what is expected as the reply. The other response is the dispreferred answer, what is unexpected, less ordinary, and more difficult to give'. The former typically complies with the Gricean Maxims while the latter flouts it. The second pair part or reactions in the above conversations are essentially dispreferred responses because they exemplify violations of the quantity and relevance maxims. Possible preferred responses are:
1A: What did you score in GS 101?
1B: 36%.
2A: Did you pass Prof Ebong's course?
2B: Yes, I made a C.
3A: So you flunked LIT 222?
3B: Yes (or No).

An online criticism of the cooperative principle posits that speakers who deliberately flout the maxims usually intend for their listener to understand their underlying implication . . . . Thus, the Gricean Maxims serve a purpose both when they are followed and when they are flouted (Wikipedia 2012). To determine how the original data with the dispreferred responses and the possible preferred responses presented above fulfill this purpose, there is need to grasp the underlying implicatures of the adjacency pairs particularly the second pair part of the conversations.

Conclusion and Recommendations
An understanding of the implicatures of learner utterances plays a crucial role in pedagogy. It gives the teacher an insight into the workings of the mind of the learner. A student who is comfortable to blame others, especially his teachers for his shortcomings is not ready to learn. On the other hand, gross violation of the conversational maxims by way of giving incongruous answers to straightforward questions could be an indicator of underlying psycholinguistic problems or inadequate
Learning is task oriented. Until a student learns to accept responsibility for his actions and inactions, he may not appreciate the essence of hard work. Today, books are basic educational materials. Procurement of this resource per se cannot accomplish anything until it is actually read and studied. Tracy (2011) puts it thus:

Accepting responsibility is one of the hardest of all disciplines, but without it, no success is possible. The failure to accept responsibility and the attempt to foist responsibility for things in your life that make you unhappy onto other people, institutions, and situations completely distort cause and effect, undermine your character, weaken your resolve, and diminish your humanity. They lead to making endless excuses (p50).

Unsavory tales of ‘sex for grade’ in institutions of higher learning has tainted the public image of both students and their lecturers. It is most likely that victims of such anomaly in the educational system would vouch for the truth condition of the dispreferred responses which imply that students are victimised by their lecturers. If students’ success is dependent on the whims and caprices of their lecturers to the extent that hard work loses its significance in academics, then the nation is doomed. The academia should constantly remind themselves of the need to live up to the ethics of the teaching profession by ensuring, to the best of their ability, that their products are indeed found worthy in character and learning. Attempts to do otherwise would make their professional integrity questionable. Preferred responses, on the other hand, states the matter as clear as possible. Thus, it makes it easy to decipher where and when a student requires help with his studies, and when he is making progress. Implications can also reveal a learner’s underlying communicative strengths and weaknesses. Once identified, a teacher can then devise an effective strategy to assist the learner’s development.

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