



VIOLETION OF CONVERSATIONAL MAXIMS: THE CASE OF ADVERTISEMENTS

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Introduction

Following Grice's (1975) proposition that irony and humour in texts may stem from the violation of conversational maxims, Yamaguchi (1988) and Attardo (1993) published works on 'non-bonafide texts of humour'. Texts which strictly adhere to Gricean maxims invariably produce meanings. In such a scenario, ambiguous texts which violate these maxims should not be able to convey any meaning. However, this is not the case; advertisements with ambiguous language do communicate and convey meanings. Then how do we interpret this paradox? This study examines the violation of maxims in ambiguous advertising texts and explores the inferential paths that help us uncover their underlying meanings.

Semantic and pragmatic meaning

For the followers of Bloomfield, linguistics meant only phonetics, phonemics, and morphophonemics. Syntax became a central concern in linguistics under Chomsky. Though Chomsky and his followers worked on a systematic theory to study the structures of language, they still regarded meaning as altogether too messy a concept for any serious contemplation. Commenting on Chomsky's position, Leech (1983:3) emphatically says, 'Chomsky strongly maintained the independence of grammar as 'a theory of a mental organ' or 'mental faculty' from consideration of its *use and functions of language*.'

Chomsky thus restricted the scope of linguistics to what he referred to as 'competency theory', rather than 'performance'. With the advent of text linguistics, discourse analysis, and conversational analysis, the Chomskyan competence theory has given way to the performance theory, losing its position as the dominant paradigm of linguistics. Sociolinguistics has stressed the importance of the social dimension whenever an attempt is made to study language. These developments within linguistics have welcomed the addition of pragmatics. Pragmatics is all about the study of the meaning in use.

The very moment when meaning comes up for discussion in relation to pragmatics, there arises a need to explain how the study of meaning in pragmatics is different from other areas notably semantics. Leech (1983:5) says that it is just a boundary dispute between semantics and



pragmatics, as both are concerned with meaning. However, there is a notable distinction between semantics and pragmatics.

The problem of language (langue) and language use (parole) has centred on a boundary dispute between semantics and pragmatics, both fields are concerned with meaning, but the difference between them can be traced to two different uses of the verb "to mean".

(Leech, 1983:5)

He explains the difference in the following way. 'What does X mean?' is the territory of semantics, and 'What do you mean by X?' is the area of pragmatics. Thus, meaning in pragmatics is defined relative to a speaker or the user of the language, whereas meaning in semantics is defined purely as a property of a given language. The semantic meaning has nothing do with the social context where it is used nor who is using it to whom. Semantics thus explores the meaning of linguistic units, typically at the level of words/sentences, while pragmatics is the study of meaning in speech situations.

Levels of meaning

The pragmatics literature demonstrates that we understand an utterance's meaning at three levels. The first level is that of 'abstract meaning' and the second being 'context meaning.' The second level carries the assigned sense and/or reference to a word or a sentence. When we take note of the speaker's intention, we reach the third level. This level is known as the 'force of utterance'. The first level of meaning is traditionally the subject of *semantics*, and the latter two levels are the domain of *pragmatics*. Pragmatics is 'meaning in interaction.'

This interestingly presents the view that meaning is not inherent in the words alone, nor is it produced by the speaker or the hearer alone. This process involves the negotiation between the speaker and the hearer, the context of utterance (physical, social, and linguistic), and the first level meaning of the utterance.

Sense and Force

Let's delve deeper into the relationship between sense and force, the meaning of speakers' words, and the implied meaning. Recently, a conversation occurred over lunch between myself and my friend. We were both having our lunch. I had eaten my lunch before she ate hers. Seeing me close the lid of the lunch box, she asked:

Example 1: Q: "What happened?"



A: "I finished the box." I answered.

Going strictly by the semantic component or the first level meaning of these utterances, the meaning we get is contextually inappropriate. Semantically, my answer implies that I created or destroyed a carrier known as 'the box.' When my friend asked, "What happened?" and I responded, "I finished the box," I did not intend to imply that I was either the creator or the destroyer of the carrier. How was communication possible between my friend and me if neither of us intended the original meaning of these utterances? Answers: We interpret each other's words based on their implied meanings. With the question, 'What happened?' my friend implied, 'If I had eaten my meal so soon.' By answering, 'I finished the box,' I in turn implied that I had eaten the contents of the box (not the 'box'). Thus, we effectively transacted our exchange not on the semantic plane but on the pragmatic one. Our verbal contributions allowed us to exchange meanings that we hadn't explicitly stated. The unstated meaning proves to be more significant than the stated one. We understand the meaning that is not at all stated in the verbal exchange. How is it that we convey meanings that are not at all stated?

Grice's theory of implicatures

In order to solve the problem, we need first to draw a distinction between what the ordinary language philosophers H.P. Grice (1967a) called 'conventional implicature' and 'conversational implicatures'. In 1967 H.P. Grice was invited to give the William James lectures at Harvard University. It was there for the first time he outlined his theory of 'implicature'. It was published for the first time in 1975 in a paper 'Logic and Conversation'. His theory of implicatures proved to be one of the most influential theories in the development of pragmatics. Grice's theory is an attempt at explaining how hearers/readers get to know from what is said or written to what is meant i.e., from the level of 'expressed or stated' meaning to the level of 'implied meaning'.

Grice distinguished two different forms of implicatures: conventional and conversational. He introduced the technical term *implicature* to cover a variety of non-explicit meanings such as suggestions, implications and the like. The conventional and the conversational implicatures have a common property between them that they both convey an additional level of meaning which is beyond the semantic component of the words used. They differ in that the conventional implicature always conveys the same implicature regardless of the context. On the other hand, the conversational implicature implies variously according to the context of utterance.

Conventional Implicature

It is conventionally attached to the linguistic forms. Levinson (1983:127) says that there are relatively few examples of conventional implicatures in English. He lists four: *but, even, therefore* and *for*.



Example 2: She is unmarried, but far from stupid.

Though it is not actually asserted that unmarried people are stupid, the word *but* definitely implies that this is the case. The word *but* carries the implicature that what follows will run counter to expectations. Thomas (1995:57) says that this sense of the word *but* always carries the conventional implicature regardless of the context in which it occurs.

Conversational Implicature

Conversational Implicature arises only in a particular context of utterances. It varies from context to context. In some other context the example1 cited above does not need to mean 'the box of food', or may mean only 'the box' that someone has made or destroyed.

The Cooperative Principle or the CP

Grice's theory explains how hearers understand the implications from what is merely said. In order to explain the mechanisms by which people interpret conversational implicature, Grice introduced four conversational maxims which are supposed to guide conversational interaction in keeping with a general Cooperative Principle (CP). What are maxims? Maxims are intuitive principles which the users of the language are aware of in interaction. Maxims differ from rules in that they are seen as generally valid rather than count only for specified cases. The CP is as follows:

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

(Grice, 1989:26)

Grice was suggesting that in conversational interaction people work on the assumption that a certain set of rules is in operation, unless they receive indications to the contrary. Such assumptions are generally made in all spheres of life all the time. To explain it further, Thomas (1995:62), cites a useful example- that of driving a car. When we drive, we assume that other drivers will operate according to the same set of rules and regulations as we do or at least they know what these regulations are. If we do not make such assumptions the traffic system would surely grind to a halt. However, using the road is not as smooth as this is. There are times, when we do have indications that another driver may not obey the specified Highway Code, for instance, a learner, whose vehicle is out of control etc. On these occasions we examine our assumptions or suspend them altogether. And at some other times, our assumption that others are not operating in accordance with the same set of rules is misplaced, and then accidents may occur.



The same can be applied to conversation. When we talk, we operate according to a set of assumptions available in each community and we get by. There will be times when we suspend our assumption that our interlocutor is operating with the same conversational norms as we are: for instance, when we talk to a drunken or child. And there will be times when our assumptions are wrong about the communicative competence of the interlocutor. For as Thomas (1995:62) says, 'in setting out his CP, Grice was not suggesting that people are always good and kind or cooperative in any everyday sense of the word. He was simply noting that overall, people observe certain regularities in interaction. One set of those regularities are those that govern the generation and interpretation of conversational implicature. Consider the following example:

Example 3:

The speaker (a friend of mine) bumped into our room, when I was sitting with a couple of people over a drink.

I: Do you want a drink?

He: No, I have come here all the way to see you drink and enjoy.

On the surface my friend's answer is untrue and uncooperative as I know that he likes boozing. But this is the sort of sarcastic replies we generally encounter and have no problem at all in interpreting. How do we interpret such assumptions? According to Grice, I got the implicit meaning from what my friend has said was by resorting to alternative interpretation with the strong assumption that my friend was observing the CP. Grice argues that without the assumption that the speaker is operating according to the CP, there is no mechanism to prompt me (or someone) to seek for another level of interpretation. My observation that my friend has said something that is manifestly untrue, combined with the assumption that the CP is in operation prompted me to search for an implicature. In Grice's view, the four conversational maxims constantly guide us reach the implicatures of the utterances we make/receive.

The Four Conversational Maxims

quantity: 1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purpose of the exchange).

2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Quality: 1. Do not say what you believe to be false.

2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.



Relation: 1. Be relevant.

Manner: 1. Avoid obscurity of expression
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)
4. Be orderly.

(Grice: 1989 : 26)

Research on Gricean maxims assumes that the CP, articulated in these four maxims, does not operate straightforwardly, and in fact most of Grice discussion is dedicated to the ways to 'trick' the CP to get meaning across. Grice reviewed several attitudes a speaker could hold towards the CP. A speaker can observe (fulfil) the maxims or non-observe them.

Observing the maxims:

Observing the maxims is simply to follow their directions as in the following example :

Example: 4

Son : Where are my spectacles ?

Mother : They are on the table in the front room.

The mother has answered clearly (Manner) truthfully (Quality), has given just the right kind of information (Quantity) and has directly addressed her son's goal in asking the question (Relation). She has said precisely what she meant, no more and no less, and has not given rise to any inferential path i.e., there is no destination to be made here between what she says and what she means hence there is no additional level of meaning.

Non-observance of the maxims:

Grice was aware that there are very many occasions when people do not observe the maxims. Some ways of failing to observe a maxim are:

Flouting/Violating/exploiting

Infringing a maxim

Opting out of maxim



Suspending a maxim

Thomas (1995:64) says that language users may fail to observe a maxim because of two reasons:

- a. a) Incapable of speaking clearly,
- a. b) Deliberately choose to lie.

The most interesting category which directly concerns us in this paper is the first one; that of flouting or violating a maxim because it generates an Implicature. A flout occurs, says Thomson (1995:65), when a speaker fails to observe a maxim at the level of what is said, with the deliberate intention to give rise to an Implicature. Attardo (1993:537) argues that the flouting or violating a maxim is salvaged by the fact that the speaker is fulfilling another maxim. If my supervisor asks me 'when are you giving me the paper?' and I answer, "the typist has not finished yet", the answer is in violation of the maxim of relevance. However, by assuming that the answer does in fact fulfill another maxim that of quantity one can construct the following inferential path: the supervisor is being told that the course paper is with the typist; my research guide knows that I give in my course papers after getting them typed, and since the most likely scenario is that the question is asked to make sure that I submit my paper before the due date. My answer, 'the typist hasn't finished yet' is enough information as it entails that I have finished writing it and is with the typist and the submission is just a matter of time.

The next half is shared by the non-verbal code and the signature line. The non-verbal code comprises six Nehru cotton caps neatly arranged in the shape of a flower in the gray and black backdrop. Each cap is distinct by its colour. Below the picture is printed the signature line 'Jenson and Nicholson (India) Ltd'. A *swastika* mark is super imposed in light blue over the punch line.

The stated meaning:

With the signature line, it becomes obvious on the first reading that Jenson and Nicholson India Ltd. (printed in bolder typefaces) has put up the advert. With whenever you see colours think of us' just below the signature line, the reader gets to know that J & N is a paint/colour producing firm. The punch line states the purpose of the advert, that colourful caps iconically concludes the discourse that this advert is all about colours.

The implications:



Implicature: The situations which chiefly interested Grice were those in which a speaker blatantly fails to observe a maxim, not with any intention of deceiving or misleading. The speaker there by wishes to prompt the hearer to look for a meaning which is different from, or in addition to, the expressed meaning. This additional meaning is what has been discussed as conversational Implicature. The Conversational Implicature is calculated based on the violation of the CP. A discussion of the CP calls invariably for the application of the conversational maxims which are enlisted in the preceding sections.

A close reading of the punch line of the advert while foregrounding the swastika symbol that is super imposed there, immediately turns the entire text of the advert ambiguous. Ambiguity results in the violation of the Gricean maxims. The ad violates one of the submaxims of the maxim of manner by being ambiguous. In Grice's discussion of the maxims, one of the possible cooperative uses of the maxims is their flouting i.e., their patent violation. Violation does not mean that all the maxims are violated in a single exchange. The violated maxim, instead of being communicatively unviable, allows the reader to infer that a given maxim is violated in so far as another maxim is being obeyed (1989 : 30). The violated maxim (manner) is salvaged by the fact that the advert is fulfilling other three maxims of quality, quantity and relevance.

Begin at the breach

To salvage the Text from becoming non-cooperative, hence, communicatively opaque, we can tentatively postulate a theory of 'begin at the breach'. That is, to construct the inferential path to understand the text, first we need to foreground our reading with the textual clues, which are overtly left. The clue that leaves the text ambiguous is indeed the one that becomes the focal area to launch the reading. The presence of the dexterously super imposed swastika symbol over the punch line, apparently makes the ad ambiguous. This is also the site that violated the maxim of *manner*. This required the reader to bring in and to put to work the aspects (linguistic & non linguistic) which are not overtly mentioned in the text.

This can be done by borrowing a principle adopted by Attardo (1993 : 552) for the analysis of jokes. He says that jokes convey information or simply work not by force of what they state, but by force of their 'existential presuppositional basis'. The existential presuppositions of the ad are that the ad was released at the time of the recent general elections held in India. In Indian democratic elections the voters are given a rubber stamp bearing the swastika symbol to exercise their franchise against the symbol of the contesting candidate of their choice on the ballot paper.

The next area that requires the reader to construct the existential presuppositions is that of the non – verbal code: the Nehru caps arranged in splendid colours. They presuppose the information that they have the shape and the fabric of the type Nehru used to wear. Nehru was a politician. Therefore, these types of caps are worn by politicians. The politicians of this country wear caps



and appear before the voters at the time of elections. They wear caps of various colours – each colour of the cap is associated with a political party. The rereading of the text in this light replaces the colours and the caps by the political parties that the coloured caps stand for. are contesting in this way, the other three fulfilled conversational maxims disambiguate the text there by making the CP violation only superficial and temporary. The disambiguated ad entails the Implicature that the potential consumer-voters should exercise their democratic right wisely rather than impulsively.

Conclusion

Thus, it is interesting to note that beginning the reading of an ambiguous text at the place where the maxim is breached together with the presuppositional features of the whole text seem to guide the reader arrive at the implicature and thus the pragmatic force of the text. It has further been discussed the violation of a conversational maxim does not make the text communicationally incompetent. The violation is salvaged by the other maxims which are fulfilled.

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