

## Information-based Infringements and Implicit Meanings in Conversations in Select Recent Nigerian Novels

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### Abstract

*Conversation presents the context for one of the most prevalent uses of human language. Scholars have therefore studied conversation in linguistic scholarship with consideration for its structural and functional features (whether in real or literary context) from the stylistic, register analytic, discursive and pragmatic perspectives. This paper is a departure from the existing pragmatic ones on conversations by applying insights from Gricean Pragmatics to investigate meanings implicitly conveyed in the conversational contexts in which speakers are assumed to be cooperative, but infringe the maxim of quantity in conveying their informative intentions in the purposively selected recent Nigerian novels, *Purple Hibiscus (PH)* and *Half of a Yellow Sun (HYS)*, written by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The findings reveal two types of information-based infringements in characters' conversational contributions spurred by flouting the maxim of quantity. These are less-information-spurred implicit meaning such as the themes of subjugation, self-centredness, resistance against religious imposition found in *PH* and more-information-spurred implicit meaning such as the themes of tribalism and inhumanity found in *HYS*. The study concludes that this inferential pragmatics' approach to fictional conversations enhances a better understanding of how implicit meanings of conversational discourse can be generated in the contexts of information-based maxim in the texts, to aid the interpretation and understanding of the author's messages to the readers.*

**Keywords:** Conversation, implicit, meaning, information-based, infringements, novels

### 1. Introduction

Conversation has been identified as the most basic register of human language, given that most humans spend much more time participating in conversation than any other use of language (Biber and Conrad 2009:86). This position probably accounts for why the study of conversation has received a great deal of scholarly attention from linguists over a long period of time. Much of these scholarly studies have addressed the prescriptive nature of conversation, dealing largely with the idea of what makes a 'good conversationalist' (cf. Burke 1993, Lerner 2004, Laddicoat 2007, etc). Other studies have also concentrated on the structural and functional analyses of conversations (whether in real or literary context) from different perspectives; stylistic (Brown 2005, Leech and Short 2007, Osisanwo 2010), register analytic (Biber and Conrad 2009), discursive (Sinclair and Coulthard 1992, Tsui 1992, Passot 2007), and pragmatic (Wang 2009, Osunbade 2013, Adeniji 2014).

While the pragmatic studies have been devoted to the exploration of language use in conversations, such efforts have been more from the natural contexts. The few pragmatic efforts from the literary contexts have however examined such features as: universal pragmatic acts in drama (Adedimeji 2009), disambiguation as an explicature strategy in novels (Osunbade 2013) and pragmatic acts in drama (Odebunmi 2006, Adeniji 2014), leaving a gap in knowledge on the role of non-observance or infringement of the Gricean maxims of cooperation in the generation of the speaker's intended meaning, which is not explicitly said in the conversational context. This study fills this gap by investigating meanings implicitly conveyed in the contexts in which speakers are assumed to be cooperative, but infringe the maxim of quality in conveying their informative intentions in the select recent Nigerian novels, *Purple Hibiscus (PH)* and *Half of a Yellow Sun (HYS)*, written by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Following Tunca 2008, opting for the less problematic phrase "recent Nigeria novels" is to avoid generational tag, given the inconsistency in drawing the boundary between the second and third or new generation of Nigerian writers.

Adichie's novels served as our data source, spurred by Adichie's feat in the contemporary literary circle as a gifted embodiment of intellectualism whose artistic prowess surpasses many writers in a realistic refraction of the post colonial experiences of Nigerians.

Our data consisted of purposively sampled conversations manifesting flouts of the quantity maxim from the selected texts (i.e. *PH* and *HYS*), and these were analysed for occurrences of implicit meanings, using insights from Gricean Pragmatics. The study is significant for enhancing a better understanding of how implicit meanings of conversational discourse can be generated in the contexts of information-based maxim in the texts. It also shifts literature on inferential pragmatics forward and contributes to the development of Gricean pragmatics by applying insights from the approach to Nigerian fictional discourse to aid the interpretation and understanding of the author's messages to the readers.

## 2. *Conversations in Novels*

One of the most prevalent uses of human language is located in conversation (Liddicoat 2007:1). The fact is that all human beings engage in conversational interaction and human society depends on conversation in order to function. Through conversation, people socialize and sustain their relationships with each other. Conversations are thus either face to face, as we have in human day-to-day interactions, or mediated by different media of communication such as television, radio, computer, phone, books, and so on.

Natural conversation differs from other forms of conversation in many ways, though its features may be applied illuminately in fictional conversation within a literary text (drama or novel). With respect to conversations in the novel, which is being focused in this study, though the talk appears to be more 'tidied up', there are evidences of relatively few unclear utterances, overlaps, false starts, hesitations, and repetitions (see Toolan 1989:193). Since conversations in the novel represent talks between characters which are an important part of the message from the writer to the readers, there are literary conventions at work governing this fictional representation of talk, so that the rendered text is not quite a faithful representation of a natural conversation (Toolan 1989:193). However, certain structural and functional principles govern fictional dialogue, as they do natural dialogue, and a reader or hearer must recognize and attend to those principles in order to comprehend the dialogue, as an examination of the flout of the Gricean cooperative principle vis-a-vis the generation of implicit meaning in the novel will reveal in this study.

## 3. *Grice's Conversational Maxim of Quantity*

In Gricean pragmatics, speakers who participate in a conversation implicitly signal that they agree to co-operate in the joint activity, to abide by the rules, as it were. In this Gricean sense, people's use of language has the assumption that they are being cooperative and are following Grice's maxims of conversation. Grice's version of what a conversationalist implicitly endorses, especially by accepting to take part in the conversation, is given as follows:

Make your conversational 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 1989:29)

This principle is elaborated by means of a set of maxims, which indicate what it means to co-operate in a conversational way (see Cruse 2000:368). These are maxims of quality, quantity, relevance and relation. These maxims can be adhered to or violated, flouted (deliberately not observed) to generate an implicature. Flouting a maxim is therefore a pragmatic strategy of generating conversational implicature, especially with consideration for certain inferential processes.

This study benefits from the maxim of quantity, given its focus on determining the pragmatically conveyed meaning at the implicit level with consideration for the non-observance of the maxim. The maxim of quantity is concerned with the amount of information an utterance conveys. It is expected to be observed in two ways:

- (i) Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange in which you are engaged.
- (ii) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Within an inferential-intentional approach to meaning, Grice maintained that implicatures arise as the result of the infringement of certain principles or 'maxims' of rational conversational behaviour, such as the ones above, which govern speech exchanges (see Grice 1989: 26). Such infringements therefore have implications for the question of the universality of the Gricean maxims.

For instance, Keenan (1976) says that we can readily imagine situations even in human societies in which people do not observe the first maxim of Quantity, which stipulates that hearers are to make their contributions ‘as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange’. As she points out, there are many situations where it would be indiscreet, impolite or unethical to be informative. Having demonstrated the lack of applicability of Quantity (i) in some Western contexts, Keenan goes on to claim that societies exist where, in general, the maxim ‘be informative’ does not hold at all. One such society, Keenan claims, is Madagascar, where ‘the expectation that speakers will satisfy informational needs is not a basic norm’ (see Keenan 1998: 218). According to her, Information in traditional Malagasy society is characteristically withheld, especially if the information in question is important. In fact, if one gains access to new information, one is, expectedly, reluctant to reveal it, given that as long as it is known that one has that information and others do not, one has some prestige over them (Keenan 1998: 218). However, Keenan further observes that it will be misleading ‘to conclude that the maxim “Be informative” does not operate at all in a Malagasy community’, as members of this speech community do not regularly expect that interlocutors will withhold necessary information. Rather, it is simply that they do not have the contrary expectation that, in general, interlocutors will satisfy one another’s informational needs (Keenan 1998: 224).

Generating implicatures (in the tradition of the “science of the unsaid,” as Levinson (2000) calls inferential pragmatics theories, such as Gricean pragmatics), therefore, operates differently in different communities with consideration for the four maxims that inform people’s cooperative behaviour in general as guiding principles in inference drawing. Ultimately, since interlocutors’ working assumption is that cooperative speakers do abide by the maxims, any possible violation of one of the maxims, and blatantly so, is assumed to be informed by a special speaker communicative intention behind the maxim flouting, rather than taken as a breakdown in the communication. Such a communicative intention is thus a pragmatic inference, based on what is said explicitly and contextual assumptions the speaker intends the addressee to consider in the computation of the inference. In the case of those flouts triggered by the violations of the maxim of quantity to generate implicatures, for instance, the speaker may provide too much information and once the addressee figures that the speaker is being cooperative while having a specific intention in being too informative, the way is paved for deriving the implicature that the added information is relevant in a context-sensitive way and vice versa, as the present study will analytically reveal.

#### 4. Analysis and Findings

The data for this study manifest two types of information-based infringements in characters’ conversational contributions spurred by flouting the maxims of quantity. These are less-information-spurred implicit meaning found in *PH* and more-information-spurred implicit meaning found in *HYS*.

##### 4.1 Less-information-spurred Implicit Meaning

The communication of implicit meaning necessitated by the flout of the quantity maxim, spurred by being less-informative, is largely found in our data, especially in *PH*, as the examples that follow will demonstrate.

- Example 1: (Background: Eugene and Ifeoma’s families were in Abba, their hometown for Christmas and Ifeoma came to take Eugene’s children for sightseeing alongside her own children)
- Aunty Ifeoma: Are you ready, Jaja and Kambili?  
(Turned to Beatrice) Nwunye m, will you not come with us?
- Beatrice: (shaking her head) *You know Eugene likes me to stay around.*  
(*PH*, p. 80)

In the conversation above, Ifeoma wants to take her children and her brother’s children, Jaja and Kambili out for sightseeing, and she extends the invitation to Beatrice, the brother’s wife, but she declines. When asked whether she would join them for the outing, she says:

You know Eugene likes me to stay around.

Instead of giving this response, Beatrice could simply have said “no” and this would cooperatively give the maximum amount of information required by Ifeoma in the situation. By giving this much weaker and less informative response, a level of non-cooperation is demonstrated by her, thereby flouting the maxim of quantity to generate an implicature. The pragmatic implication of this is that it prompts Ifeoma to look for additional meaning that “she (Beatrice) is not joining them for the outing”, based on inference.

The fact that Beatrice is being restricted from leaving the house is, therefore, communicated to underscore the theme of subjugation.

The finding further reveals that infringement with respect to the amount of information given in the communicative situation also gives off implicit meaning associated with the projection of the theme of self-centredness. Example 2 will illustrate this point:

- Example 2: (Background: Kambili come second in the class and Eugene follows her to school, and engages her in a challenging conversation in front of her classroom building).
- Eugene (T<sub>1</sub>): Where is Chinwe Jideze?  
 Kambili (T<sub>2</sub>): (Pointedly) She's the girl in the middle.  
 Eugene (T<sub>2</sub>): Look at her, how many heads does she have?  
 Kambili (T<sub>2</sub>): One.  
 Eugene (T<sub>3</sub>): (Pulled a small mirror from his pocket). Look in the mirror. How many heads do you have?  
 Kambili (T<sub>3</sub>): One.  
 Eugene (T<sub>4</sub>): The girl has one head too, she does not have two. *So why did you let her come first?*  
 Kambili (T<sub>4</sub>): It will not happen again, Papa.  
 Eugene (T<sub>5</sub>): *Why do you think I work so hard to give you and Jaja the best? You have to do something with all these privileges.*  
 Kambili (T<sub>5</sub>): Yes papa.  
 Eugene (T<sub>6</sub>): *I didn't have a father who sent me to the best schools... I would be nothing today but for the priests and sisters at the mission. I was a house boy for the parish priest for two years. Nobody dropped me off at school. I walked eight miles every day. I was a gardener for the priest while I attended St. Gregory's secondary school.*  
 (PH. p.45-47)

The above is a conversation involving Eugene and, her daughter, Kambili. The conversation reveals Eugene's disapproval of Kambili's academic performance and its implication for the projection of the theme of self-centredness, which is implicitly communicated, using non-figurative expressions. Implicatures manifest in Eugene's utterances in his T<sub>1</sub>, T<sub>5</sub>, and T<sub>6</sub> in the conversation above. In Eugene's T<sub>1</sub>, the second segment of the utterance "so why did you let her come first?", which gives off an implicature, is deliberately engaged to make it manifest that he (Eugene) is most displeased with Kambili's second position in the class in her previous result. The utterance flouts the maxim of quantity in its under-informative non-cooperation, costing Kambili extra efforts in searching for the additional meaning conveyed. She then first accesses the contextual assumption that:

*The person that came first (Chinwe Jideze) is not better than her in any way.*

This assumption then forms the context for reaching the father's implicit communication that: *Kambili came second out of her own volition.* This implicated conclusion pragmatically captures Eugene's belief that everything could be controlled in one's favour, thereby revealing his egoistic and self-centred character.

Eugene's displeasure with Kambili's performance is further established by uttering the utterance in his T<sub>5</sub>:  
 Why do you think I work so hard to give you and Jaja the best? You have to do something with all these privileges

This utterance also flouts the quantity maxim, as it is less informative than Kambili needs to understand the force of his father's utterance, and expectedly, forces Kambili to access the assumption that:

- (i) Being sent to the best school is a rare privilege.
- (ii) One has to always come first to justify this privilege.

These assumptions thus serve as inferential premises that eventually yield the implicature:

Eugene expects her (Kambili) to always come first.

The implicature here encapsulates Eugene's projection of his uncompromising belief that humans have the ability to control their situations. This attitude of self-aggrandizement subsequently leads him to employ another implicit style in his T<sub>6</sub> to cap his thought in the conversation. Equipped with the more than necessary information supplied by the utterance in Eugene's (T<sub>6</sub>), Kambili is able to supply the contextual assumptions that:

- (i) Eugene didn't have the opportunity of a good life she and her brother have, as he went through hard times in his school days;
- (ii) Eugene attained success by hard work.

Ultimately, the fact that Kambili is expected to take a good advantage of the rare opportunity she has is thus implied. Succinctly put, the implicature derived from the inferences above is that *Eugene is motivating Kambili to success and, at the same time, not giving her a choice in this endeavour*. As such, Adichie's thematic focus on self-centeredness (that is typical of many highly placed individuals in the society) is demonstrated.

However, in another transaction between Kambili and her cousin, Amaka, Kambili implicitly communicates a thought that reveals her father's behavioural traits, and her own dogmatic internalization of his dictates to underpin the theme of subjugation, using an utterance which flouts the quantity maxim:

Example 3: (Background: Amaka strikes a conversation with her cousin, Kambili, on the topic of watching TV).

Amaka (T<sub>1</sub>): You have satellite here, don't you?

Kambili (T<sub>1</sub>): Yes.

Amaka (T<sub>2</sub>): Can we watch CNN?

Kambili (T<sub>2</sub>): *We don't watch a lot of TV.*

(PH, p. 79)

In this exchange, instead of simply being as cooperative as the conversational situation requires by saying "no", Kambili engages, in her second turn (i.e.T<sub>2</sub>), an indirect answer to Amaka's utterance in her own T<sub>2</sub>. When Kambili says "We don't watch a lot of TV", the utterance flouts the quantity maxim in its being less informative in the context of use. Kambili informs Amaka that they (i.e. Jaja and herself) do not watch a lot of TV, but does not make any mention that it is their father's directive. She therefore demands from Amaka the extraction of the contextual assumption:

Kambili and her brother do not just watch TV at will.

This assumption, expected to be accessed with the advantage of Amaka's shared knowledge of Kambili's father's strict rules, is then needed for the recovery of the implicit interpretation that:

They cannot watch CNN.

By resorting to this implicitly conveyed information, Kambili's intention is to make it manifest that they (her brother and himself) strictly operate according to the scheduled routine dictates of their father. Her implicit refusal to consent to Amaka's idea of watching TV exposes her unquestionable internalization of her father's set standard of living and her dogmatic adherence to them even in his absence. Eugene's evolving personality is thus inherently depicted, as he totally subdues his family members; hence, Adichie's thematic focus on lack of freedom/subjugation, in *PH*, is implicitly demonstrated in the implicature derived.

The flout of the information-based maxim (that is, the quantity maxim) is further evident in our data to implicitly project the theme of resistance against religious imposition, especially in *PH*. Let us consider example 4:

Example 4: (Background: Amaka was asked to choose an English name for her confirmation in the church, but she declined)

Father Amadi: Amaka, have you chosen an English name for your confirmation?

Amaka: *Why do I have to, Father? When the missionaries first came, they didn't think Igbo names were good enough. They insisted that people take English names to be baptised. Shouldn't we be moving ahead?*

Father Amadi: Don't make this what it is not. You don't have to use the name. Look at me, I've always used my Igbo name, but I was baptised Michael and confirmed Victor.

(PH, p. 255)

This transaction reveals that Amaka is expected to choose an English name for her confirmation, but she declines. Instead of saying "no" which would be as cooperative and informative as required for the current purpose of conversation, Amaka says:

Why do I have to, Father? When the missionaries first came, they didn't think Igbo names were good enough. They insisted that people take English names to be baptised. Shouldn't we be moving ahead?

With this utterance, Amaka supplies information not as informative as the situation demands, thereby triggering off the search for the right implicature. Amaka's response to Father Amadi's question starts with a rhetorical question, challenging the need for choosing an English name for the confirmation. It also ends with another rhetorical question, which further challenges the continued imposition of English names on Africans under the cover of validating their baptism. The interrogatives serve to give off implicatures by aiding access to the inferences provided by the propositional contents of other sentences (i.e. sentences 2 and 3) of the utterance thus:

- (i) Earlier missionaries condemned Igbo names to favour English names.
- (ii) English names were forced on the people during baptism.

Drawing these inferences makes it easy for Father Amadi to recover the implicatures below as the ones rightly intended to be communicated by Amaka's rhetorical utterances:

- (i) Amaka has not chosen, and is not choosing an English name for her confirmation.
- (ii) It's time Africans stopped adopting English names for confirmation.

These demonstrate that Amaka totally objects to any alteration of her African identity, especially by resisting to be renamed. As such, the thematic implication derived from the implied meaning above is that, through the character of Amaka, Adichie condemns the Catholic's practice of imposing baptismal names on Africans as a neo-colonisation strategy, which it seems to depict.

#### 4.2 More-information-spurred Implicit Meaning

Our data further reveal the communication of implicit meaning necessitated by the flout of the quantity maxim, spurred by being more-informative, especially in *HYS* to project the thematic foci on tribalism and inhumanity. Examples 5 and 6 can be considered:

- Example 5: (Background: The topic of marriage forms the focus of the discussion between Arinze and Olanna, her elderly cousin)
- Arinze (T<sub>1</sub>): So you are moving to Nsukka to marry Odenigbo, sister?
- Olanna (T<sub>1</sub>): I don't know about marriage yet. I just want to be close to him and I want to teach.
- Arinze (T<sub>2</sub>): It is only women that know too much book like you who can say that, sister. If people like me who don't know book wait too long, we will expire. I want a husband today and tomorrow, oh! My mates have all left me and gone to husbands' houses.
- Olanna (T<sub>2</sub>): You are young. You should focus on your sewing for now.
- Arinze (T<sub>3</sub>): Is it sewing that will give me child? Even if I had managed to pass to go to school, I would still want a child now.
- Olanna (T<sub>3</sub>): So why are you talking marriage-marriage like this, Ari? Have you seen anybody you like? Or should I find you one of Mohammed's brothers?
- Arinze (T<sub>4</sub>): *No. Papa would kill me first of all if he knew I was even looking at a Hausa man like that.*  
(*HYS*, p. 42-44)

The conversation above between Olanna and her cousin, Arinze, exposes the intensity of the tribal sentiment between the Hausa and the Igbo. In the discourse, marriage is depicted from Arinze's perspective as a necessity that should be given consideration at an early stage of a woman's life with consciousness for tribal boundary in the choice of the partner. It is this tribal consciousness that is implicitly communicated by Arinze in her T<sub>4</sub>, which flouts the quantity maxim:

No. Papa would kill me first of all if he knew I was even looking at a Hausa man like that

By this utterance in her T<sub>4</sub>, Arinze has blatantly given more information than required; he could simply have said "no" alone, and this contribution would be maximally relevant to the communication. However, by giving extra information in sentence 2 of the utterance, she breaches the quantity maxim. This non-observance of the maxim therefore sets in motion a process of (informal) reasoning, leading Olanna to derive an additional piece of information that: "her parents (i.e. Arinze) would not support her marriage to any of Mohammed's brothers, being Hausa men". An implicit projection of tribalism is thus evident.

Another instance of more-information-spurred implicit meaning generated by the flout of the quantity maxim is illustrated by the conversation in example six below, with the theme of inhumanity being projected.

Example 6: (Background: As the Biafran war become more serious, two American journalists came to Biafra, visited a refugee camp and one of them, Charles, the redhead, interviewed a refugee)

Charles (T<sub>1</sub>): Are you hungry?

The refugee (T<sub>1</sub>): Of course, we are all hungry.

Charles (T<sub>2</sub>): Do you understand the cause of the war?

The refugee (T<sub>2</sub>): *Yes. The Hausa vandals wanted to kill all of us, but God was not asleep.*

(HYS, p. 380)

Example 7 reveals that rather than relying on the propaganda from the media, some American journalists visited Biafra so as to gather first-hand information about the Biafran war. This endeavour takes Charles, the redhead, one of the journalists, to a refugee camp to interview the refugees. In an interview with a woman with one arm (suggesting that she is a real casualty of the war), he elicits information about the cause of the war and the woman answers enthusiastically, flouting the maxim of quantity:

*Yes. The Hausa vandals wanted to kill all of us, but God was not asleep.*

Obviously, the woman's contribution here is too informative than required in the context of communication. Having said "yes" which is sufficiently relevant to the question asked, she goes ahead to accuse the Hausa of holocaust, which is believed to have catalyzed the war. Assisted by inference, Charles would be expected to reach the additional meaning conveyed here that: "the Hausa are inhumane". Hence, inhumanity is favoured in the implicature derivable.

## 5. Conclusion

This study investigated conversations with consideration for meanings implicitly conveyed in the contexts in which speakers are assumed to be cooperative, but infringe the maxim of quantity in conveying their informative intentions in the purposively selected recent Nigerian novels, *Purple Hibiscus (PH)* and *Half of a Yellow Sun (HYS)*, written by Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie. It maintained that conversation presents the context for one of the most prevalent uses of human language and identified distinguishing features of fictional conversations, as a genre of conversation usually lent to scholarly studies in linguistic scholarship. Routing the analysis through insights from the Gricean Pragmatics' cooperative principle, the study revealed two types of information-based infringements in characters' conversational contributions spurred by flouting the maxim of quantity. These are less-information-spurred implicit meaning such as the themes of subjugation, self-centredness, resistance against religious imposition found in *PH* and more-information-spurred implicit meaning such as the themes of tribalism and inhumanity found in *HYS*. This inferential pragmatics' approach to fictional conversations, ultimately, enhances a better understanding of how implicit meanings of conversational discourse can be generated in the contexts of information-based maxim in the texts, especially to aid the interpretation and understanding of the author's messages to the readers.

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