

Original Paper

Pragmatic Analysis of Selected WhatsApp Chats

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Abstract

WhatsApp chats are human communication activities in which language is put to use by social actors (discourse participants). Language operates therein as units of communication with one or more topics. A pragmatic analysis of WhatsApp chats examines who utters an utterance, why the utterance is uttered and where the utterance is made; indeed, these are crucial issues in the analysis of WhatsApp chats. Such an analysis is a linguistic approach towards investigating the concept of meaning in human communication, which in social media, shows the link between 'context' and 'meaning' as evident in the selection and sequencing of speech acts. Arguably, language use cannot be divorced from the discrete contexts that produce it. In communicative events, different contexts are invoked for the purpose of making speech acts 'easy to mean'. This shows the intentional nature of speech acts. This study is poised to explain the fact that speakers' intentions, beliefs and principle-driven use of language can be elucidated through a pragmatic-analyst approach to WhatsApp conversations. The theoretical framework of this study is Bach and Harnish's (1979) speech act theory. The study finds out that in WhatsApp chats, illocutionary acts are selected and sequenced according to communicative goals; and expressions pick referents that are either abstract or concrete from the immediate or remote world.

Keywords

WhatsApp chats, pragmatics, speech acts, language, Bach and Harnish's speech act theory

1. Introduction

This study is a speech act approach to the analysis of WhatsApp conversational exchanges in which the participants of discourse bring to the fore, action potential of language. In this sense, the study is essentially a pragmatic analysis of textual communication. Utterances in WhatsApp chats are speech acts in which the encoder and decoder engage socially realistic phenomena via language choice. The process makes reference-making easy, and operates as a linguistic system in a given speech community. In addition, it involves the use of discourse-structuring acts; that is, different illocutionary acts of informing, ascribing, assenting, dissenting, asserting, etc are used by the 'illocutors' to address the topic relevance.

WhatsApp conversations do not only show backgrounds for engaging ‘meaning’, ‘sense’ and ‘intention’, but also reveals the communicative potential of human language. Mey (2001:313) submits that ‘language, in Marx and Engel’s immortal phrase, is our ‘practical consciousness’ ... it tells us what we’re doing; but at the same time, it is the conscious instrument of our planning: it tells us what to do ... thus, language is both the record-keeper of reality, in that it reflects our actions, and its rule and guideline, in that it, through our actions, continually creates and re-creates reality...’

In WhatsApp chats, all that is said about the referents are immersed in speaker-hearer cognition relating to the immediate setting of the conversation and larger society which is the world of humans. Thus, the illocutionary acts deployed by the participants are made easy to process for meaning, as the conversation unfolds. The mental states of the participants are activated in relation to the topic relevance. In WhatsApp chats, the different communicative strategies used by the communicators, result in intelligible communication. In using language to convey messages therein, the encoder is not expected to alienate the addressee. Encoders’ expressions have meanings in the environmental context of the communicative event. Bruno G. Bara (2012, p. 548) notes that ‘if we assume that conversation is a dual task, and that the interlocutors cooperate to construct a shared meaning, error is no more on the shoulders of a defective hearer or of a bad-planning speaker. Both are simultaneously engaged in obtaining a simultaneous result to their interaction.’ As a cooperative activity, WhatsApp chats reveal that the participants construct and negotiate meaning not arbitrarily, but according to the shared knowledge that binds the illocutionary acts they deploy concerning a wide range of discourse topics. This study investigates how expressions and illocutionary acts relate with sentential and extra-sentential meaning in textual communication.

2. Pragmatics

From the Greek *pragma* which means ‘deed’, the term ‘pragmatics’ emanates. Before the emergence of pragmatics in language study, emphasis was on linguistic competence. The emergence of pragmatics shifted focus away from mastery of the grammar of language (linguistic competence) to mastery of context-driven use of language (communicative competence). According to the *Encyclopedia Americana* (1994), pragmatics is ‘the subfield of the study of language that investigates the techniques by which language is processed for communication purposes.’ Defining pragmatics, Crystal and Varley (1993) posit that pragmatics is ‘the study of the factors that govern our choice of language (sounds, construction, words) in social interaction, and the effects of our choice upon others. The subject includes the cooperation in our speaking behavior and it thus involves using language to convey politeness, intimacy, playfulness, rudeness, awkwardness and a range of other social attributes.’ Crucial concepts in pragmatics (cf. Austin 1962) include:

- participants (users of language in context);
- speech acts (locutionary act which is an utterance with determinate sense and reference; illocutionary act which is the making of a statement, offer, promise, etc. in uttering a sentence by virtue of the conventional force associated with it; and

perlocutionary act which is the bringing about of effects on the audience by means of uttering the sentence);

- context (the relevant aspects of the physical or social setting of an utterance or discourse);
- non-verbal communication (extra-linguistic communication);
- inference (the process of making logical conclusions from all that a particular context provides to arrive at what a speaker means);
- presupposition (facts that the participants of discourse take for granted in a particular context of communication); and
- shared knowledge (common background information shared by the participants of discourse).

Adegbija (1982) mentions the scope of pragmatics, which indeed defines the term:

- (i.) The message being communicated;
- (ii.) The participants involved in the message;
- (iii.) The knowledge of the world which they share;
- (iv.) The deductions to be made from the text on the basis of the context;
- (v.) The impact of the non-verbal aspect of interaction on meaning.

3. Theoretical Framework

Although Bach and Harnish's (ibid) speech act theory is the main (primary) theoretical framework of this study, Acheoah's (2015) Pragma-crafting Theory is explored in the analysis of data at a secondary level.

3.1 Bach and Harnish's Speech Act Theory

Bach and Harnish's speech act theory projects 'intention' and 'inference' as crucial notions in the use and interpretation of language. The theory evolves MCBs (mutual contextual beliefs) which is simply speaker-hearer shared knowledge about discourse phenomena. In the theory, Speech Act Schemata (SAS) concerns the inferential process of a communicative event. Bach and Harnish (ibid) posit that 'to infer what S (speaker) is saying, H (hearer) depends also on the 'Presumption of Literalness' (PL); the hearer should know when the linguistic communication of the speaker (S) is within or outside the bounds of literalness, and if S is speaking in a non-literal dimension, H should not only acknowledge it, but should also be able to understand what such speech by S means. Apart from MCBs, Bach and Harnish establish other types of beliefs shared by an entire linguistic community, which the hearer explores to make appropriate inferences;

- (i) Linguistic Presumption (LP); and
- (ii) Communicative Presumption (CP).

Linguistic Presumption (LP) refers to the moral belief that members of a Linguistic Community (LC) share on the particular language (L). Therefore, any expression (e)

uttered by a member to any member of the community, is taken by the speaker for granted; the speaker presupposes that the hearer understands the expression or utterance. The success of a communicative act is determined by the hearer's ability to decode an utterance.

Bach and Harnish recognize two broad categories of illocutionary acts: communicative and non-communicative. In the former, the recognition of S's R-intention is required, whereas in the latter, it is not. Four major categories of communicative illocutionary acts are established in the theory: Constatives, Directives, Commissive and Acknowledgements. These four main categories correspond roughly to Austin's Expositives, Exercitives, Commissive, and Behabitives respectively and closely to Searle's Representatives (Assertives), Directives, Commissive and Expressives, differing mainly in their characterizations. There are two classes of non-communicative illocutionary acts: Effectives and Verdictives, corresponding roughly to Searle's (ibid) Declarations. Fifteen subcategories of this group are recognized as follows: Assertives, Informatives, Confirmatives, Concessives, Retractivates, Assentives, Dissentives, Disputatives, Responsives, Suggestives and Suppositives.

Assertives are characterized by S's expression of belief that the hearer (H) also believes that P. Examples of verbs denoting Assertives are: affirm, allege, assert, aver, avow, declare, and deny.

In informatives, S expresses 'the belief that P' and also 'the intention that H form the belief that P'. Examples include advise, announce, appraise, disclose, inform, insist, notify, point out, report, reveal, tell, and testify.

In Descriptives, the speaker declares that 'a particular quality is possessed by a person, place or thing'; the speaker expresses 'the belief that O is F' and 'the intention that H believes that O is F. Examples are appraise, asses, call, categorize, characterize, classify, date, describe, diagnose, evaluate, etc.

Directives express the speaker's attitude toward a future action by the hearer and the speaker's intention or desire that the hearer considers his utterance as reason to act. Six subcategories of illocutionary acts are listed under this category: Requestives, Questions, Requirements, Prohibitives, Permissives, Advisories. See the theory for more insights on illocutionary act types and their associative verbs in English.

4. Presentation and Analysis of Data

In the analysis of U.1-U.5, this study presents illocutionary acts and explains them in relation to the pragmatic, social, psychological and linguistic aspects of context.

U.1: Naija is now in another level. You can't even differentiate a mad man from a sane man. The hairs used to be the difference. Now, everybody is dada.

Illocutionary Acts: informative, ascriptive, dissentive.

The encoder of U.1 informs the decoder (addressee) that in *Naija*, there is a change in status-quo. The change revolves around the moral decadence ravishing the country that is referred to as '*Naija*'. Given the fact that *Naija* is not the real name of any country in the world map, the addressee is not supposed to

know the referent. However, there is writer-reader shared knowledge about what the expression means; it is coined from Nigeria, its referent. Acheoah (ibid) evolves the term Geoimplicature (GI) which means 'region-restricted expression'. Such region-restricted speech forms are understood by discourse participants from the same speech community in which the expression is commonly used in everyday communication. As Bach and (ibid) postulates, when S (speaker) utters an expression (e) to any member of the same Linguistic Community (LC), the expression is uttered with Communicative Presumption (CP), and H is expected to know what it means in the particular language; mutual contextual beliefs (MCBs) is said to operate in the communication activity concerned. In WhatsApp conversations, speaker-hearer shared knowledge or presupposition prevents pragmatic failure, which is 'the inability to understand what is meant by what is said'. Indeed, knowing the meaning of region-specific expressions such as 'dada' and 'yahoo boys', facilitates inference-making. In WhatsApp chats, the participants explore pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics of communication in the use and interpretation of language. While 'pragmalinguistics' of communication refers to the means of conveying different messages in discourse, 'sociopragmatics' of communication has to do with the social variables for communicating messages in any communicative event.

The encoder of U.1 ascribes negative qualities to *Naija*/Nigeria. Exploring world knowledge, the encoder expresses the view that when a person's hair is unkempt, people conclude that the person is insane. U.1 reveals that there is a new, unacceptable twist in the scheme of things in *Naija*. Simply because people want to be fashionable and be part of societal trends, they leave their hair bushy and scattered. In some instances, hair saloons make people's hair that way, in line with the trendy fashions of celebrities in developed countries. The encoder is dissenting by disagreeing with the new turn of events which is tantamount to moral decadence. The encoder condemns the new practice because it is a departure from the value systems of Nigeria/*Naija*. The linguistic stretch '*Naija* is now in another level' is an indirect illocutionary strategy in the sense that the encoder is not actually praising *Naija*. This encoder is condemning the country/people of Nigeria for accepting wrong Western ways of life. Conventional implicature which the expression 'mad man' generates, facilitates the inferential process and gives meaning to the utterance. Like the expression *Naija, dada* is an expression uttered with what Bach and Harnish (ibid) refer to as 'Linguistic Presumption' (LP). In Nigeria, *dada* refers to people born with special kinds of (scattered-looking) hairs on their heads, which make them look different from others.

In using discrete illocutionary acts in each utterance, the encoder presents different arguments revolving around the topic of discourse. The selection and sequencing of speech acts align with the arguments.

Brumfit and Johnson (1979, p. 118) posit that 'the ability to compose sentences is not the ability we need to communicate. Communication only takes place when we make use of sentences to perform a variety of different acts of an essentially social nature. Thus we do not communicate by composing sentences, but by using sentences to make statements of different kinds ... to record, to classify, and so on, or to ask questions, make requests, give orders, etc. Knowing what is involved in putting sentences together correctly is only one part of what we mean by knowing a language, and it has very little value on its own.

It has to be supplemented by knowledge of what sentences contain as in their normal use as a means of communication.'

The addressee is made to process sender-meaning, and attempt to locate what Allan Keith (1986) refers to as 'world-spoken-of'. Different inference strategies including world knowledge are involved in the inferential process.

U.2: Many of them are not mad. They are not necessarily yahoo boys. They may not even be yahoo plus.

Illocutionary Acts; ascriptive, dissentive.

The encoder does not agree (dissentive) with the claim that those who go about with crazy-looking hair are mad people or criminals, even though the claim is a product of world knowledge about mad people's appearance. The expressions 'yahoo boys' and 'yahoo plus' are used with encoder-decoder shared knowledge; the participants are aware of what the expressions mean in the speech community. Although each of the units in the phrase 'yahoo boys' and 'yahoo plus' are in the English lexicon ('yahoo' and 'boys'; 'yahoo' and 'plus'), the encoder uses the phrases with regional meaning. Given the 'context of speech' and context of situation surrounding the use of the expressions, they convey negative remarks about the addressees (implicature). In the physical setting of the communicative event which is Naija/Nigeria, 'yahoo boys' are those who engage in internet crimes. 'Yahoo plus' are those who commit additional crimes (money-making rituals) as extended forms of internet crimes. The construct resonates with what the term 'plus' and 'extra' mean when used as inscription on consumer products including medicines e.g. 'Rerve plus' and 'Neurogesic extra'.

In WhatsApp chats, the essence of expanding the topic by relating it to different societal practices is to make encoders' intentions clear. According to Adegbija (1999, p. 191), 'the concept of intention is very important in understanding of speech acts. It refers to the goal purposed to be achieved, resident in the mind of a speaker or a hearer ... people often have different intentions. Sometimes, the intention may coincide. Intentions can change as interaction progresses. They can also be modified in the cause of interpersonal interaction. In most types of interaction, there is a communicative intention. Intention is often indeterminate; that is, they may not be always easily accessible. The addressee in a communicative exchange often tries to recognize the speaker's intention. Deduction about the meanings being communicated by the speaker is often based on the context of interaction and interpretation of the intention of the speaker.' Context also enables addressees to know the references in utterance acts. Charles Ogbulogo (2012, p. 9) posits that 'reference relates to things, people and events in the world. It is the object or entity to which a linguistic expression relates. Thus, the referent of the word 'boy' is a human being called boy. If meaning were restricted to reference, many words without obvious referent would be left out. It will be difficult to explain the meaning of prepositions, conjunctions and other grammatical units. Again, several linguistic expressions may relate to single referents. To avoid these limitations, semanticists use the word's denotation and connotation to distinguish between meaning based on ostensiveness (that is, pointing) or reference and extension...'

U.3: These days, don't mind appearance Fat stomach does not mean he is rich. Agbada does not mean he is a politician. There are diseases o.

Illocutionary Acts; informative, ascriptive.

The encoder informs the decoder that the outward appearance of a person is not always the true reflection of the person's social status or health condition. The addressee is also informed that unlike in those days, the contemporary world is characterized by unprecedented sicknesses and diseases. U.3 captures the reality of the present world, whereby modern practices have become health hazards to human beings. The text encapsulates the societal phenomenon known as 'social stratification', showing the dichotomy between the rich and the poor. *Agbada* signals 'high social class'. It counts as semiotic particular in Acheoah's (ibid) Pragma-crafting Theory in which Contextual Object (CO) is a semiotic instrument of conveying meaning. In addition, haing a 'fat stomach' communes with the expressions 'rich' and 'politician' in the utterance. The linguistic context is also conveyed via the expression 'These days' which implies that the propositional content conveyed in the informative is about difference in scheme of things in terms of the past and present world. The extended element of U.3 ('o') is attitudinal; that is, it communicates the encoder's disgust and concern about emerging societal vices and the consequences of such vices; this is simply 'sender-meaning'. Patrick Griffiths (2006, p. 7) posits that 'sender meaning is the meaning that the speaker or writer intends to convey by means of an utterance. Sender meaning is something that addressees are continually having to make informed guesses about. Addressees can give indications, in their own next utterance, of their interpretation (or by performing other actions...).

In uttering a particle such as 'o' in instances of language use, the encoder usually behaves in certain ways that convey his/her feelings (non-verbal communication); rising pitch or facial gesture may be used as a non-verbal accompaniment in uttering 'o' in a communicative event. Acheoah (ibid) evolves the term 'Behavioural Implicature' (BI) to refer to behaviour-revealing expressions/linguistic stretches.

According to Adegbija (1999, p. 194) 'implicature is what is suggested or meant, as distinct from what is literally or overtly stated. It has to be inferred or worked out. The working out of an implicature is crucially dependent on the awareness of the speaker and the hearer of the presupposition of the context of interaction. It is a sophisticated inferential procedure that is possible only through an understanding of the presupposition of a situation of social interaction.'

U.4: I agree with you. Sometimes I feel there is peace and health in poverty. I sleep better than the 'money-bagsss'. Kidnappers do not want me. I don't take breakfast in Dubai and lunch in Canada. Even the one wife I have is too much for me, not to talk of...

Illocutionary Acts; assentive, assertive, informative, dissentive, ascriptive.

The encoder of U.4 agrees (assentive) that external factors such as wealth or outward appearance should not be the basis for concluding that everything is okay with a person, as such a person may still lack good health, peace of mind, rest or security. In asserting self-opinion, the encoder informs the addressee about the problems of the rich, which are problems that the poor may not have. The encoder disagrees with the

lifestyle of the rich, and does not think there is good reason for the poor to envy the rich. To capture the unfortunate condition of the rich, the encoder ascribes certain unacceptable characteristics on the rich. According to the encoder, the rich are often people who are: wasteful, lack rest, subjected to health challenges, insecure and lack peace.

The wrong spelling ('bagsss' instead of 'bags') is intentional. It emphasizes the degree of criminality of those referred to as 'money bagsss'. Word meaning is crucial in human communication because it impinges on the interpretation of linguistic stretches or utterance acts, irrespective of how the words in a sentence are spelt. William P. Alston, cited in Savas L. T. (1994, p. 31) opines that 'word meaning is prior to sentence meaning in the order of the explanation of particular facts ... sentence meaning is prior to word meaning in the order of conceptual analysis, or explication. We explain the concept of word meaning in terms of the contribution a word makes to the meaning of sentences.

U.4 is uttered with shared knowledge as the referents are Nigerian politicians who loot public funds with vexatious impunity. In any on-going communication, the message-driven duplication of sounds as in the use of 's' sound in the expression 'bagsss' is an example of what Acheoah (ibid) refers to as 'phones', and it a component of 'linguistic acts' in the Pragma-crafting Theory.

U.5: Our forefathers had many wives but enjoyed peace and good health. There was no need for monogamy because wives were submissive then. In those days, men lied long. The air was safe. The virgins were virgins. The streams were not poisonous. Your face masks were not necessary.

Illocutionary Acts; informative, assertive.

The encoder of U.5 informs the addressee that the polygamous practices of our forefathers did not constitute problems to them. The addressee is also informed that the longevity of our forefathers was a product of healthy and natural environment. The encoder ascribes qualities to: 'forefathers', 'natural environment', 'wives' and 'those days'. The implicatures/indirect speech acts in the utterance are clear even though they are not stated: 'men are mostly monogamous these days'; and 'men were dominantly polygamous in those days'. Adegbija (1982) contends that in using speech acts, contextual structures are involved. In U.5, different contextual structures (domains of life) are projected. These include: family, nature and science. The messages therein are domain-specific. The communication competence of the participants as well as their background knowledge, enable them to make appropriate choices in using linguistic and extralinguistic elements of communication. Bruno G. Bara (2010) asserts that 'communication is essentially a cooperative activity between two or more people in which the meanings of each transaction are constructed by all those actors together engaged in the shared task of reciprocally attending to the other communicants' words.' In WhatsApp chats, the participants rely on topic-related knowledge to use and interpret utterance acts. Adeyemi (2000, p. 71) asserts that 'schemata' is the plural word for "Schema". It refers to either (the totality of items of knowledge in the brain) or (the totality of items activated in relation to a particular topic in a communicative process). Each schema denotes items of knowledge that are associated with an object, person, event, action, place, etc.'

5. Findings, Discussion and Conclusion

The analyses reveal that the encoders of U.1-U.5 demonstrate textual pragmatics; brevity, clarity and expressiveness are explored in ascribing qualities to referents, and giving necessary information that develops the communicative event. In this regard, indirect speech acts and implicatures operate as pragmatic forces that impinge on utterance meaning. The encoders of the utterances use expressions and illocutionary acts in terms of what such expressions and illocutionary acts relate to in the linguistic community. Charles W. Kreidler (1998, p. 42) states that ‘generally we can recognize three aspects of meaning in lexemes: the relation to phenomena outside language, the relation to people’s attitudes and feelings and the relation to other lexemes.’ The entire meaning of an utterance is ascertained from the meaning of one or more expressions that it contains – a kind of compositional paradigm. The decoder of each of the utterances is subjected to the perception process of locating the phenomena captured by words or expressions in utterance acts/propositional contents. In using certain expressions to convey message to the addressee, the encoder ensures that entailments or presuppositions are pragmatically engaged. As shown in this study, the expressions used in WhatsApp chats are defined in terms of relating to abstract and concrete referents. The meanings of the expression can easily be ascertained in the speech community where the communicative event takes place.

The mental states of discourse participants are evident in the use and interpretation of language. This resonates with Cognitive Pragmatics. The participants know the evolving practices in their society. They know how to judge evolving phenomena that are alien to the cultural values their society. They also know (cognition) the norms of the larger society. For example, as captured in the analyses, discourse participants who communicate via WhatsApp chats are familiar with social stratification and the characteristics of the rich and the poor. Commenting on the implications of encoder-decoder cognition, Chilton (2005, p. 23) submits that ‘cognitive pragmatics is defined as a study of mental states of the interlocutors, their beliefs, desires, goals, and intentions ... produced and interpreted by human individuals interacting with one another ... If language use (discourse) is, as the tenets of CDA assert, connected to the construction of knowledge about social objects, identities, processes, etc., then that construction can only be taking place in the minds of (interacting) individuals.’

In the expansion of topic, the participants invoke different contextual structures thus projecting discrete contexts that often characterize WhatsApp chats and human communication in general: physical, psychological, linguistic, social and pragmatic contexts. Commenting on context types, Adebija (1999, p. 192) submits:

Broadly, we may identify at least four types of context as impinging on utterance interpretation: the physical, the socio-cultural, the linguistic, and the psychological. Pertinent questions for probing into the context include the following:

Did the communicative exchange occur at night, in the morning, twenty years ago, at a church, at a mosque, in a bedroom, in the market, at a cemetery, at a hospital. Socio-culturally, one may ask questions such as these: what are the beliefs, habits, value

systems, or cultures of those involved? Are their religious and cultural beliefs at hand?
Linguistically, what are the other words appearing in the environment of the word used?
What do they mean? What do they imply within the physical and socio-cultural setting?
Psychologically, what is the state of mind of those involved in the interaction?

In the corpora of this study, the participants reveal their stance or judgements on the topics. In doing so, illocutionary acts are carefully selected and sequenced. In addition, expressions are fused with the illocutionary act potentials of the linguistic stretches therein. Hyland, cited in Ayo Osisanwo (2017, p. 149) submits that ‘... ‘stance’ expresses a textual ‘voice’ or community recognized personally. Stance can be seen as an attitudinal dimension and include features which refer to the ways speakers or writers present themselves and convey their judgments, opinions, and commitments about a particular topic. It is the ways that writers intrude to stamp their personal authority onto their arguments ... stance is the lexical and grammatical expression of attitudes, feelings, judgments or commitments concerning propositional content of a message. Specific word choices are made to convey such judgments and opinions. Other scholars have used words such as appraisal, attitude, evaluation, among others, to represent the concept stance. Stance, therefore, gives the speaker an opportunity to present his views on a propositional content ... Engagement ... is “an alignment dimension where writers acknowledge and connect to others, recognizing the presence of their readers, pulling them along with their uncertainties, including them as discourse participants, and guiding them to interpretations.”

To develop a conversation in WhatsApp chats, the participants contribute in the expansion of the topic or topic relevance. As Fowler (1981) appropriately observes, ‘linguistic structure is not arbitrary’. It is determined and motivated by the functions it performs. In the corpora of this study, speech acts succeeds in making references to different objects, people and phenomena in the real world of humans. Conclusively, as this study reveals, speech acts are used in WhatsApp chats based on speakers’ communicative intentions.

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