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Pragmatic Dynamics of Some Foregrounded Computer Lexical Items in Nigerian Youth Discourse

Rosarri C. Mbisike (PhD)[1*]

[1]Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Lagos State University, Lagos, Nigeria

*Corresponding Author
Rosarri C. Mbisike
Department of English,
Faculty of Arts, Lagos State
University, Lagos, Nigeria

Abstract: This study set out to investigate instances of foregrounded computer lexical items in discourse, with the aim to examine their underlying contextual usage among some youth in Nigeria. The pragmatic dynamics of such foregrounded lexical items constitute the focus of the analysis. The pragmatic approach of conversational implicature was adopted as the theoretical framework for this study. The methodology adopted for this research was the qualitative approach. The research findings revealed that the conceptual meanings of the foregrounded computer lexical items were shifted to transcend their denotations such as to generate dependence on contextual forces for appropriate interpretation. Furthermore, it was observed that contextual factors triggered both the encoding and decoding of the deviation-type foregrounded computer lexical items. Propitiously, the notion of conversational implicature provides us with an explanation of utterance interpretation, in consonance with pragmatic norms, and consequently prevent breakdown in communication, which could be caused by deviation-type foregrounding. Based on the findings of this research, further studies on foregrounding as it relates to transfer of registers and their contextual implications are strongly recommended.

Keywords: Foregrounded Computer Lexical Items, Context, Conversational Implicature, Pragmatic Dynamics.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Certain lexical items which had hitherto been either dormant or restricted to diverse professional registers have come up as part of everyday conversations. The frequencies of use of such lexical items have projected them to become foregrounded, especially computer lexical items, particularly due to the impact of digitalization process on the process of communication. However, amongst some Nigerian youth, some of the foregrounded computer lexical items used in conversations have underlying meanings ascribed to them, which must be worked out to prevent breakdown in communication. Such foregrounded lexical items constitute the data of this study, which will be analyzed through the pragmatic approach of conversational implicature.

Nevertheless, some linguists have carried out various research on foregrounding, such as Asatiani (2005) who focuses on projecting the major devices of foregrounding used in the information structure of Georgian sentences. He points out that information structuring proceeds through the foregrounding of certain parts of the information, and notes that foregrounding can be realized on various linguistic levels. He also hints that it is possible to distinguish: Conceptual, Functional, Discourse and Pragmatic devices, which can be represented by various formal means such as Phonetic-Phonological, Morphological-Syntactic and Lexical-Pragmatic

means. Moreover, he points out that all the devices can co-occur during the information packaging. However, he notes that the relations between the different types of foregrounding are language specific, though it seems possible to speak about universal models of formalization of the information structures. Nevertheless, he observes that in Georgian, there is no morphological topic marker, but all other devices of foregrounding are possible.

Furthermore, researchers such as Awonuga *et al.*, (2018) highlight the impact of deviation-type foregrounding on literary interpretation. Their study examines the linguistic and literary cues used by James Kirkup in his poem "Thunder and Lightning". From the standpoint of the theory of foregrounding, some models of transitivity, and the rules of selectional restriction, the study highlights some stylistic patterns in the poem and concludes that such patterns are motivated for meaning in the text.

The above reviews of research based on the theory of foregrounding show that the theory is relevant to both linguistics and literary studies. Nonetheless, there is draught of research on the impact of foregrounding on the transfer of registers in discourse. Basically, the present study investigates instances of foregrounded computer lexical items in conversations, with the aim to examine their underlying contextual usage amongst some of the youth in Nigeria. The objective of this study is to determine the direction of the pragmatic dynamics of the foregrounded computer lexical items in discourse.

2.0 Foregrounding

Foregrounding is one of the fundamental theories in Stylistics and very significant in Pragmatics. Yemets (2019: 93) defines 'foregrounding' as "the principle of text organization which is aimed at attracting the reader's (listener's) attention to the pragmatically significant parts of the message". The theory of foregrounding was earlier propagated by the Russian formalists (Shklovsky 1917, 1965; Jakobson 1964), as well as the Prague School of Linguistics (Mukarovsky 1932, 1964) who propounded the principle of making a literary text more striking. Mukarovsky's (1932) term "aktualizace" was translated into English by Garvin (1964) as "foregrounding". The term 'foregrounding' was adopted from the art of painting where the foreground is part of a painting which is the most conspicuous in the work of art. Yemets (2019: 95) points out that "the theory of foregrounding was intended to explain and reveal the difference between poetic and everyday language".

Furthermore, Douthwaite (2000: 93) provides a detailed definition of foregrounding thus:

> Foregrounding is the general linguistic technique by which a marked linguistic expression is produced in order to make that expression convey a different meaning than its synonymic equivalent unmarked construction would have conveyed.

Moreover, Arnold (2004: 99) states that:

> Foregrounding is the ways of the text organization which focus the reader's attention on certain elements of the message.

However, Yemets (2019: 95) would rather replace the word "certain" in Arnold's (2004: 99) formulation above with the lexical items: "significant" or "pragmatically important". Yemets (ibid: 95) thus posits that:

> It is possible to state that foregrounding is the principle of a literary text organization which focuses the reader's attention on the pragmatically important elements of the message.

Nonetheless, Leech (2007: 38) categorizes the types of foregrounding into qualitative and quantitative aspects. The qualitative aspect is concerned with the deviation from the language code, which consequently manifests as a breach of some linguistic norm. The quantitative aspect, on its part, deals with the deviation of some expected frequency.

Essentially, two basic principles of foregrounding are projected by some stylisticians, mainly deviation and parallelism (Short 1996; Douthwaite 2000). Deviation can be phonetic, graphological, lexical, grammatical, and semantic (Short 1996: 36-58). Moreover, the foregrounding techniques connected to deviation include neologisms, live metaphors, oxymoron, paradox, archaisms, and ungrammatical sentences (van Peer and Hakemulder 2006: 547). On the other hand, parallelism is related with quantitative foregrounding, which deals with the repetition of sentence structure and some words in several sentences. The quantitative aspect operates on syntactical, as well as on lexical and phonetic repetitions.

Furthermore, Zidane (2017: 509) notes that deviation can also be pragmatic and states that:

> Pragmatic deviation is denoted by the inappropriate use of well-formed sentences. This phenomenon is not a deflection, but it is a strategy that helps the speakers or writers to highlight personal attitudes, specify the nature of social relationships, show one's linguistic code or even reflect a sort of

innovative linguistic performance. It occurs in everyday conversations. Also, it may be found in literary discourse which is a reflection of daily verbal behaviour.

Moreover, Zidane (2017) highlight types of pragmatically motivated deviance which include impoliteness, irrelevance, tropes, and unconventional use of language. He notes that these instances of divergence from the norm may be depicted in the notions of language transfer, code switching and code alternation. (Ibid: 511).

Invariably, the interpretation of deviation-type foregrounded elements depends on underlying contextual factors. Essentially, the pragmatic concept of 'Implicature' proposed by Grice (1975) provides the theory from which to work out the appropriate meaning embedded in the foregrounded elements.

3.0 Pragmatics

The theoretical orientation of this research is based mostly on the Linguistic sub-field called Pragmatics. Mbisike (2001: 183) states that: "Pragmatics is a theory of communication which deals with meaning in use." Mey (2001: 6) asserts that:

> Communication in society happens chiefly by means of language. However, the users of language, as social beings, communicate and use language on society's premises; society controls their access to the linguistic and communicative means. Pragmatics, as the study of the way humans use their language in communication, bases itself on a study of those premises and determines how they affect, and effectualize, human language use. Hence: Pragmatics studies the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society.

Thus, pragmatics basically deals with utterance interpretation within a particular context. Sperber and Wilson (1981: 28) point out that "an adequate pragmatic theory should incorporate a general account of the processing of conceptual information in a context, and a particular account of whatever special principles and problems are involved in the processing of information that has been intentionally, and linguistically communicated." This proposition is hinged on the theory put forward by H.P. Grice (1975), in which he points out that in all communication, there is a general agreement of cooperation between a speaker and a hearer, which he called the Cooperative Principle (CP). The cooperative principle subsumes a set of maxims which specify the conventions that should govern participants in a conversation. The maxims, in other words, represent an attempt to account for how conversations are construed by participants in different speech situations. The maxims are presented below:

Quantity: Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange). In other words, do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Quality: Do not say what you believe to be false. This is to say that you should not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Relation: Be relevant. Let your message be well related to, or connected with, the topic of discourse.

Manner: Be perspicuous. Thus, let your message be clear by avoiding obscurity, and by avoiding ambiguity. As much as possible, make your message brief, as well as orderly.

These maxims show that the cooperative principle suggests that communication is essentially a cooperative endeavour governed by specifiable conventions. Basically, successful communication depends on cooperation between interlocutors, as well as on correct interpretation of messages.

The notion of interpretation is vital to comprehension of messages. Invariably, the interpretation of utterances involves making the right inferences and appropriate assumptions, which in pragmatics are called implicatures. It is only when utterances are correctly interpreted that communication can be successful.

3.1 Implicatures

Grice (1975) classifies Implicature into two types, namely: Conventional Implicature and Conversational Implicature. [See, Kempson (1977), Sadock (1978), Levinson (1983), Thomas (1995), Yule (1996), Verschueren (1999), Mey (2001), Mbisike (2001), Huang (2007), Akmajian *et al.*, (2012).]

3.1.1 Conventional Implicature

On Conventional Implicature, Sadock (1978: 282) states that:

> Conventional implicatures include all non-truth-conditional aspects of what is conveyed by an utterance solely due to the words or forms the sentence contains. These include, then, most of what have been called by linguists the presuppositions of a sentence; they are closely allied to what is said in the strict sense, at least in that the same clause can determine either the truth conditions of a sentence or a set of conventional implicatures.

Intrinsically, conventional implicatures are entailed by the background information shared by both the speaker and the heaver. Thus, as Sadock (1978: 293) states: "conventional implicatures reside in the conventional meaning of the utterance."

Moreover, Levinson (1983: 127) asserts that:

Conventional implicatures are non-truth-conditional inferences that are not derived from superordinate pragmatic principles like the (Gricean) maxims, but are simply attached by convention to particular lexical items.

Mey (2001: 50) notes that this 'attachment' may take the form of unavoidable, almost logical conclusions, such as when Leech (1983: 90) remarks that on hearing the following sentence:

"Sally is the secretary."
we automatically conclude that:
"Sally is a secretary."

In addition, Mey (2001: 49) points out that conventional implicatures do not depend on a particular context of language use. He (ibid) asserts that:

Certain expressions in language implicate by themselves or 'conventionally' a certain state of the world, regardless of their use. For instance, the word 'last' always denotes (by conventional implicature) 'the ultimate item in a sequence, as in 'the last page of a book or manuscript'. Contrast, in conversation it might imply: 'that which came before the time of speaking as when a speaker refers to 'last winter'.

3.1.2 Conversational Implicature
On Conversational Implicature, Kempson (1977: 70) states that:

Conversational Implicatures are assumptions over and above the meaning of the sentences used, which the speaker knows and intends that the hearer will make, in the face of an apparently open violation of the Co-operative Principle, in order to interpret the speaker's sentence in accordance with the Co-operative Principle.

Furthermore, Bilmes (1986: 27) highlights that:

In everyday talk, we often convey propositions that are not explicit in our utterances but are merely implied by them. Sometimes we are able to draw such inferences only by referring what has been explicitly said to some conversational principle. In certain of these cases, we are dealing with 'conversational implicature'.

Essentially, conversational implicatures are non-trivial inferences that prevent breakdown in communication. Consider the following example:

Mary is a dove.

This utterance is an instance of pragmatic deviation which flouts the maxim of quality. It is a metaphorical expression, and it involves a non-linguistic knowledge of the world for the hearer to interpret it. Grice's 'implicature' provides us with a natural explanation of the interpretation of metaphor. To interpret this utterance in accordance with the cooperative principle, the hearer must assume that the speaker is conveying extra information other than the literal meaning of the sentence. Since 'dove' is a kind of small white bird often used as 'a sign of peace'; the speaker is then saying that Mary is a peace-loving person. Thus, the notion of conversational implicature provides us with an explanation of utterance interpretation, following pragmatic norms. This interpretation was realized based on the assumption that in conversational interaction, interlocutors are guided by certain rules, which help to uphold the cooperative principle and thus prevent breakdown in communication.

Fundamentally, pragmatic norms are necessary for appropriate language use. As presented earlier in this study, Grice (1975) classified pragmatic norms into different maxims that are exploited for the purpose of eliciting felicitous communication whether in speech or writing. Basically, pragmatic norms include the maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner. Moreover, the list of normative rules governing language use is extensive. Nevertheless, the main pragmatic principles determining appropriate discourse include cooperation, politeness, relevance, truthfulness, conventionality, and reciprocity. Essentially, these rules constitute norms of discourse. However, some language users may flout these principles which lead to the existence of pragmatic deviation.

To this extent, it is vital to investigate instances of foregrounded computer lexical items in conversations, with the aim to examine their underlying contextual usage amongst some of the youth in Nigeria. The objective of this study is to determine the direction of the pragmatic dynamics of the foregrounded computer lexical items in discourse.

4.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS
For this research, some undergraduate students at the Lagos State University were randomly chosen to participate in the collection of the data. The students chosen were in their final year at the time this study was conducted. The students collected the various contextual usages of the foregrounded

computer lexical items through interacting with fellow students and engaging each other in conversations, within the Lagos State University, Lagos, Nigeria. The methodology adopted for this research is the qualitative approach.

5.0 Samples of Foregrounded Computer Lexical Items

Startup	Access	Connect	Click
Update	Loading	Open	Close
Upload	Download	Cancel	Delete
Restart	Enter	Shift	Refresh
Virus	Format	Windows	Office

5.1 Implicatures in the Foregrounded Computer Lexical Items

Datum One
Speaker: Did you hear that the bandits plan to delete the kidnapped students?
Hearer: Ah! Is this how they will end up?

In the interaction in Datum One above, the Speaker's use of the word 'delete' is striking. The lexical item 'delete' conceptually means 'to remove something that has been written down or stored in a computer' (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (New Edition) for Advanced Learners). However, in the above Datum One, the Speaker used 'delete' in a deviant way, which flouts the maxim of relation and requires to be worked out by the Hearer. Nevertheless, conversational implicature provides the means through which 'delete' could be correctly interpreted. To interpret this utterance in accordance with the cooperative principle, the hearer must assume that the speaker is conveying extra information other than the literal meaning of 'delete'. Being that the contextual situations of banditry, insurgency and abduction in Nigeria have led to killings of captured victims, the Speaker has then shifted the conceptual meaning of 'delete', through euphemistic style, to connote 'Kill', thereby generating a deviation-type foregrounding in the negative direction. Based on the assumption that in conversational interaction, interlocutors are guided by certain rules, which help to uphold the cooperative principle and thereby prevent breakdown in communication, the Hearer would have to work out the relevant interpretation of 'delete' through connecting it with the prevailing contextual factors in Nigeria. Thus, the euphemistic style of using 'delete' to connote 'kill' is an instance of deviation-type foregrounding.

Datum Two
Speaker: Be careful! You're just a click away!
Hearer: Chai! Scam!

In the above Datum Two, the Speaker foregrounded the lexical item 'click'. The conceptual meaning of 'click' includes 'to make a short hard sound', 'to press a button on a computer mouse to choose something from the screen that you want the computer to do' 'to suddenly understand or realize something', to like and agree with each other', 'to happen in a good or successful way' (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (New Edition) for Advanced Learners). Interestingly, in the interaction in Datum Two, the Speaker used the word 'click' in a deviant way, which flouts the maxim of relation and requires the Hearer to rely on conversational implicature to arrive at the correct interpretation of 'click'. For this utterance to be interpreted in congruous with the cooperative principle, the hearer must assume that the speaker is conveying extra information other than the literal meaning of 'click'. The Speaker foregrounded 'click' to alert the Hearer to keep away from getting into trouble. With the unfortunate cases of deceiving and defrauding unsuspecting people in the Nigerian society, the Speaker shifted the conceptual meaning of 'click' towards negative coding to connote 'about to get into trouble', which is contrary to the conceptual meaning of 'click', thereby generating a deviation-type foregrounding. Following the assumption that in conversational interaction, interlocutors are guided by certain rules, which help to uphold the cooperative principle and resultantly prevent breakdown in communication, the Hearer would have to work out the relevant interpretation of 'click' through connecting it with the Speaker's first utterance: "Be careful!", which is a caution to the Hearer.

Datum Three
Speaker: I'll like to enter that topic.
Hearer: In fact, the Lecturer is on point.

In the interaction in Datum Three above, the Speaker foregrounded the lexical item 'enter'. The conceptual meaning of 'enter' includes 'to go or come into a place', 'to start to work in a particular profession or organization, or to start studying at a school or university', 'to start an activity, or become involved in a situation', 'to put information into a computer by pressing the keys', 'to write information on a particular part of a form, document, etc.', 'to begin a period of time when something happens', 'start to exist' (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (New Edition) for Advanced Learners). However, the Speaker broadened the conceptual meaning of 'enter' to connote 'to show interest in something'. To interpret this utterance in consonance with the cooperative principle, the hearer must assume that the speaker is conveying extra information other than the literal meaning of 'enter'. Based on the assumption that in conversational interaction, interlocutors are guided by certain rules, which help

to uphold the cooperative principle and thus prevent breakdown in communication, then the Hearer would have to work out the relevant interpretation of 'enter' by linking it with the lexical item 'topic' which involves a subject of interest.

Datum Four
Speaker: Hey! She'll download the event in detail.
Hearer: Wow! I can't wait to hear it!

In the Datum Four above, the Speaker's use of the word 'download' is unusual, thereby, being foregrounded. The lexical item 'download' conceptually means 'to move information or programs from a computer network to a small computer' (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (New Edition) for Advanced Learners). In other words, 'download' relates to activities on the internet. However, in the above Datum Four, the Speaker used 'download' in a deviant way, which flouts the maxim of relation and requires to be worked out by the Hearer. Nevertheless, conversational implicature provides the means through which 'download' could be correctly interpreted. For the utterance to be interpreted in accordance with the cooperative principle, the hearer must assume that the speaker is conveying extra information other than the literal meaning of 'download'. Therefore, through the contextual usage of 'download', the Hearer would have to work out the relevant interpretation of 'download' through connecting it with movement of information. In this connection, the Hearer would figure out that the Speaker meant that the person referred to would relay sufficient information about the event to the Hearer.

Datum Five
Speaker: He's just a virus!
Hearer: Ah! So shocking!

In the Datum Five above, the Speaker's use of the lexical item 'virus' is an instance of deviation-type foregrounding which flouts the maxim of quality. The conceptual meaning of 'virus' includes 'a very small living thing that causes infectious illnesses', 'a set of instructions secretly put onto a computer or computer program, which can destroy information', 'a program that sends a large number of annoying messages to many people's mobile phones in an uncontrolled way' (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (New Edition) for Advanced Learners). However, the Speaker's utterance is a metaphorical expression, and it involves a non-linguistic knowledge of the world for the hearer to interpret it. Grice's 'implicature' provides us with a natural explanation of the interpretation of metaphor. To interpret this utterance in congruity with the cooperative principle, the hearer must assume that the speaker is conveying extra information other than the literal meaning of the sentence. Therefore, since 'virus' is 'a set of instructions secretly put onto a computer or computer program, which can destroy information', then the Hearer would work out that the speaker is saying that the person being described is destructive and dangerous. Thus, the notion of conversational implicature generates an explanation of utterance interpretation, in accordance with pragmatic norms. This interpretation was realized based on the assumption that in conversational interaction, interlocutors are guided by certain rules, which help to uphold the cooperative principle and thereby prevent breakdown in communication, which could be caused by deviation-type foregrounding.

6.0 FINDINGS

The data analysis above portrays that deviation-type foregrounding engenders semantic change hinged on the pragmatic dynamics of the foregrounded lexical items. The conceptual meanings of the foregrounded computer lexical items were shifted to transcend their denotations such as to generate dependence on contextual forces for appropriate interpretation.

Moreover, it is observed that contextual factors triggered both the encoding and decoding of the deviation-type foregrounded computer lexical items. For instance, the contextual usages of some of the foregrounded computer lexical items contain negative connotations, which presuppose occurrences of criminal and fraudulent activities in Nigeria, such as cyber fraud and diverse cases of security concern that impacted on the encoding as well as the decoding of the foregrounded computer lexical items in the various discourses. Interestingly, some of the deviation-type foregrounded computer lexical items perform euphemistic functions in discourse, which help to manage the tension surrounding their context of usage.

7.0 CONCLUSION

The pragmatic dynamics of deviation-type foregrounding is propelled by underlying contextual forces in discourse which impact on both the encoding and decoding of the foregrounded lexical items. Nevertheless, the notion of conversational implicature provides us with an explanation of utterance interpretation, in consonance with pragmatic norms, and consequently prevent breakdown in communication, which could be caused by deviation-type foregrounding.

Following from the findings of this research, further studies on foregrounding as it relates to transfer of registers and their contextual implications are strongly recommended.

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