

# ON PRAGMATICS AND NEGATION: A CASE STUDY OF ÌGBÒ

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## Abstract

*The relationship that exists between the concepts of pragmatics and negation in language is examined. The paper seeks to establish this, using the Ìgbò language of Nigeria as a case study. Pragmatics and Negation are explained in conjunction with definitions and views of different scholars. It is established that the Negative-assertion is a distinct Speech-Act different from that of the Affirmative in Ìgbò. The Negative-assertion is a distinct speech-act used with different communicative goals in mind than the affirmative assertion.*

**Key words:** Pragmatics, Negation, Speech-Act, Ìgbò.

This paper examines the relationship that exists between pragmatics and negation in language, using examples from the Ìgbò language of Nigeria, West Africa. The paper presents scholars' definitions and their views on both pragmatics and negation as preambles. The relationship that exists between the two concepts is then examined and established based on data from the Ìgbò language.

## Pragmatics

The concept of pragmatics is well entrenched in the quotation below by Jean Atchison:

*We human beings are odd compared with our nearest animal relative. Unlike them, we can say what we want, when we want. All normal human can produce and understand any number of new words and sentences. Human use the multiple option of language often without thinking. But blindly, they sometimes fall into its traps. They are like spiders who exploit their webs, but themselves yet caught in the sticky strands.*

Jean Atchison

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Stalnaker (1970) defines pragmatics as ‘the study of linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed’. On her own part, Kempson (1988) compares semantics and pragmatics. According to her, ‘semantics provides a complete account of sentence meaning for the language...’ while ‘pragmatics provides an account of how sentences are used in utterances to convey information in context’.

The definitions above try to differentiate between a sentence and an utterance. These scholars bring to the fore the importance of context in any given utterance. While sentences are merely strings of words put together by the grammatical rules of the language, utterances, on the other hand are said to be physical events. In making an utterance, an act is being performed. This is why pragmatics seems to be concerned with the practical usage of words which are context, intention and user-bound.

Leech (1969) and HE (2000) also believe that one of the characteristics of pragmatic meaning is that the comprehension of speaker intention is context-bound. In view of the fact that utterances seem to involve performing an act, Austin (1962: 10) developed what he called Speech-Acts theory. J. L. Austin believes that languages can actually be used to do, that is, to perform linguistic acts, such as warning, complaining, apologizing, teasing, reassuring, consoling, etc. The Ìgbò examples are:

- 1a. Nne Ada dọ̀rọ̀ ya aka na ntị.  
mother Ada pulled her hand at ear  
Ada’s mother pulled Ada’s ear  
‘Ada’s mother warned her’.  
(act of warning)
  
- b. Ha nà-èti ya aka n’obì.  
they are beating her chest with hand  
‘They are consoling him’.  
(act of consoling)

To further emphasize the importance of context in utterance meaning, which often goes beyond what is literally said, H. P. Grice (1967) propounded the theory which he calls Cooperative Principle (CP). The theory is summarized, thus:

*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 1967a/1989:26).*

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According to Grice, the CP is implemented by observing four major maxims of Quality, Quantity, Relation and Manner.

### **Functions of Pragmatics**

Basically, two functions of pragmatics are established. These are the Communicative and Linguistic functions.

### **Communicative Functions**

A German psychologist Karl Bühler (1934:29) elaborated his famous triangle of (roughly) expression or manifestation (speech), appeal and representation as characteristics of language while Roman Jakobson later elaborated on it by adding three more aspects: code, channel and poetic quality. The above processes help to consolidate the different agenda of the 'componentialist' and the 'perceptiveness' by appealing to other users as a means of social togetherness.

### **Linguistic Functions**

These are best studied in situations where people interact normally, using language face to face, as in every day conversation. There are two ways of studying fundamental linguistic interaction: by observing what is going on and try to describe as exactly as possible, the participants' choices of expressing themselves to their own and others' satisfaction as well as their options to join in at any given point of the conversation.

### **Pragmatic Component of Grammar**

The component view of pragmatics was made popular by Chomsky's early works (1957, 1963) and maintained by his faithful followers. The component corresponds to different human abilities that can be differentiated based on the syntax and semantics of a language in case of brain damage. This view is mainly on a 'modular' conception of human mind. The human facilities are regarded as independent but cooperating units. The pragmatic component is understood as the set of whatever pragmatic function and perspective that can be assigned to language i.e. the way they operate. This can be illustrated by asking users how they 'mean what they say', i.e. how they communicate, using language or how they 'say what they mean' employing the linguistic devices at their disposal to express themselves.

### **The Use of Pragmatics**

Pragmatics serves as a tool in proffering basic solution to the numerous practical traditional problems in linguistics. Many of these problems areas include problems of conversation, problems of argumentation, problems of language use in educational

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settings and problems of interaction between humans and computers. Others are general communication problems in anthropology, ethnography, psychiatry and psychology, the public language inside and outside of social institutions, rhetoric, the media science, educational sciences etc.

Pragmatics offers lasting solutions to areas that cannot be found in good old-fashioned linguistics. Its methods help for greater understanding of how human mind works, how humans communicate, how they manipulate one another and how they use language. Pragmatics is needed if we want a fuller, deeper and generally more reasonable account of human language behavior.

### **Negation**

In the words of Frege (1918/77"48):

*The negative word or syllable often seems to be more closely united to part of that sentence e.g. the predicate. This may lead us to think that what is negated is the content, not of the whole sentence, but just of this part.*

Two major facts can be deduced from the statement above. The fact is that the negation marker usually comes before the predicate, i.e. the verb. In many languages, no other item can come in-between the negation marker and the main verb in a simple sentence. This is true of the Ìgbò language. *Adi* is one of the negation markers in Ìgbò. This negation marker always comes before the main verb in simple sentences. For instance:

- 2a.    Ìzù adì ga.  
          Ìzù neg go  
          ‘Ìzù did not go’.
  
- b.       Nwoke ahù adì ezu ohi  
          man that neg. steal  
          ‘That man does not steal’.

Another fact that can be deduced from Frege’s statement is that two distinctions are involved in the understanding of utterances of negative sentences. They are, Scope distinction and Representational distinction.

### **Scope Distinction**

Negation in a sentence could be viewed from two angles, depending on the scope of the negation. The negation could have a wider scope negating the whole

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sentence or utterance. It could also have a narrower scope, affecting just part of the sentence. For instance:

- 3a.     Ụmụ nwaànyị niile adị zụ akwà.  
          ‘All the women did not buy the cloth’.
- b.     Adị ụmụ nwaànyị niile zụrụ akwà.  
          ‘Not all the women bought the cloth’.
- c.     Adị otù n’ime ụmụ nwaànyị zụrụ akwà.  
          ‘None of the women bought the cloth’.

From the above (3a, b, c,) examples, it is observed that sentence (3a) can be interpreted in two different ways, as given in (3b) and (3c). Each interpretation lies in the scope of the negation marker in sentence (3a). the interpretation in sentence (3b) is as a result of the fact that the negation is believed to only affect the universal quantifier *niile* (all). It therefore implies that some women have bought their cloth. The interpretation in sentence (3c) stems from the belief that the negation marker affects the entire predicate. It implies that none of the women has bought the cloth.

**Representational Distinction**

According to Robyn Caston (2008), this is known as language/metalinguage distinction. This is best explained using Ìgbò examples below:

- 4a.     Ànyị adị ri ji. Manà ànyị rìrì àgwà.  
          ‘We did not eat yam. But we did eat beans’.
- b.     Ànyị adi ri ji. Anyị rìrì ji.  
          ‘We did not eat yam. We ate yam’

In sentence (4a) above, the predicate, falling within the scope of negation is being used literally. The follow-up statement is therefore taken descriptively. Hence, this follow-up statement is consistent with the prior negation.

In sentence (4b), however, such a descriptive understanding leads to a contradiction. This is because the follow-up statement is not consistent with the prior negation.

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### **Pragmatics and Negation**

Before we take a cursory look into the relationship that exists between pragmatics and negation, let us first of all, examine the quotation below by Frege (1918b/77:48), also in Frege (1952).

*Thus for every thought, there is a contradictory thought: he acknowledged the falsity of a thought by admitting the truth of its contradiction. The sentence that expresses the contradictory thought is formed from the expression of the original thought by means of a negative word.*

Frege's statement confirms the view of some scholars and philosophers that the world is operating on a binary theory of opposition, i.e. the world is made in two's. For every positive, there is a negative; for every good, there is an evil; for every white, there is a black. According to the statement above, for every thought, there is a contradictory thought also. Ogden and Richards (1923) in agreement with Frege claim that 'every case of knowledge expressed through a negative proposition was in reality of a positive nature'. Thus:

5.        Ìzù adì nọ n'ahja.  
            'Ìzù is not in the market'.

is said to be a description of some positive proposition (6) or (7) below:

6.        Ìzù nọ n'ụlọ.  
            'Ìzù is at home'.

or

7.        Ìzù nọ ebe ọzọ  
            'Ìzù is somewhere else'.

### **Negation and Presupposition**

It is believed, in pragmatics, that meaning goes beyond what is literally said. In other words, when a sentence is uttered, there are some other facts, not stated, but which can be deduced from what is said. This is said to be the presupposed utterance. This is in accordance with Grice (1967) Cooperative Principle. Grice believes that there is always a mutual understanding, a knowledge that exists between a speaker and hearer.

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Presupposition, therefore, is an assumption which is implied by the use of particular words or structure. For instance:

- 8a. Onye isi бү nwoke.  
‘The boss is a man’.  
presupposes that there is a boss.

However negation changes the truth value of the assertion, as in example (8b) below:

- b. Onye isi adi бү nwoke.  
‘The boss is not a man’.

For the presupposed utterance, negation does not change its truth value. The fact that ‘the boss is not a man does not mean that there is no boss’. Therefore, negation in a sentence does not in any way affect the presupposed statements.

**Negation and Entailment**

Entailment is similar to presupposition. Entailment is referred to as meaning of inclusion. This means that some other statements can be deduced from what is said literally. In other words, some statements are covertly included in an overt statement. Simply put, a sentence (A) is said to entail sentence (B) if the meaning of sentence (B) is included in sentence (A). For instance:

- 9a. Onye isi бү àgà.  
‘The boss is barren’.

**Entails**

- b. Onye isi adi мү ұмұ.  
‘The boss cannot bear children’.

However, if assertion in sentence (9a) is negated, as in (9c) below:

- 9c. Onye isi adi бү àgà.  
‘The boss is not barren’.

the truth value of the entailed sentence (9b) is also affected. Hence, example (9b) becomes (9d) below:

- 9d. Onye is gà-amұ ұмұ.  
‘The boss can bear children’.

i.e. the reverse of (9b).

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If the boss is not barren (9c), then the boss can bear children (9d).

### **Conclusions**

There seems to be some background assumptions that exist in both affirmative and negative assertions in Ìgbò. The contrast between the two can be summarized thus:

**Affirmative Assertion:** The hearer does not know, the speaker knows.

**Negative Assertion:** The hearer knows wrong, the speaker knows better.

Thus, the Negative-assertion is seen as a distinct Speech Act different from that of the Affirmative assertion as illustrated with the Ìgbò examples in this work. In using the Affirmative or positive assertion, the speaker seeks to pass new information to the hearer. However, in using the Negative-assertion, the speaker is not in the business of communicating new information to the hearer. Instead, he is only trying to correct the hearer's misguided or wrong beliefs about shared information.

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