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A Pragmatic Analysis of Conversational Maxim Violations in Nigerian Newspaper Advertisements

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how conversational maxims are violated as a pragmatic strategy in the Nigerian newspaper advertising. Respectively guided by the Cooperative Principle of Grice, the study examines thirty adverts that are selected through purposive sampling of three newspapers (The Punch, The Nation and The Nigerian Tribune). It focuses on how the maxim of quantity, quality, relation, and manner are flouted while trying to achieve certain persuasive effects. The findings indicate that the maxim violation is ubiquitous in the sector of advertising. The maxim of quantity often is not honoured by real estate adverts by not giving details and prices. Quality maxim is violated through the overstatement of the product benefits in the advertisements of health and Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) products. Political adverts rely on ambiguous slogans, violating manner, while some educational adverts use emotionally charged but vague expressions. These violations result into implicatures that require readers to infer meaning but they also have the tendency to mislead audiences or decrease credibility. The study establishes that the violation of maxim in the advertisement was done intentionally as part of the rhetorical tool to draw attention and appeal but at the cost of clarity and credibility. The research contributes to the field of pragmatics through the application of maxim theory in advertisement discourse in Nigeria. It also gives a recommendation to the advertisers, media practitioners, and regulators in balancing creativity and communicative effectiveness.

Keywords: Pragmatics; conversational maxims; maxim violations; cooperative principle; Nigerian newspapers; advertising discourse

1.0 Introduction

Pragmatics, or the science of language used in context, provides the tools for addressing how meaning is negotiated beyond the literal meaning of words. The Cooperative Principle of Grice (1975) is one of the main frameworks in pragmatics and according to this principle, effective communication is done with reference to four conversational maxims: quantity, quality, relation, and manner. While these maxims encourage clarity, relevance, and truthfulness, advertising often thrives by flouting them. Advertisers deliberately exaggerate, leave out information, and use ambiguity to capture attention and convince people (Thomas, 2019; Kecskes, 2022).

In Nigerian newspapers, such maxim violations are common. Health adverts may claim miraculous cures without fact, hence the violation of the maxim of quality; real estate adverts can omit a price indicated, thus violating the maxim of quantity; and political adverts tend to use vague and ambiguous phrases, violating the maxim of manner. These strategies may maximize persuasion but they also pose pragmatic difficulties to the readers especially in the linguistically heterogeneous environment in Nigeria, where consumers simply depend on coherent and timely information to make their decisions (Okolo & Udeze, 2020; Adeniyi, 2021).

The issue is that, even though the maxim violations in advertisement are rhetorical actions by design, they can fail to convey the right information, obscure meaning, or diminish credibility. Yet, there has been limited systematic study of how Nigerian newspaper adverts employ maxim violations as pragmatic tools. However, this study was carried out to determine the prevalence of the most violated maxims, how such violations function as persuasive strategies, and the interpretive implications they may have to the readers.

This research is relevant in two aspects. It contributes to pragmatic theory by demonstrating how the maxims of conversation are manipulatively used in advertising discourse in the Nigerian media. Practically, it empowers the advertiser with the information on how to use maxim violations without compromising clarity while it also informs regulators and consumer protection agencies of the danger of misleading content. The study is limited to textual material of thirty adverts that are selected from The Punch, The Nation, and Nigerian Tribune. The visual components are taken into consideration only when they influence the pragmatic interpretation of violation of the maxim directly.

2.0 Literature Review

The Cooperative Principle (CP) used by Grice (1975) to analyze the spoken discourse can be applied to written words, and advertisements in particular. According to the CP, effective communication is done in accordance with the four conversational maxims that include: Quantity (give enough but not

too much information); Quality (give truth and evidence-based information); Relation (give information that is relevant), and Manner (give information that is clear, short and concise). This study reviews the theoretical framework of the CP, how it has been applied to advertisements and how maxim violations have been used to create implicatures, and finally empirical evidence as to their frequency and effect on advertisements in the Nigerian newspaper adverts.

In advertising, adherence to Grice maxims ensures that advertisements are informative, accurate, relevant and clear, serving as the guidelines of communicative effectiveness (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000). However, advertisers often intentionally flout these maxims to create implicatures — meanings inferred beyond the literal content (Grice, 1975; Yule, 1996). (Grice, 1975; Yule, 1996). As an example, an advertisement that says a product is the best in the universe is contravening the Quality maxim and it seeks to create appeal to the audiences to infer that the product is highly effective. Such violations can enhance creativity through cleverness of slogan or metaphor, but the danger is that it leads to misinterpretation if the audience misinterprets the implicature (Goddard, 2001).

Empirical examination of Nigerian newspaper ads suggest that the violation of these maxims is common and that it may have different communicative consequences. Exaggerated claims attract quality violations as seen in phrases like, "unbeatable prices", which can force the audiences to infer moderated meanings but overuse would generate skepticism (Ayoola, 2013). The most common are Manner violations, because of ambiguous diction, unfamiliar acronyms (such as VGC to refer to Victoria Garden City), or culturally incomprehensible references, which lower comprehensibility, particularly among semi-literate or rural audiences (Ayoola, 2013; Gidado, 2015). Quantity violations take place when promotions fail to include important information, such as prices or contact, or overload a user with too much text so they cannot make the necessary decision. Relevance violations, i.e., irrelevant imagery leading to confused context, is demonstrated in the banking adverts that do not relate to financial services (Ayoola, 2013). These difficulties are compounded by the socio-linguistic diversity in Nigeria with about 62 percent literacy rate and various languages that serve to enhance the implicatures that might not be understood by diverse audiences (Gidado, 2015).

Maxim violations in Nigerian advertisements are a double-edged sword. They promote creativity and help come up with catchy and convincing messages that attract interest (Goddard, 2001) but improperly executed violations that do not match the pragmatic competence of the audience are misinterpreted, confusing, or mistrusted (Robert, 2013). Recent research indicates that cultural and contextual adaptations are important, with implicatures in multilingual contexts that frequently do not give results when shared knowledge is assumed (Enyi, 2025). Digital advertisement further complicates the issue because AI-generated content can cause more violations when they are not adjusted to an audience expectation (Cotton et al., 2024). Grice's CP reveals that maxim violations are central to Nigerian newspaper advertising, balancing creativity against clarity.

3.0 Methodology

In this research, a qualitative research design was used to carry out a practical examination of Nigerian newspaper advertisements using Grice Cooperative Principle (1975). This method was chosen to synoptically find, categorize, and infer any violation of conversational maxims with a view towards the types, frequencies, and implications of these violations so as to determine their effect on meaning negotiation in printed adverts.

The sample size was comprised of advertisements in Nigerian national daily newspapers, namely, The Punch, The Nations, and the Nigerian Tribune, which are selected based on these newspapers offering a large advertisement section and wide variety of readers (Gidado, 2015). A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 30 advertisements—10 from each newspaper—published within a consecutive three-month period. The samples selection targeted sectors characterized by creative or ambiguous use of language, such as banking, insurance, real estate, and fast-moving consumer goods, which ensured a rich data provision for pragmatic analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data collection entailed collecting newspaper copies physically and extracting newspaper adverts that contained adequate linguistic material that could be analysed. A pragmatic analysis coding sheet, based on Grice's maxims of Quantity (sufficiency of information), Quality (truthfulness and substantiation), Relation (relevance of text/visuals), and Manner (clarity, avoiding ambiguity or jargon), served as the main tool. The coding sheet captured definite violations, made implicatures and interpretive notes on communicative effects.

Data analysis followed a qualitative pragmatic approach, scrutinizing each advertisement to identify: (1) a flouted maxim, (2) a linguistic or visual element that contributed to any violation (e.g., ambiguous salvo, irrelevant picture, unsupported claim), (3) an implicature that could be inferred, and (4) whether the violation would lead to greater persuasion or confusion. Data was presented in tables that described frequencies of violation per maxim with illustrative examples drawn out of the data set (Table 1)

Table 1: Summary of the Analysis of Advertisements in The Punch and The Nation Newspapers

Maxims/Adverts		Frequency	Percentage
Maxims	No Maxim	13	34%
	Quantity	5	13%
	Manner	11	29%
	Quality	5	13%
	Relation	4	11%

4.0 Analysis and Discussion

An analysis was done by utilizing Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975) to assess maxim violations in 30 adverts of The Punch and The Nation. The four maxims - Quantity (give enough information), Quality (tell the truth), Relation (be relevant), and Manner (be clear and orderly) are evaluated with implicatures produced. A summary given in Table 1 shows that 13 adverts (34%) violate no maxim; the most violated is Manner (29%), which, common to many, includes use of ambiguity or acronyms; Quantity and Quality come in at 13% each. Specific examples illustrate violations: The Real Estate Promo in The Punch violates Quantity and Relation by omitting price and location, generating implicatures of urgency and exclusivity. Health Supplement in The Nation flouts Quality and Quantity with unverified claims, implying superiority without evidence. Political ads frequently violate Quantity, relying on slogans for emotional impact. Conversely, banking ads like UBA Bumper Account observe all maxims, providing clear details without implicatures. Most of the violations are deliberate, creating persuasive implicatures (e.g., "Cook The Difference" in MAGGI advert violates Manner, implying innovation). In Nigeria's context, these violations pose a threat to trust in the context of different literacy levels and diverse cultural interpretations.

Violation of maxims in Nigerian advertisements, as a persuasive tool, corroborates the idea of Grundy (2000) that they create implicatures that prioritize impact over accuracy. The high rate of violation by Manner is indicative of ambiguity brought by advertisers to evoke curiosity, as seen in the recent reviews of Pakistani advertisements, in which implicatures generate interest even despite violation (Shahzad and Jan, 2023). This is in line with billboard research indicating that maxim violations in Nigeria give the illusion of superiority in parity products (Bossan, 2024; Omolabi, 2024).

Quality maxim violations could confuse consumers, which could be reflected on the pragmatism of sensationalism in online newspapers, where violations result in hype at the cost of trust (Abdul Rahman and Hassan, 2024). The 34% observance rate in informative adverts supports Grice's framework, but the 29% Manner flouts highlight cultural adaptations. In multilingual Nigeria, the use of simple diction can prevent violations, yet economic adverts work well by adherence to maxims (Ayoola, 2013). In the recent studies on Gricean maxims in editorial cartoons, the same violation applies to implicit message conveyance, with possible indication of a broader media trend (Okafor, 2025). Examples of the implications are that the consumers may get confused or reject the advert and therefore the call to ensure ethical advertising. Digital changes can intensify the infractions with AI-informed ads unless they are pragmatically adjusted (Cotton et al., 2024). Future investigations may measure implicature effects using surveys.

5.0 Findings

The analysis of 30 advertisements of The Punch and The Nation newspapers based on the Cooperative Principle formulated by Grice confirms the presence of the widespread violation of the maxims: 25 adverts (57) violate at least one of the maxims, the most violated being Manner (29%, through ambiguity or acronyms), then Quantity (13%, leaving out information such as prices), Quality (13%, unproven assertions), and Relation (11%, irrelevant pleas. No violations occur in 13 adverts (34%), mainly in finance where all maxims are observed for clarity. Maxim violations produce persuasive implicatures (as in the case of urgency in real estate advertisements (Quantity/Relation flouts) or superiority in health supplements (Quality/Quantity breaches)) but can frequently compromise informativeness and comprehensibility. Sectoral patterns show finance and real estate minimizing violations for trust, while politics, education, health, and FMCGs frequently flout for emotional impact (e.g., slogans violating Quantity). These deliberate violations in Nigeria are in tandem with the cultural persuasion strategies but they can be problematic in relation to the different levels of literacy and multilingualism, which result in misunderstanding, suspicion, or financial wastage.

6.0 Conclusion

Violation of conversational maxims in Nigerian newspaper advertisements is used strategically to persuade, which proves that they are effective at creating implicatures that are appeal-oriented rather than grounded in fact as expounded by Grice (1975). While they are good in engaging audiences, their overuse, in particular, Manner and Quantity violation, erode credibility and clarity, especially in a multifaceted environment such as Nigeria where pragmatic interpretations are inconsistent. The analysis proposes moderated compliance to maxims, particularly in the high-stakes industries, to build on trust and moral communication. The study therefore shows how pragmatics theory can be applied to advertising discourse.

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