

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

#### 2.0 Introduction

Interest in *discourse studies* has grown among linguists, philosophers and sociologists over the years and it has become an important area in related disciplines such as psycholinguistics, ethnomology, and pragmatics. As a branch of language study, discourse studies have benefitted from contributions from various language disciplines such as linguistics, literature, rhetoric and stylistics as well as other fields concerned with verbal communication such as psychology, sociology and philosophy. Advances in discourse studies have also helped to elevate the field of pragmatics into an independent discipline. In the study of language and human communication today, researchers have come to recognize the need for approaches that are more eclectic which incorporate the functional, intentional, psychological, social, cognitive perspectives and other fields once considered outside the area of pure linguistics. Many, like Rommetveit (1990), have argued for an interdisciplinary integration of research lines as the ultimate option for the understanding of human cognition, action and communication.

#### 2.1 Approaches to Discourse Studies

Although many theories and approaches have been put forward by

language researchers, the problem of how talk should be analyzed remains unresolved. One area that has remained problematic is that of utterance meaning. Utterance meaning has been approached differently over the decades. The analysis of utterances in the 60s was based on traditional sentence-based semantics concerned with truth conditions, representational meanings and the expression of beliefs about the world. Linguists laid emphasis on literal word meaning by focusing on the linguistic qualities of words spoken. Ideas and theories about discourse often dealt with made-up examples in imaginary contexts rather than with authentic, connected speech. However, increased interest in how discourse is produced and interpreted in a specific situation and the consequent development of pragmatics from the 70s onwards have added functional dimensions to the study of utterance meaning which place a greater emphasis on elements such as speaker intention and contexts.

The recognition of children's language as having research potential has generated research into child discourse over the last three decades. First and second language acquisition and linguistic development were areas of emphasis in the 70s. Grammatical and lexical areas remained the staple of research, influenced by the structural-behavioural approach to language research. While approaches such as Conversational Analyses focused on situated interactions, they did not pay much attention to meaning derivation and intention. Details of sequences and structure of exchanges

especially with regard to turn-taking and repairs to ensure the smooth flow of conversation were given particular attention. Likewise in the Birmingham School approach i.e. Sinclair & Couthard's (1983) *Discourse Analysis*, the analysis of conversation was confined to the study of moves categorized as initiation or response. Utterance meaning was derived mainly from its position in sequence. It may also be said that the study of meaning in communication was confined to semantic and functional considerations still concerned with linguistic categories.

It was not until the 80s that pragmatics became a recognized branch of linguistics. Language research goals and methods were liberalized to include elements and aspects of communication related to understanding an utterance. Ideas of intentionality and contexts were accorded significance in the analyses of utterances. Discourse studies adopted pragmatic approaches which were more concerned with interlocutors and their social relations and how they generate and understand talk than with the linguistic properties of the expressions used in communication. More than just a rule-governed tool of communication, language has come to be regarded as dynamic, possessing performative functions.

This emergence of pragmatics and the study of utterances as acts had its beginnings in Austin's philosophy of language and Searle's Speech Act Theory which will be discussed in 2.3.1. The brief history of the direction

of discourse studies above serves as background understanding to the emergence of utterance meaning studies.

## **2.2 The Approach to this Study**

Although discourse analysts have approached dialogue and discourse in different ways (e.g. The Birmingham School Discourse Analysis, and Sacks and Schegloff's Conversational Analysis), these approaches are basically theories of discourse structure. Attention is paid to the reciprocal nature of conversation governed by concepts of response and initiative sequences. They underestimate the semantic multifunctionality and indeterminacies in authentic discourse and thus they often fail to capture the emergent properties of utterances and their interpretations (Linell 1998).

Since there is as yet no formal pragmatic model for discourse analysis, the researcher has chosen instead to look at some perspectives of communication that have been postulated by linguists, language philosophers and researchers over the years, which are pertinent to the study of utterance meaning or conversational implicature as a general framework of this study.



## **2.3 Perspectives of Communication**

The discussion here will center on the following perspectives of communication which are essentially pragmatic skills frequently applied to adult discourse studies.

### **2.3.1 Language as a Form of Acting**

The functionalistic approach to utterance meaning has its origins in Austin's (1962) notion of language as a form of acting. He characterized speech in terms of acts (every utterance carries 3 kinds of acts) and examines conversation in the following way. Making an utterance itself using grammatical structure and words is what he calls a *locutionary act*. Each time someone performs a locutionary act, he or she also performs some illocutionary act such as apologizing, promising, warning, stating and others. It follows that if the hearer, through his or her knowledge of the conventions of the language, grasps what the speaker is saying and the purpose of the utterance, there is *uptake* on his or her part of the *illocutionary force* of the utterance. Finally, the effect the illocutionary force of the utterance has on the hearer is called the *perlocutionary act*. It may have the effect of persuading, misleading, convincing, assuring surprising and so forth.

To Austin, the illocutionary force of an utterance is of foremost concern to both the speaker and the hearer and crucial to its recognition is the use of performative verbs. Therefore when someone says, ‘ I *promise* to return your book next week’, the verb *promise* is the performative verb which spells out the force of the utterance. Searle (1969), Austin’s protégé realized that not all utterances carry performative verbs as direct clues to the speaker’s intention. For example, when requesting for something to eat, a child might say ,

“I’m hungry”

The utterance which on the face appears to be a statement in its linguistic form may actually be an illocutionary act of request. For Searle, an utterance or a proposition (his term) must always be viewed as part of a larger context and what the speaker intends to achieve by uttering the proposition.

The speech act theory has advanced the perception of speech as a form of action or intentional behaviour. An important point of Austin’s and Searle’s work on the meanings of utterances was that referential and descriptive aspects will not make up the complete picture. Utterances have both performative values as well as illocutionary meanings. The theory has steered linguists and researchers to perceive communication as goal and purpose driven. (Clark 1996) This has given impetus to a study of

utterance meaning which considers contextual, sequential and social-  
interactional interdependencies.

There is now the recognition that utterances are not always autonomous and there is not just one unique interpretation to an utterance. Spoken discourse is a particularly complex form of human behaviour and analysing discourse by merely considering the lexical, grammatical, phonological, prosodical and paralinguistic conventions in a specific language is inadequate for the derivation of speaker meaning and intention, which are perceptual elements in discourse. Often in natural, spontaneous conversations that are unplanned, there is the need to search for “the other meaning” which Grice (1975) terms **Conversational Implicature (CI)**. Before CI can be understood, it is necessary to examine his notion of the nature of conversation.

### **2.3.2 The Cooperative Nature of Conversation**

Sociolinguists and pragmatists generally agree that most of the time, in human communication, participants in conversation do desire for verbal interaction to flow smoothly. When people speak, they express intention and they expect that intention to be understood. As such, they will attempt to form their utterances in such a way as to achieve something in the hearer; to make the hearer understand, or think in a certain manner, or to move the hearer to respond either verbally or with a desired action.

According to Grice, participants in conversation are generally aware of their roles in any situation and it is understood that conversation can only go smoothly if A and B cooperate. In postulating the Cooperative Principle, he states that basic rules for turn-taking, listening when the other is talking and giving appropriate responses so as not to be misconstrued and making inferences from the context, are consciously observed. He identifies four maxims which must be observed for conversation to work.

QUANTITY	make your contribution as informative as is required
QUALITY	do not say what you believe is false or that for which you lack adequate evidence
RELATION	be relevant
MANNER	be perspicuous, brief and orderly; avoid obscurity and ambiguity

### **2.3.3 Conversational Implicature**

Grice's Cooperative Principle and Conversational Maxims have not gone unchallenged. Such a premise concerning conversation seems to create a utopic world where every utterance can be taken at face value and every intention can be readily read. This certainly does not reflect the way conversation is managed in real life. Grice himself and his followers

however, insist that the Principle and Maxims are not meant to be prescriptive. He is not advocating that all participants in conversation should observe these maxims. In fact, he stresses that when a listener seeks to understand an utterance, it is the flouting of one or more of the maxims that gives the cue to begin the search for the other meaning.

Consider the following conversation:

(At the fitting rooms of a department store)

A: How do I look? (1)

B: Mm. It's an unusual colour. (2)

A: O.K. let's look around. (3)

B's response seems to have flouted the maxim of relevance. Yet A does not take the utterance (1) at face value. Instead of rendering speaker B to be uncooperative, A has understood B to be diplomatic. B is essentially saying that the dress does not look good on A, in an indirect way.

The example above indicates that the Cooperative Principle does not constitute a method for conducting a conversation. The Principle and its maxims may be adhered to perhaps in formal and informative settings but in everyday naturalistic settings, they may prove to be the exception rather than the norm. In the search for speaker meaning, it is the flouting of a maxim that guides the listener to look for meaning beyond the

conventional. The violation of the maxims coaxes the listener into searching for speaker meaning that is not explicitly stated. It is this kind of speaker or utterance meaning or Conversational Implicature that is central to his theory of the idea of meaning in human communication.

### **2.3.3.1 Deriving Implicature**

Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP) and Maxims are a paradoxical approach to analyzing discourse because on the one hand, they establish the norm for efficient information transfer yet on the other, they serve as a reminder of ways in which participants can violate the same maxims in order to express meaning and intention efficiently.

The following is an example of how participants in conversation derive implied meaning (implicatures) from what is said in context.

A: Have you seen my glasses anywhere?

B: Shawn was in your room just now.

At the outset, there seems to be a mismatch between the question and the information given. The maxims of relation and manner seems to have been violated. The sense (the literal or face value meaning) of the reply is incompatible with the information sought for by A. Yet A does not walk

away from the conversation and dismiss B as being difficult and illogical because A assumes (see 2.3.4.1) that the situation is governed by the Cooperative Principle. The proposition in B's reply must therefore contain an additional piece of meaning. A must derive that meaning (the illocutionary force) because it will provide him with useful information for the next course of action ( e.g. getting Shawn's help).

Arriving at the extra meaning or implicature in this case may involve a three-stage sequence as follows:

- (1) The prima-facie observation is that there is something 'up' with B's reply. After all, B does not give the right amount and kind of information to meet A's needs. In other words, B has apparently violated the CP (specifically, the Maxim of Relevance).
- (2) There is, however, no reason to suppose that B is being deliberately uncooperative. Therefore, A can reasonably assume that B IS observing the CP, and that this apparent breach of the Relevance Maxim is due to B's wish to uphold the CP at another point. Therefore A must look for a reason why the CP should cause B to give irrelevant information.
- (3) A may reason that B is trying to uphold the Maxims of Quantity and Quality. B does not know where A's glasses are but B has reason to

believe that their grandson may have had something to do with them. Although B cannot provide the exact information, she thinks she can provide A with useful information which has yet to be proven true. This can be seen from another perspective, that of B trying to uphold the Maxim of Relevance, at an indirect level.

(Adapted from Leech: 1983)

The above is only one example of how the intended meaning of an utterance is resolved in conversation. Seeming violation of other maxims can also be worked out similarly, some involving additional stages depending on the nature and complexity of what is said and intended.

#### **2.3.4 The Intuitive Nature of Talk**

To fully understand implied meaning or conversational implicature, the intuitive nature of talk data must be acknowledged. As was mentioned earlier, meaning in natural discourse often take on an additional dimension beyond that which is syntactically and semantically recognizable. Thus, value notions and subjective interpretations become valid because the real meaning of an utterance can never be arrived at if it is not subjected to evaluation by the hearer. Grice in his lecture entitled *Meaning Revisited* (ed. Smith 1982:223ff), goes so far as to say that when we deal with meaning in discourse, we are actually dealing with intuitive data. He has reason for saying this.



Grice's model of human communication upholds man as a complex creature. When man communicates, it is not merely a cognitive act. He is not mechanically using the little black box (Chomsky 1965) to produce novel sentences. In whatever context, man as a participant in conversation carries with him the psychological and emotional states together with his perceptions of the world and reality. This whole person approach to the study of meaning and language use has made a significant contribution to the field of pragmatics. In recent years the trend has been towards a multi-discipline approach to research in linguistics and this indeed is a promising sign.

Linell (1998) adds a different perspective to this orientation when he points out that communicative interaction involves the meeting of consciousnesses. He attributes giving 'the vague' a proper place in the theory of the mind to the American pragmatist philosopher, William James (1996[1909]). James had posited the notion that the human mind is like a flow of thought, a stream of consciousness, in which some things are focused upon and provide resources for talk. As some things are made explicit, other things remain on the fringe of consciousness, vaguely present as possible associations and implications.

### **2.3.4.1 Relevance As Assumed**

Grice's maxims are not exhaustive because as he himself acknowledges, there may be other possible maxims such as the 'be polite' maxim, which has since been extensively developed by Leech (1983) as a principle in itself. The quantity, quality and manner maxims have by and large been ignored by linguists and Grice himself but the maxim that has created debate is the maxim of relation or relevance. Those who accuse Grice of being prescriptive when postulating his Principle and Maxims have failed to understand his recognition of the multifunctionality of discourse contributions and his contention that some utterances will remain indeterminate unless subjected to further enquiry. The Cooperative principle is not aimed at dictating the laws of social behaviour. Rather, Grice intends for it to describe the rational workings of the human mind in finding out what a speaker means when he says something. Grice argues that when an utterance violates a maxim or the Cooperative Principle, there is probably a reason for flouting it whether blatantly or discretely. The reason is always related to speaker meaning and intention as well as what he sets out to achieve with it. An utterance should not be dismissed as irrelevant if it takes time and effort to work out the implicature and hence, the utterance meaning. Sometimes, the uptake may be slow but the illocutionary force exists. An utterance that seems vague, overgeneral and incomplete may actually provide a hint to the search for a relevant interpretation.

### **2.3.5 Communication as Other-oriented**

Communication is other-oriented and purposeful. The speaker 'talks with an active expectation of response' (Shotter 1993:52) and his awareness of the listener as a co-producer of thought and meaning and not just a mere recipient gives the former the confidence that his intention will be understood.

Speaking with a recipient design ... implies casting the other (listener) in the role of a certain type of 'implied responder'.

(Linell 1998:104)

The speaker is listener-oriented while the listener is speaker-oriented and they both monitor their own and each other's communicative activities in accordance with their respective assumptions of a social world which they temporarily share in interaction. This view of interaction is also expressed by Graumann (1990) when he says there is a reciprocal setting and taking of perspectives in the interaction process. Verbalization, in other words, is meant for another's ears.

### **2.3.6 Context**

Engaging in meaning making or sense making is thus more than taking part in initiation-response exchanges. The interactants need to bear in mind what Givon (1989:8) calls the 'silent partner' of an utterance: the context. The meaning of an utterance can only be accomplished by contextualizing it correctly.

Context is not an easily understood entity. It encompasses many things. One view is that context includes the values which a society attaches to given behaviours or concepts, the shared knowledge, relationships and goal of participants in a given interaction, and the expectations which such knowledge, relationships, and goals generate (Duranti 1992).

Rommetveit (1990), Graumann (1995) and Linell (1995) also note that contexts are both visible and invisible. Contexts do not only refer to specific references in the concrete setting (location, participants, occasion) but also to abstract conditions (background knowledge, previous experience, assumptions).

Language and communication research has often focused on the physical or concrete context. It is sorted and broken down into various components such as setting, scenes, participants, ends, topics, tones, channels, codes, norms and genres. However, Duranti (1992) proposes a revisit of dominant models of context which focus on the elements mentioned. He says that, although context/culture/orders of discourse largely determine the limits of what can be said, people talking in context nonetheless find room to negotiate and resist, given the dynamic order of human action and human understanding.

Speakers, according to Linell (1998) do not, and cannot, express all aspects of meaning that could be made relevant for the interpretation of their utterances. Instead, they give cues to the interpretation of their utterances. Understandings are inferred from utterances-in-context, rather than expressed in utterances per se.

### 2.3.6.1 The Fluidity of Contexts

Communication situations do not occur in isolation. On the contrary, they are connected in subtle ways, across space and time through human beings who wander in and out of situations. Discourse can travel across situations and this phenomenon involves recontextualization. (Goffman 1974, Linell 1998). No linguistic message, no thought or intention exists first without a context, and only then becomes recontextualized. When we say something, we are actually transcending the situation from how it appeared just before the utterance. We modify our contextual matrices in our minds, while the physical setting remains the same. When speakers contextualize topics by assembling a new context space around them, recontextualization takes place. Abstract contexts are not always specified. They are often reoriented by words. Their fluid nature is expressed by Bakhtin (1986) when he says that it is possible for contexts to get established and reestablished through discourse. Therefore, it is possible to have multiple contexts, occurring simultaneously in the same physical and social setting. This takes place in the mindscape of the interlocutors

and it may be said to be a kind of perceived reality which influences the perception of meaning. This kind of reality encompasses elements such as shared knowledge, previous experience and points of view. They may be called levels of consciousness and they provide participants with the resources for processing implied meaning.

### **2.3.7 The Meeting of Perspectives**

The notion of conversation as a meeting of perspectives will be discussed in terms of shared knowledge and the social and cultural penetrations involved.

#### **2.3.7.1 Shared knowledge**

Linguists like Smith, and Clark and Carlson (ed. Smith 1980) have emphasized the importance of mutual knowledge in communication. They argue that mutual knowledge is necessary for the correct communication of meaning by the speaker. However, it must be reiterated that any knowledge that speakers share is never complete. At best, there can only be partial sharedness since the interactants are individuals who bring with them their own worlds when they communicate. Despite this, the communicative purposes of the participants in discourse can still be achieved. As Vygotsky (1987) says, in contexts of use, an adult and child can arrive at inter-subjective agreement about a word's reference without sharing the same complex system of sense relations. In this way the

communicative purposes of each party can be achieved, even though the interactants are not on an equal footing intramentally. As interactants in conversation, Rommetveit (1988) points out, our realities are only partially shared and fragmentally known. The guesswork necessary to work out what the speaker means is alluded to when he reminds us that under many circumstances, people undoubtedly have different knowledge of, perspectives on, and opinions of the world and the specific situations they are in. Again, this does not hinder the achievement of goals and purposes among the interactants.

Brown (1983) contends that unarticulated notions in the form of prior knowledge or experience are appealed to when an utterance is made to indicate what is being talked about. In other words, shared knowledge has a retrospective aspect to it. It has to do with the interactants' prior knowledge, early experience with other interlocutors in different contexts, personal world views and beliefs.

#### **2.3.7.2 Social and Cultural Penetration**

Deriving meaning involves a complex interaction between the individual and the physical environment. Interlocutors and situated aspects are inherent entities. So are the abstract forms mentioned above. Communication is thus the meeting of perspectives entrenched in social and cultural routines. Action and meaning in discourse are penetrated by

social and cultural routines acquired and developed by the individual as he interacts with his environment and the world around him. The way we say things, the linguistic choices we make in order to convey meaning and intention are shaped by the social and cultural routines which we are accustomed to.

The following examples will serve to illustrate the role of shared knowledge and the social and cultural dimensions involved in ordinary conversation.

### **Example 1**

( Setting: An interaction between two colleagues)

A: I've not seen you a couple of days.

B: Yeah. Had to go back to Ipoh for my mother-in-law's funeral. Old age. She was 80.

A: Sorry to hear that. My wife's mother died at 98 recently. **Just didn't make it.**

B: **O, What a pity.** Anything interesting happened in my absence? ~

That there exists a kind of shared understanding between the interactants is obvious when A utters "Just didn't make it" and when B responds with



“What a pity.” Both understand the aspiration of longevity among humans and that living to a hundred is a rare achievement.

### **Example 2**

(Setting: An exchange between two college students)

A: So, are you staying with your parents?

B: **Well, yes, I'm staying with my mother.**

A: **I see.** I'm staying out.

Conversation often goes this way. Sometimes like A, we do not pursue a topic not because we are not interested in getting at the details. Very often, we know that a response like the one given by B appeals to our knowledge of how the world goes. Perhaps B's father has passed on. Perhaps her parents are separated. Other aspects of shared knowledge such as social and cultural considerations do often influence our decision whether to continue with the topic or to change focus. Hence, we see in this example that A chooses to leave the possibilities as they are, even though there is no absolute resolution of the implicature.

### **Example 3**

(Setting: Teacher (A) arrives in class to find only one student, B, present.)

A: Where is everyone?

B: It was raining.

A: Let's wait and see if they show up.

**B: It's already 8.30, Puan Sharon.**

From the outset, the reply by B seems incongruent to what was asked. Yet the reply is well-understood by the teacher because of the retrospective element of previous experience kindled in her mind : when it rains early in the morning, students have difficulty coming on time for class. B's response to the teacher's decision to wait and see is a hint to the teacher to call off the class. However, the unoffending manner in which the student says it is an indication of the social and cultural dimensions which have penetrated the interactant's psyche.

## **2.4 Summary**

While the phenomenon of Conversational Implicature remains the mainstay of this research, there is no running away from the considerations of communicative competence which involves both linguistic and pragmatic knowledge. Littlejohn captures the essence of what Grice meant when he summarizes conversational implicature as follows:

Conversational implicature allows communicators to use all kinds of strategically interesting, indirect statements to achieve their purposes, without risking the judgment of incompetence; in fact, competence itself requires the effective use of implicature.

(Littlejohn 1992:92)

When linguistic applications to an utterance fails to extricate its meaning, the listener needs to analyze it with recourse to the pragmatic entities discussed in 2.3. These entities of human communication are interrelated in terms of intrinsic, conceptual interdependencies, as is to be expected when individuals interact in social and cultural contexts. Because of their interrelatedness, these perspectives have been put together as a loose analytic framework of human communication for the purposes of this research, bearing in mind that it is not possible to establish a comprehensive framework of discourse analysis, given the diverse orientations of linguists and language philosophers. The data obtained from this research will therefore be analysed with the various aspects of human communication discussed in the earlier parts of this chapter (see 2.3) in mind. These essentially constitute the pragmatic dimension of meaning-making in human communication and they are perspectives mainly applied to adult language studies. The connection between them and the data used in this study (child discourse) is a pertinent one, especially when, as has been suggested in the literature review of this chapter, the premise of a comprehensive theory of communication, if it should arise, should be one which can be applied to all human communication, including child discourse. This study may be said to be an attempt to test such a premise. This premise is anchored on what Littlejohn (*ibid*) says about conversational implicature and communicative

ompetence and what Bloom (2000:12) suggests about children's linguistic competence:

By the time children are about age four, they have mastered just about all the phonology, syntax and morphology they are ever going to know, at least for their first language.

He adds that although we know little about their conceptual and perceptual capabilities, existing developmental studies on children's language have shown that these capabilities do exist. Thus with linguistic competence, and some conceptual and perceptual capabilities in place, there is every likelihood that children's language use would reflect the ways language is used in the adult world.