

## **Conversational implicatures of Whatsapp stickers in chats of Unizik students**

**Charles Chukaokeke & Greg Obiamalu**

Department of Linguistics

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Anambra State, Nigeria

[charlescharjoe@gmail.com](mailto:charlescharjoe@gmail.com)/[gregobiamalu@gmail.com](mailto:gregobiamalu@gmail.com)

### ***Abstract***

*This is a study of implicatures of whatsapp stickers. Stickers just as words are used to communicate ideas and exchange feelings. These stickers carry mental pictures that express different ideas, and interlocutors use them for communicative purposes as they use words. The study identifies and describes the different stickers used by the interactants in inferring implicature, and classifies the stickers according to their forms and meanings. In order to achieve this, the theory of conversational implicature as propounded by Paul Grice in 1975 is used as the framework of this research. Conversational implicatures, or simply put, implicatures; has to do with the implicit meaning of an utterance as against what is literally expressed. The data are sourced from the Whatsapp chats of random students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka (Unizik). It is discovered that there are various reasons why whatsapp users decide to use stickers in communicating their*

*thoughts. Here, it is determined that students mostly rely on stickers in communicating some thoughts to enforce meaning words alone could not express. The work therefore recommends an extension of the implicature theory to accommodate sticker analysis.*

## **Introduction**

Flashback to the '90s and earlier when handwritten letters were the basic forms of communication, a single sheet of paper carried a lot of feelings, emotions and attachment. Fast forward to today, everyone is connected and conversing on WhatsApp or other social network platforms like Facebook, Instagram, WeChat and the rest. This has in a great way aided communication.

Being able to communicate and connect with others is an important aspect of human lives and this has been made easier with the digital messaging application such as WhatsApp. Although digital conversations are governed by the text, non verbal conversational cues such as emoji and stickers help to express emotional feelings and determine the sender's meaning to improve the efficiency of the conversation (Tigwell and Flatla, 2016).

A sticker is a detailed illustration of a character that represents an emotion or action that is a mix of cartoons and Japanese smiley-like 'emojis' (Jennifer, 2013). They have more variety than the emoticons and have a basis from internet 'reaction face' culture due to their ability to

portray body language with not just a facial reaction, but other body parts, sometimes accompanied with a write-up.

Whatsapp seems to be the biggest domain for accommodating such stickers, and applications have been designed to allow one create the kind of stickers one wishes to. Although stickers had always been in use on Facebook since 2013, it was just in 2018 that it was introduced to Whatsapp and the following year 2019, it became so popular especially in Nigeria that many would rather use them than text. This could be as a result of the expressive nature of such stickers, the humorous aspect, among other reasons. Although stickers extend the ways in which social media users can express their affective state, they may also lead to various interpretations; thus the focus of the study: ‘The conversational implicatures of Whatsapp stickers’.

Conversational implicatures, or ‘implicatures’ as coined by a British philosopher of language Paul Grice, is a term used to account for what the speaker implied, suggested or meant, as opposed to the semantic meaning of such expressions (Yule, 146). In a Whatsapp chat for instance, “I am with you there” can mean “I am online”. It can be difficult for users to convey their emotions due to the absence of non-linguistic cues such as facial expression and body language when interacting via digital messenger application (Walther and D’Addario, 2001). However, though this issue was resolved with the

emergence of emoticons which evolved into emojis; a more lasting solution was made with the emergence of stickers.

Going down memory lane, it is worthy of note that pictures have been used in communication as was then in the ancient Sumerian, Egyptian and Chinese regions. This was called ‘pictography’ which is a form of writing which uses representational, pictorial drawings and hieroglyphic writings as phonetic letters, written symbols were based on pictographs (pictures which resemble what they signify) and ideograms (symbols which represent ideas).

This study will be more like a retrospective analysis of such pictographs which are still in use as the main medium of written communication in some non-literate cultures in Africa, the Americas, and Oceania. In this case however, our study is on stickers which is a more detailed representation of such ideas; some of which may have only pictures, others only characters, while some others a combination of both pictures and characters. Notwithstanding, such stickers when used on Whatsapp chats may imply one meaning or the other.

These stickers communicate ideas just as words do, because they carry mental pictures that express different ideas. Therefore, when such stickers are used on WhatsApp chats, it could be qualified as a use of language in communication. This is so because WhatsApp chats involve interlocutors who are the

participants in an exchange of feelings. It may be of interest to note that conversations have taken different dimensions. It takes place on different platforms and such platforms determine the nature of the conversation. It is on this note that this study will be based to determine how such stickers are used in instances of communication to achieve conversational implicatures.

This study seeks to account for the conversational implicatures of Whatsapp stickers in Whatsapp chats of Nnamdi Azikiwe University (Unizik) students. More particularly, it will,

1. Describe conversational instances in which the stickers are used;
2. Determine implicatures connected with each of the instances;
3. Figure out the motivations behind the use of the Whatsapp stickers in chats; and
4. Classify stickers according to their forms and implicatures they mark.

Interpretation is at the core of communication and adequate interaction. Owing to the complexities embodied in interpreting utterances, systematic processes are introduced to account for adequate interpretation. Stickers embody complex dimensions that require systematic procedure for interpretation. This study contributes to the delineation of existing stickers

and their interpretation according to instances of communication in which they have been applied.

The implicit meaning is 'folded-in' meaning. In other words, it requires being unfolded and the process of unfolding is not clear. This is the impetus for Grice's theory of implicature. This study will contribute to this theory by providing evidence for its adequacy and identifying any issues that support any requirements for its modification. More critically, Grice's theory of implicature is not articulated for analysis of pictorial symbols of communication. Thus, applying it to stickers is a novel case and will create a dimension for the enhancement of the theory.

In addition, this work will help the reader know the nature of conversation on Whatsapp and the different strategies Whatsapp users employ to express their thoughts. Also, it will provide the reader with basic knowledge about the principles of implicature as it can be applied to Whatsapp stickers; thus, making him or her better understand, enjoy and appreciate the use of stickers.

Overall, this study contributes to more material in pragmatic approaches to the interpretation of communicative instances.

### **Conceptual overview**

Language is a means which human beings have devised for communicating ideas, feelings, emotions, desires, etc. through complex vocal or written symbols (Anagbogu,

Mbah and Eme, 2010). Anagbogu *et al.* (2010) further state that by communication we mean all kinds of 'verbal' interaction among human beings such as exchange of ideas, feelings, information, etc. whether by speaking or by writing. Sometimes man deliberately attempts to conceal his ideas or thoughts by giving wrong information to an individual. Thus, language's function in this context is the communication of ideas – but these ideas are false; they are ideas meant to conceal ideas. In other words, while it is true to say we communicate when we speak, it is equally true to say that we can conceal ideas in the process of communicating. Be that as it may, whether we conceal or express ideas, the communicative function of language is basic. More so, the ideas when communicated are understood within the context of the language use which is the domain of pragmatics.

According to Akmajian *et al* (2001), pragmatics covers 'the study of language use and in particular the study of linguistic communication, in relation to language structure and context of utterance.' In the words of Yule (1996), pragmatics "is the study of 'invisible meaning', or how to recognize what is meant even when it is not actually said (or written)". This means that there are other aspects of meaning which are not derived solely from the meanings of the words used in phrases and sentences, but also from what the writer or speaker of those words intended to convey. For this to

happen, speakers and writers must be able to depend on a lot of shared assumptions and expectations.

Context is important in figuring out ambiguities in spoken or written language. To Mey (2002), it is about understanding what things are for; what gives our utterances their true pragmatic meaning. No conversational contribution at all can be understood properly unless it is situated within the environment in which it was meant to be understood.

This study adopts the Gricean Theory of Conversational Implicature. The term ‘implicature’ is coined by H.P Grice to act for what a speaker implies, suggests or means; as opposed to the semantic meaning of the words in an utterance. In less than a decade after its first publication in 1975, Grice’s paper ‘*Logic and conversation*’ becomes one of the classic treatises of the linguistic sub-discipline now referred to as pragmatics. There are at least two reasons for the paper’s success: first, it can be regarded as the first truly serious attempt to clarify the intuitive difference between what is expressed literally in a sentence and what is merely suggested by an utterance of the same string of words. And second, the components of the notional and inferential framework that Grice set up to characterize various kinds of utterance content are intuitively appealing (Haberland and Mey 2002).

Grice (1967) distinguishes between the ‘natural’ and ‘non-natural’ meanings of utterances in order to solve



the problem of how we understand speakers to mean things that they do not actually say. In the sentence:

(1) Manchester United won.

The natural meaning is that Manchester United scored at least one goal more than the team they were playing against. This is called the 'entailment' i.e. a meaning present on every occasion when an expression occurs. Unlike this, the non-natural meanings are variable so that on different occasions, the sentence could convey the meaning that Manchester United only played well. Because non-natural meaning is only associated with the sentence from which it is inferred on particular occasions, it is not part of the entailment. Mey (2002) explains this,

(2) A. Is that Bacchus over there?

B. Help yourself.

A's utterance is literally a request for information (on the nature of the wine), yet B interprets it as a request for a drink. Nothing in literal meaning of A's utterance could lead B to that interpretation, which can only be derived by means of conversational Implicature.

Implicature can be either conventional or conversational; our guide however is the conversational implicature. Conversational implicature is triggered by 'certain general features of discourse' rather than by the

conventional meaning of a specific word (Grice 1975-1989a: 26). These features are the following:

- i. Linguistic exchanges which are governed by the *cooperative principle*, the content of which is detailed in the four *maxims of conversation* and their sub maxims.
- ii. When one of the participants of the exchange seems not to follow the Cooperative Principle, his or her partner(s) will nevertheless assume that, contrary to appearances, the principle is observed at some deeper level.

These maxims are quality, quantity, relation and manner which have already been exhaustively discussed.

### **Methodology**

This study is purely qualitative. It is based on the Whatsapp chats of random Unizik Students. The research identifies stickers used in Whatsapp chats and interprets them according to how they are used by Whatsappers. This is done employing the theory of conversational implicature. The period covered by this study is chats within July 2019 and March 2021. These chats are chosen based on how much the interactants employ Whatsapp stickers in their chats. 3 different chats are selected randomly with 9 of them assessed to be of

relevance for the purpose of identifying and interpreting the underlying implicatures.

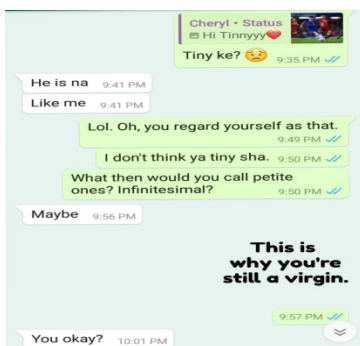
The selected stickers are presented, (C1 to C6) with C formalized from conversation. In other words, each of C1 to C6 is a conversational instance. The participants in each conversation are identified as S (sender) and R (receiver).

## Data presentation and analysis

### Implicatures marked by the selected stickers

C1 and C2 below are chats between a girl (S) and a boy (R) who reacts to the girl's description of herself in her status. The conversation centers on the body size of the footballer Billy Gilmour (a 19-Year-Old Chelsea player as at 2020). The word-text in the chats is the carrier of the implicatures marked by the stickers.

C1



C2



The implicatures marked in C1 are:

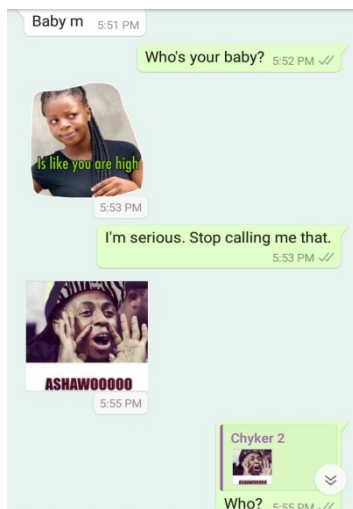
- i. Disappointment: R is disappointed that S is comparing herself to Billy because to him she is not as tiny looking.
- ii. Assertion: R might have the privileged information on the virginity status of S and decided to use that fact on her, probably in a bid to sound sarcastic.
- iii. Conversation trigger: as eventually clarified by R, he wants to provoke S to starting a conversation. It could be he is bored at that moment or desirous to have a conversation with her.

In C2, the following implicatures are the case:

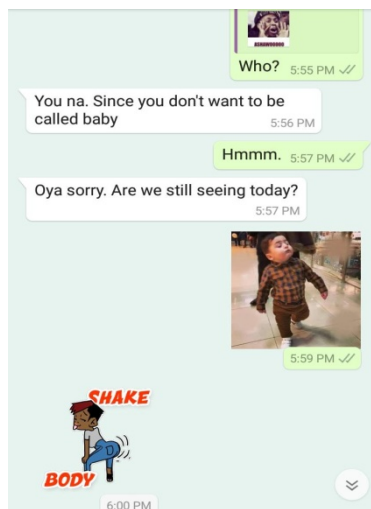
- i. Disillusion: R's effort to have a conversation with S falls through as she is already going to bed.
- ii. Guilt: R is feeling guilty that the previous sticker he used provoked anger in S.
- iii. Sadness: R is sad that S do not want to have a conversation even after making it obvious to her that he wants one.

C3 and C4 below are chats about a meeting S (male) and R (female) scheduled to have later on a day.

## C3



## C4



C3 has:

- i. Warning: after S is asked who his baby is, he uses the sticker to issue a warning to R who is feigning ignorance of who is chatting. The carrier of this implicature is the countenance given by the sticker image.
- ii. Inquisition: S is inquisitive on knowing if R is okay or if he has wronged her, probably she does not like being called that by him or strangers. This is expressed by the characters in that sticker.

The second sticker in C3 marks the implicatures:

- iii. Assertion: S uses the sticker to mean R is an 'ashawo' i.e. prostitute, and may have other men she

has been going out with. The carrier of this implicature is the characters in the sticker.

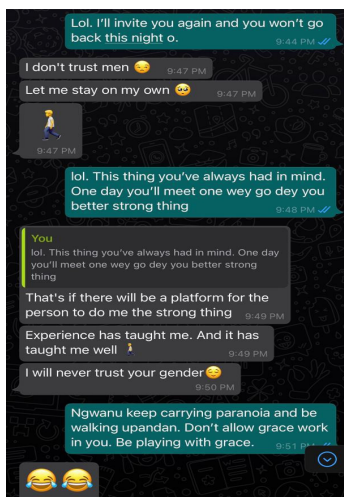
- iv. Humour: He notices R is not in the mood, so he tries to lighten the environment with the same sticker but with a different word-text.

The twerking image in the sticker used by R in C4 expresses the following Implicatures:

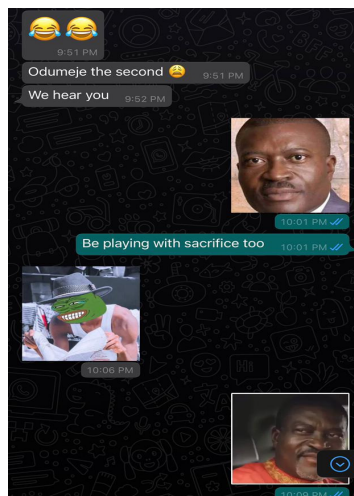
- i. Disapproval: she uses the sticker to suggest that she is not interested in the meeting they are supposed to have that day. The carrier of the implicature here is the little boy majestically walking away.
- ii. Going off: She uses the sticker to show she is going offline as that is her last chat about that subject. The 'walking away' gesture by the boy is the carrier of this implicature.
- iii. Disinterestedness: she uses that to suggest she is no longer interested in the topic. The carrier of this implicature is seen from the countenance of the boy.
- iv. Indifference: S seems unbothered about the sticker reply he gets from R. This is expressed on the sticker through the cartoon twerking image.
- v. Humour: S may have used that to further lighten the atmosphere of the chat. The characters on the sticker alongside the gesture from the cartoon suggest so.

The chats below are between a boy (R) and girl (S). The subject is about distrust which S has for men.

C5



C6



- The implicatures marked in these conversations are:
- i. Warning: the sticker image of a popular Nollywood actor known for his ritual roles in movies. Kanayo O. Kanayo is used by R to warn S against the level of distrust she has for men. According to R, one day she would meet a man who would tie her down with love that may change her narrative about the male gender.
  - ii. Disinterestedness: S uses the sticker cartoon of a man reading a newspaper to infer her nonchalance to whatever the boy is saying about men and love. More like she has made up her mind from her past experience that men can never be trusted.
  - iii. Threat: the image of a menacing laughter by same Nollywood actor is used by R to further stress that the

girl does not know what awaits her in the future especially when she gets entangled in love to a gender she vows never to trust.

From all indications, Whatsapp stickers serve to substitute the communicative import of gestures and gesticulations in communicative instances engaging Whatsapp platform. Of course, writing ‘I’ll deal with you’ does not convey the accompanying emotions that a gesture conveys. This is the gap stickers fill, providing concrete images which word texts could fail to adequately capture. The implicatures identified here are enforced more concretely by the stickers with or without any accompanying word texts.

### **Motivations for the use of Whatsapp stickers**

- To achieve detailed expression of an idea, situation, emotion, purpose, intention, etc; the detail is powered by a concrete representation of an image which distinguishes a mental image which word texts drive.
- To promote another innovative way of communication; we point out here that this motivation is responsible for redundant or boring use of particular stickers or misapplication of stickers. That is, the use of stickers in contexts in which they hardly apply.
- To neutralize formality: use of stickers has a way of breaking communicative strains which



characterize formal contexts. Whatsappers are therefore easily given to engaging them in all contexts of communication.

- To euphemize serious events such as armed robbery, death, violent demonstration, disagreement etc.
- To attract attention; most stickers are designed to attract the attention of the addressee(s) and most users of stickers understand this and apply them to achieve this goal.
- To cover or avert errors that could possibly occur in writing in a language; this motivation characterizes 2<sup>nd</sup> language speakers who are deficient in the language.

Evidently, the stickers presented in this paper justify in one way or the other the motivations stated here.

### **Classification of the Stickers**

The stickers used in this study represent the different types of stickers that are available to Whatsappers. We hereby classify them as follows:

- (a) *Pictographic stickers*: stickers with only pictures-text;
- (b) *Orthographic stickers*: stickers with word-text only; and
- (c) *Pictographic/orthographic stickers*: stickers with combination of picture and word text.

Notice that the stickers in C1, C2 and C6 are pictographic. The stickers in C3 and one in C4 are pictographic/orthographic stickers. Evidently, no orthographic only sticker is exemplified here. And, we note that any of the sticker types could be animated. In other words, we could have animated or unanimated pictographic stickers; animated/unanimated orthographic stickers and animated or unanimated pictographic/orthographic stickers.

### **Conclusion**

This study identifies that Unizik students use stickers in their Whatsapp conversations with the motive of being more concretely expressive. And, we believe that this applies to many if not most users of stickers on Whatsapp and other platforms on which they could apply. As has been demonstrated, the stickers express different domains of meanings and could capture diverse thoughts in dimensions word-texts could hardly apply. More particularly, the stickers take the place of gestures and gesticulations which apply to physical contact interactions. This is a major reason why the stickers have become a more popular multimodal text used in the social media especially, Whatsapp.

The stickers presented in this study cover conversational implicatures such as disappointment, disillusion, anger, sadness, guilt, mischief, indifference, disinterestedness, inquisition, confusion, surprise, fear,

threat, warning, humour and amusement. The possibility of identifying these with stickers is a pointer that conversational implicature theory could apply to any type of conversational text, oral or written; monomodal or multimodal.

This study recommends a more diversified application of conversational implicature in a purposeful drive to expand the frontiers of multimodal communication. Moreover, with evident utility of stickers in conversations as this study has demonstrated, there is the need of compiling a glossary of stickers with specified meaning entries to ensure consistency of application and resolve the cases of abuse and redundancy.

## References

- Akmajian, A., A. D. Richard, A. K. Farmers and R. M. Harnish. 2001. *Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. New Delhi: Prentice Hall of India Private Ltd.
- Anagbogu, P. N., B. M. Mbah and C. A. Eme. 2010. *Introduction to Linguistics*. Awka: J.F.C. Limited.
- Grice, H.P. 1967. Utterer's meaning, sentence meaning and word meaning. *Foundations of Language* 4.225-242.

Grice, H. P. 1975. *Logic and Conversation*. In Cole, P. and J. Morgan (eds.), *Syntax and Semantics* 41-58. New York: Academic Press.

Haberland, H. and J. L. Mey. 2002. Editorial: Linguistics and pragmatics, 25 years after. *Journal of Pragmatics* 34.1671-1682.

Mey, J. L. 2002. *Pragmatics: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.

*Charles ChukaOkeke is a postgraduate student of the Department of Linguistics, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka*

*Greg Obiamalu is a professor of Linguistics in the Department of Linguistics, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka*