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Examining Ambiguities in Film Titles: The Nigerian Situation

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Abstract

The paper investigated ambiguous film titles with specific reference to films in Nigeria. It observed that film titles which are meant to serve as initial appraisal and forerunners of films that light up the interest of the consumers and promote patronage are usually scripted in mind-boggling ambiguous expressions, which make them prone to multiple interpretations. Using the pragma-syntactic theoretical framework, a total of ten ambiguous film titles randomly selected across the length and breadth of Nigeria were analysed. The analysis showed the possible interpretations of each of the selected titles, their related syntactic structures and the usefulness of pragmatics in interpreting film titles. The paper finally recommended that pragmatic features and discourse primes such as inference, implicature, linguistic context among others should always be taken into account before any film title is interpreted.

Key Words: Pragmatics, syntax, ambiguity, inference, implicature, illocutionary and context

Introduction

Film is one of the discourse genres which epitomizes the society, provides a template for relaxation, tells the people what has happened, what is about to happen; what is

happening, directs the psych of the people, awakens their spirit, mirrors their future and links them with the global world. The cardinal functions of films or any dramatic make-belief art are education, information and entertainment. The educational component of films provides a template of lessons, instruction and guide. The entertainment component provides the medium for relaxation, recreation, recollection and relish.

These features of films are coated first of all in their titles. Titles of films present to the audience messages contained in the films or texts. Titles are the first lines of texts usually graphed on top of the scripts which do not only serve as the initial introductions of such texts but also serve as a sort of transparent rehearsals of their contents. Titles are the initial appraisal of films, forerunners, fore bearers, which light up the interest of the consumers and promote patronage. Film titles are unspoken semantic adverts used by producers to arrest the interest of the unsuspecting consumers, who will not be satisfied until the whole bone and flesh of the films have been tasted. The semantic importance of film titles, especially those of Nigerian films, cannot be over-emphasized. Most Nigerian film titles as this paper showcased are usually lexically and structurally ambiguous, hence can hardly be interpreted on the surface-value.

Quite often, film consumers are lost because of the titles. This confusion stems from the fact that films titles which are usually mind-boggling ambiguous expressions (either caused by a word or a phrase) do not have predictable or precise interpretations.

The syntactic analysis or description of film titles alone cannot be a way out of the semantic or communicative logjam. Syntactic description only reveals the underlying rules guiding the linear arrangement of words or phrases in the titles; information about the meaning of the titles is germane since it is what is basically consumed by the audience. This communicative torchlight is practically provided by pragmatics - the study of meaning in context

The marriage of syntax and pragmatics in this paper is an attempt to perform dual purposes - a guide to the film producers; and a guide to the consumers. It will help the producers to consider their would-be-audience, the context and content of the film before graphing the title even though they have suspense at the back of their minds. To the audience, the paper will bring to their knowledge the fact that all that glitters is not gold – that certain expressions are better described as smokescreens.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework: Pragma-syntactic Theory

The theoretical framework adopted in this paper is the pragma-syntactic theory. This theory is a combination of the assumptions and principles of pragmatics and syntax. For explicitness, we describe succinctly the linguistic pre-occupation of both concepts. We begin with pragmatics.

Pragmatics

Pragmatics is a subfield of linguistics developed in the 1960s. The word, pragmatics is of the Greek origin, *pragmatikus*, which means fits for action or deed, (Nwala, 2015). In the words of Ogbulogo (2005, p. 44) ‘pragmatics is a branch of linguistics which analyses language from the viewer’s viewpoint’. From Ogbulogo’s standpoint, pragmatic meaning is personal and open since in a discourse or talk-event, there are usually many participants who also would have different viewpoints even in a given subject matter.

The encyclopedia Americana (1984, p. 54) described pragmatics from the perspective of Morris (1938). According to it, pragmatics is an aspect of semiotics which tries to explain the relationship between sign and their users. Morris observed that pragmatics as a science, relates signs to their interpretations by users; it is a sufficiently accurate characterization of pragmatics to say that it deals with the biotic aspect of semantics, with all psychological, biological and sociological phenomena involve in the functioning of signs.

Kempson (1977, p. 55) described ‘pragmatics as the study of the general cognitive principles involved in the retrieval of information from an utterance’. The opinion of Kempson alludes to our position that in pragmatics, meaning is open. This is because of his use of the phrase, ‘cognitive principles’. Secondly Kempson’s position points to the fact that pragmatics deals with performative aspect of language. It deals with these illocutionary and perlocutionary impacts which a language excites on both a speaker and a listener. Leech and Short (1987) succinctly observed that pragmatics defines where and how a piece of language is used; it shows the context of usage and the roles people play in such situations. Leech and Short (1987, p. 290) further noted:

The pragmatic analysis of language can be broadly understood to be the investigation into that aspect of meaning which is derived from the formal properties of words and constructions but from the way in which utterance are used and how they relate to the context in which they are uttered.

The ability to understand and produce a communicative act in line with content is called the pragmatic competence (Nwala, 2015), which often includes one’s knowledge about the social distance, social status between interlocutors, the cultural background, such as politeness, among others. The linguistic or grammatical competence which deals with the innate knowledge about the structure and rules of a language is theoretical, and usually, not the concern of pragmatics. Pragmatics focuses the context, the subject matter, the people involved in the discourse, their relationship, social status, shared knowledge to mention just a few – all these affect the use of language, the choice of words and the possible decodable meanings or interpretations.

The pragmatic analysis of any speech or text empowers the analyst to 'dig deep' so as to unearth even the unsaid said, and reasons for such. Pragmatic is at the centre of appropriate interpretation of sentences since its torchlight goes even beyond the moment of reference; and since there are differences between literal meanings and implied meanings. Pragmatics studies the factors that guide users' choice or code in social interactions; it looks at the effect which speakers' preferences have on their listeners. Ndimele (1999, pp. 128-129) alluded to the above thus:

In theory, we can say anything we like, but in practice, we are constrained by certain unwritten rules to be mindful of the social context we find ourselves in before we can say anything. In fact, there are norms of formality and politeness that speakers of a language must have assimilated in the course of learning their language. These norms are always followed when they are talking to other people who are older, superior in statuses of the opposites etc.

The mastery of the pragmatics principles and practice is crucial and key to situational and textual interpretations, because it arms one with both the linguistic and communicative potentials and flexibility to look deeply beyond surface level of meanings to discover even both the cause and effect of utterances. To the foregoing assertion or importance of pragmatics, Osisanwo (2005, p.1) observed that it is the responsibility of the apostle of pragmatics to identify the situation or context of an utterance before concluding on what the language user used it for and the meaning of the utterance. This factor rightly suggests that the setting where conversations take place play vital roles in decoding meanings; secondly what precedes or comes after a given sentence can also guide a listener or the analyst on the meaning of an utterance. This fact is a truism when we observe that fact that in our present research, the message of the text is not copious, it is rather implied.

Pragmatics is related to speech act. In speech act, as it is in pragmatics, we use language to perform various acts, roles and functions, apart from being necessarily informative. Our choice of pragmatics as the theoretical framework of our research is apt, especially when we consider the fact that our analysis goes beyond the ordinary usage of language or conventional meanings. The theory also allows us to investigate or look deeper in order to account for the reasons behind the language of the text.

From the foregoing, it is clear that the different scholars we have reviewed allude to the fact that what are topical in pragmatics are the context, and other sociolinguistic and psychological reasons behind a language users' choice of words. So a film producer chooses his title to reflect the context, the audience and the targeted message. And that to interpret any film title, adequate attention must be paid to both the implicit and explicit (syntactic) linguistic components that guide the graphing of the film.

Syntax

Syntax is the part of a grammar of a language which bothers on the combination of words to form phrases, clauses and sentences. To do this, syntax specifies the grammatical rules which guide the orderliness and environmental compatibility.

Syntax is of a Greek descent. According to Nwala (2004), syntax is the arrangement of things. In linguistics, syntax is the third level of analysis which defines how morphemes and words are combined (p. 9). In a related manner, Yusuf (1997) affirmed that 'syntax is the aspect of grammar of language which deals with how words are put together to form sentences and how such sentences are interpreted in natural language (p.1). According to him, syntax uses building blocks, words, which are put together in a rule-governed way.

In the words of Akmajian et al (2001, p.19) syntax is 'the subfield of linguistics that studies the internal structure of sentences and the relationships among the internal parts' Using the sentences:

1. The boy is handsome, and
2. Handsome is boy the

Akmajian et al noted that sentence 1 is grammatical while sentence 2 is not. This is because in sentence 1, the words were combined in lines with the laid rules of the English language; but sentence 2 is ungrammatical because the words were randomly arranged in an unacceptable order.

The fore-going review is hinged on the functional role of syntax – the specification of the rules that guide the arrangement of words in sentences or the study of the internal structure of words in sentences in natural languages. This means that for any construction to be syntactically acceptable, the words in the construction must be linearly organized in a well-defined or stipulated order; where this is not followed, such construction is bound to be ungrammatical and semantically deviant.

Conceptual Review

Scholars as the literature shows have in different cases looked at the terms, ambiguity, film, pragmatics and syntax. To refresh the thrust of these concepts especially within the confines of this paper, we concisely review them.

Ambiguity

Ambiguity, in semantics study, exists when a word or a sentence has more than one possible meaning, hence could be understood or interpreted in more than one way. Nwala, for instance, noted that 'a word, phrase or a sentence is ambiguous if it has more than one meaning' (2015, p. 214). Fromkin and Rodman (1978) were of the same view

by noting that ‘a word or a sentence is ambiguous if it can be understood or interpreted in more than one way. To support this position, they give the sentence:

3. Nancy cannot bear children

Which can be interpreted as:

- 3b. Nancy cannot tolerate children.
- 3c. Nancy cannot have or give birth to children.

The problem with sentence 3 is on the word **bear**. The word is polysemic, except it is appropriately used in a well-defined context, its usage is bound to be problematic.

McGregor (2012) in the same vein stated that ‘ambiguity occurs in a language when a single stretch of speech or writing sometimes has two or more distinct meaning’. He, like Fromkin and Rodman supported his position with the sentence:

4. The policeman shot the man with a rifle.

Unlike Fromkin and Rodman whose example was hinged on a single word, *bear*, here, the problem is on the phrase – **the man with a rifle**. The problem with the phrase is, if the policeman shot the man with (his own rifle) or that the man the policeman shot was carrying a rifle (or has a rifle on him). The two possible meanings of the sentence as the foregoing explanations showcases are:

- 4b. The policeman with a rifle shot the man.
- 4c. The man with a rifle was shot by the policeman.

The review which is in tandem with the literature has shown that ambiguity is of two kinds: *lexical and structural*. Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams (2011) supported the existence of lexical and structural ambiguity. According to them, lexical ambiguity arises when at least one word in a phrase has more than one meaning. For structural ambiguity, they give their explanation based on syntactic level, which means the possible multiple interpretation of a construction may be caused by more than a word, phrase or a clause. In supporting the foregoing, Trask (1997) gave the following sentential examples:

5. This is a lovely *port*.
6. John likes movies more than Alice.

Sentence 5 which is an example of lexical ambiguity because of the word *port* has the following possible meanings:

- 5b. City or town with a harbor for ships
- 5c. A dark red sweet wine

5d. The left side of a port

Similarly, sentence 6 which is an example of structural ambiguity has the following possible meanings:

6b. John likes movies more than Alice (likes movies).

6c. John likes movies more he likes Alice

The possible ways of interpreting ambiguous constructions as shown thus far are similar to what is obtainable in most Nigerian film titles. We shall show this in the course of this paper.

Film

Film is a type of information dissemination. It is a type of visual communication, which uses motion picture, sound signs and symbols to inform, educate, and entertain. Films are social and cultural artifacts created to expose the environment, give specific pieces of information, construct reflexes, character and manipulate the consciousness of the audience.

Film or movie (as also called) is a typical example of popular culture. It is a credible source of entertainment; a powerful medium of education and indoctrination. Films are of different types – some are epic, thriller; comedy, yet some are described as adventures. No matter the type, films are broadly categorized into two types: fiction and non-fiction. Fictional films are make-belief type. They camouflage issues of life. The non-fictional films describe real life occurrences and events.

Film or movies started in Nigeria in the 1960s, but what could be termed the birth of film production in Nigeria is always associated to the: *Living in bondage* produced by Nek Video in 1992. Nollywood as it is now called exploded into a booming industry in the late 1990s through 2000. It is the biggest film industry in Africa; it is even placed ahead of the American Hollywood, but second to the Indian Bollywood in terms of annual production (Agoha, 2015). The Nigerian films epitomize the socio-cultural milieu of the Nigerian people, bringing to focus the real Nigerian tradition, the influence of the missionaries, western education and globalization.

The content of the Nigerian films like those of films in general, are announced by the titles. Film titles as we have paraphrased are forebearers or forerunners of the contents of the films. They help to identify and introduce the content of the films to the consumers. But in many cases, as we are set to observe in this paper, the titles of films leave the consumers in confused states because of their possible semantic polarization. The Nigerian film producers use catchy and punchy words to arouse and light up the interest of the consumers, who would not rest until they have watched the films.

Research Methodology

To get our research data, a purposive random sampling technique was used. On the whole, a total of ten (10) film titles in the ratio of five (5) each for the two types of ambiguity (lexical and structural) were selected. The data were analyzed using the descriptive method. With it, we were able to describe the film titles, identifying their various possible meanings.

Analysis

Here, we present and analyse the ten film titles used in this paper. They include:

- a. Finding **Grace**
- b. Finding **Mercy**
- c. Missing **Angel**
- d. The **Meeting**
- e. Holding **Hope**
- f. Seat of Wisdom
- g. Save the last dance
- h. The last one I love
- i. Last flight to Abuja
- j. I'll take my chance

The titles of the films are all ambiguous. Each of them can be interpreted in many ways. Examples a-e are lexically ambiguous titles, the words *Grace*, *Mercy*, *Angel*, *meeting* and *Hope* are polysemous, hence do not have any common or specific meaning. The possible meanings of the titles are:

a. Finding Grace

- i. Looking for or searching for a person who goes by name, Grace
- ii. Trying to move in an attractive way that is smooth, elegant and balanced
- iii. Soliciting for an extra time to finish a task
- iv. Waiting to receive God's favour
- v. Praying for divine intervention to overcome sin
- vi. Wanting to be honoured or promoted

b. Finding Mercy

- i. Looking for a girl who goes by name, Mercy
- ii. Pleading for forgiveness
- iii. Relying on someone to be kind to you
- iv. Looking for a good virtue
- v. Asking for blessing

c. Missing Angel

- i. Feeling the absence of a girl called, Angel
- ii. Unable to locate Angel
- iii. An Angel that missed her way
- iv. A person that got lost

d. Holding Hope

- i. Sticking to a person or that is a source of hope
- ii. Believing that something wished for will come to pass or happen
- iii. Grasping a person named Hope by the hand
- iv. To have a virtuous desire for future good
- v. Believing in someone called Hope
- vi. Believing strongly that someone called Hope is responsible for an act

e. The Meeting

- i. A contact with a person
- ii. An accidental encounter between people
- iii. The gathering of people
- iv. A place of intersection
- v. The act of meeting somebody

The semantic multiple nature of the lexical items in the film titles or headings as shown by the many conceivable possible meanings means that the consumers, that is, the audience will hardly at the first glance decipher the exact meanings of the films. This defeats the linguistic and even discourse function of titles, which are expected to provide to the readers the first semantic content of a piece or script.

Syntactically, title a-d has the same structure. The titles are gerundive noun phrases (NP), which could be possibly termed the subjects of sentences:

7. Finding Grace is not easy
8. Finding Mercy is a difficult task
9. Missing Angel is the talk of the day
10. Holding Hope is the only way out.

The titles can also be considered as the predicate components (VP) of sentences, where the verbs, *finding*, *missing* and *holding* can be said to be infinitives or can be said to be used in aspectual references with the Be-verb, is accompanying or supporting them:

- ... is finding Grace,
- ... is finding Mercy,

...is missing Angel,

...is holding Hope,

The verb *missing* can also modify the head noun, *Angel* in which case, it can be said to be an adjective:

11. The missing Angel is yet to be found

The title, *the meeting* is a simple noun phrase (NP), headed by the noun *meeting*. The determiner, *the* can also be described as an adjective, in which case, it gives the head noun, *meeting* a specific identification. Even though the determiner modifies the noun, *meeting*, it does not spatially locate the particular meeting. The question that will fess the mind of the audience is, which meeting? This again points to the fact that the title is ambiguous.

The other film titles:

- f. Seat of Wisdom
- g. Save the last dance
- h. The last one I love
- i. My last flight to Abuja
- j. I'll take my chance

are structurally ambiguous. The possible meanings of the titles are:

f. Seat of Wisdom

- i. A place where one can find wisdom
- ii. A position occupied by a wise person
- iii. A city that inhabits wise people
- iv. A chair belonging to a person called wisdom

g. Save the last dance

- i. Reserve your final strength
- ii. Keep your last strategy
- iii. Make you end to count
- iv. Leave out for a better chance

h. The last one I love

- i. The last man/woman I have love after perhaps several cases
- ii. The last person I love among them
- iii. My recent love
- v. The only person I have ever loved.

f. My last flight to Abuja

- i. My final journey to Abuja
- ii. My most recent trip to Abuja

g. I'll take my chance

- i. Using every strength to achieve one's aim
- ii. Being careful in what one is doing
- iii. Being committed to a task
- iv. Obtaining in a tricky manner.

The structural titles like their lexical counterparts are communicatively ambiguous. The multiple meanings of each indicated above give credence to this fact and also enunciate the fact that the final consumers of the films cannot interpret each of them going by their titles. The titles, *Seat of Wisdom*, *Save the last dance* are noun phrase (NP) and verbal phrase (VP), respectively. The title, *Seat of Wisdom* is semantically and spatially descriptive; while the title, *Save the last dance* is communicative instructive, informative and advisory. The last three: *The last one I love*, *My last flight to Abuja* and *I'll take my chance* are full-fledge sentences. Each has a subject and a predicate

The meanings of the lexically ambiguous titles and those of the structurally ambiguous types can be communicatively arrived at resorting to the principles of pragmatics. In pragmatic as we have already noted, meaning of words and constructions are determined from the user's view point and the context. In pragmatics, meanings of constructions are temporarily delayed until such discourse interpretative primes such as inference, presupposition, implicature, non-verbal or facial content, context and cognitive features are taken into account. Going by the pragmatic nature or ways of interpreting words and sentence, each of the meanings enunciated above can be attested to. The titles are ambiguous no doubt, but the linguistic potentials of pragmatics as this paper canvases will necessitate the suspension of any form of spontaneous interpretation of the titles pending the definition of the context and other related linguistic primes, such as the choice of word, the socio-linguistic and cultural background of the film producers and even the illocutionary actions of the participants.

Conclusion

Films or movies are simple ways of reaching the society in terms of entertainment, dissemination of information and education. They reveal the society, the people, their history and other socio-cultural, linguistic and religious milieu. The film producers study the people and the society and activities in the society before scripting their films. At times film producers mirror the society and create fictitious scenario, a make-belief artifact of the society.

This paper acknowledged the importance of film, especially its role as a sort of a template of relaxation, a temple of humour and a soul enlivening social discourse. Film titles like other discourse titles are meant to provide a first hand semantic flash of the content of the films; they are supposed to serve as sort dessert or appetizer to consumers whose taste cannot be quenched until they have savour or watched the wholes lines of the films.

This semantic and discourse function of film titles may be seemly threatened when the reverse is the case; when the titles are not clearly scripted and when multiple interpretations are the case thus making them less information, suspense infested and semantically ambiguous. In the face of this semantic ambiance, pragmatics comes in with its meaning interpretation remedies. One that holds the study of meaning from logic and truth inferences are okay; that the construction of film titles in obedience to the syntactic rules of linearity is also okay, but the pragmatics features which aid the decoding meaning beyond the surface presentation of film titles should be encouraged. This will help the audience to penetrate the minds of film producers and other socio-cultural milieu surrounding film titles in Nigeria.

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