

Pragmatics in Parenting: Language Strategies in Communicating Issues of Sexuality to Teenagers by Kenyan Parents.

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Abstract

This study sought to examine the features that characterize parents' talk when they attempt to speak matters of sexuality to their teenage children. It identified and described various features of style which were analyzed in light of theories of pragmatics such as Brown and Levinson's Politeness theory, Austin's Speech Act theory and the theory of Cooperative Principle by Grice. The study sample consisted of parents of teenage children who were interviewed to give accounts of the kind of talk that took place between them and their children on matters of sexuality. The results showed that features of indirectness abound in parents' utterances with only occasional direct utterances. The study provides some interesting linguistic insights into the pragmatic choices of language that people make in ordinary conversation to meet their communication needs when faced with sensitive topics such as those to do with sexuality.

Key words: communication, indirectness, pragmatics, sexuality

1. Introduction

The importance of language as a vehicle of socialization cannot be underestimated. When human beings communicate, they influence each other and the impact of what they say can last for a long time in their lives. Holt (1980) observes that whenever two or more people meet, the output (messages) of one individual becomes the input of the other and this exchange of output can result in behavior or attitude change. He further asserts that no one is free of the influence of others or free of the responsibility of influencing others. This observation of the power that language possesses in influencing human behaviour is important in this study which sought to establish the kind of language that parents used in communicating to their children matters of sexuality.

In many African societies, people outside the child's immediate family such as aunts, uncles or grandparents were charged with the task of speaking matters of sexuality to children as they matured (Wanjama et al, 2006). Often at a certain age, children would be dispatched to an appropriate relative and would receive the information that was deemed fit for their stage in life and many times this teaching coincided with other rituals that were rites of passage such as circumcision (ibid). For this reason, young men and women would receive teaching as individuals from relatives as well as in groups by some respected members of the community. Today, the traditional systems are no longer in place and parents find themselves in the difficult situation of trying to articulate matters of sexuality to their own children. This is quite discomfiting for many parents and most of them either avoid the topic altogether or choose to be indirect in their talk. This study sought to establish whether parents use indirectness pervasively with their children and the various forms the indirectness can take.

Speaking to children about sex and sexuality is an important step towards helping them to make responsible decisions regarding their sexual behaviour to avoid risky tendencies that could expose them to HIV and AIDS infection. Parents are the primary sex educators and the role of arming young people with facts about sexuality and reproductive health falls squarely on them. Some parents may have the wrong notion that sex education will encourage sexual activity. On the contrary, Adams (1976) says that learning about sex and getting answers to questions about sexual behaviour do not necessarily lead to preoccupation with sex. Jackson (2002) echoes this claim, saying that sex education makes existing sexual activity safer and tends to lead to a delay in sexual debut.

As adolescents become adults, they consider sexual relations, marriage and parenthood as signs of maturity (Dryfoos, 1990). They seek information and clues about sexual life from peers, books, magazines, mass media and the internet. A good deal of that information is incorrect, incomplete or misleading. Many adolescents are therefore misinformed about their own reproductive capabilities. UNESCO (1999) affirms that studies have shown that as many as two thirds of adolescent girls believe they are too young to get pregnant. An equal number of adolescents appear to get so anxious about their sexual activities that they are not able to deal with the associated issues in any practical way. A study conducted by Behavioural Surveillance Survey (BSS) in 2005 found that two thirds of Kenyan youth reported they have ever had sex with more of them being male youth than female. This background provides the basis for this study which sought to analyze the language that parents use

in articulating matters of sexuality to their adolescent children. The study was guided by the following objectives:

- i. To establish and describe the stylistic features of language used by parents in discussing issues of sexuality with their adolescent children.
- ii. To analyze the language features in light of pragmatics to explain their relevance in communication of sexuality to children by parents.

2. Literature Review

In attempting to understand how communication between parties takes place, we need to consider three levels of meaning that words, phrases or sentences possess as explained by Thomas (1995). The first level is the abstract meaning, which is concerned with what a word phrase or sentence, could mean. This is the meaning that semantics is concerned with. Leech (1983) says that meaning in semantics is defined purely as a property of expression in a given language in abstraction from particular situations, speakers and bearers.

The second level of meaning is the contextual or utterance meaning. Here we look at what speaker actually means by using a particular word on a particular occasion. At this level, we look at meaning from the speaker's point of view in which case we are already looking at meaning pragmatically. Leech (1983) says that in pragmatics, meaning is defined relative to the speaker. Thomas (1995) refers to this second level of meaning as the first component of speaker meaning. The third level of meaning, and which is also vested in the speaker is force. This refers to the speaker's communicative intentions. This is the second component of speaker meaning. In analyzing the forms of communication between parents and their children, speaker meaning is the most important element. However, this does not mean that we can completely ignore abstract meaning. As Leech (1983) observes, to have a satisfactory explanation, we have to approach meaning from both a pragmatic and a semantic point of view. He calls it complementalism. Akmajian et al, (2001) observe that speaker meaning can differ from linguistic meaning depending on whether the speaker is speaking literally or non-literally. The non-literal styles include indirect references such as metaphors, similes, irony, and sarcasm. This study explored how these features of style appeared in parent-child talk on sexuality. As Akmajian et al, (2001) say, 'speakers can mean what they say, not mean what they say or mean more than what they say.' In this study, we explored this phenomenon and its implications in communication. Figure 1 summarizes the three levels of meaning.

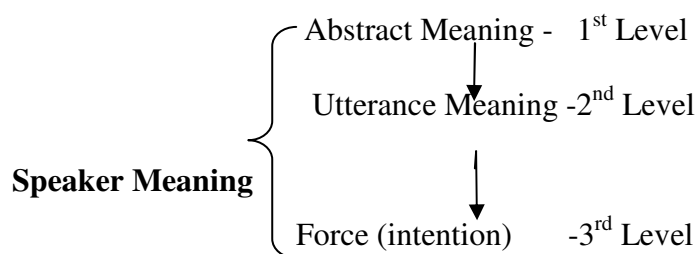


Figure 1: Three levels of meaning

3. Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by a combination of three theoretical frameworks namely: Austin's (1962) Speech Act Theory (SAT), Brown and Levinson's (1978) Politeness Theory and the theory of Cooperative Principle by Grice (1979). These theories explain the pragmatics of language. Broadly speaking, pragmatics looks into how our knowledge of the world helps us to derive meaning from utterances. This study therefore used these theories to help explain the factors that come to play when parents and their children engage in talk on sex.

3.1 Speech Act Theory (SAT)

This theory was borne out of Austin's (1962) observation that utterances have a performative aspect. In this study we were looking at peoples intentions when they utter certain words and the effect of these words on the hearers. This is captured in the Speech Act Theory where Austin observes that utterances not only have sense but they also have force. Austin (1962:169) made a three-fold distinction of utterances: Locution - the actual words uttered; Illocution - the force or intention behind the words; Perlocution - the effect of the illocution on the hearer.

3.2 Politeness Theory

Leech (1983) and Brown and Levinson (1978) treat politeness as a pragmatic phenomenon. Politeness is interpreted as a strategy (or a series of strategies) employed by a speaker to achieve a variety of goals, such as promoting or maintaining harmonious relations. The concept of 'face' by Goffman (1967) was central to Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness. Face refers to reputation or good name. According to the 'face' theory, an individual's face may be damaged, maintained or enhanced through interaction with others. People try as much as possible to save their face and may adopt various strategies to do so. A common practice people use as a politeness strategy is indirectness. Thomas (1995) says that people may employ indirectness to avoid a taboo word or topic. This aspect of politeness was used in this study to explain the language behaviour of parents as they talked to their children about sexuality.

3.3 Grice's Theory of Cooperative Principle

Grice's (1967) theory was an attempt at explaining how a hearer gets from what is said to what is meant, from the level of expressed meaning to the level of implied meaning. In this theory, speaker meaning is interpreted beyond the conventional meaning of an utterance or proposition. According to Grice, when people talk, they engage in cooperative efforts in order to communicate. This effort is what is entailed in his idea of cooperative principle which requires participants in a communication process to make their conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose of the talk exchange in which one is engaged. This general principle operates in four maxims of quantity, quality relation, and manner as explained below.

Quantity-Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purpose of the exchange. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Quality- Do not say what you believe to be false. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Relation-Be relevant

Manner- Avoid obscurity of expression; Avoid ambiguity; Be brief; Be orderly

In this study, the maxims were used to show how parents flouted them when communicating with their children and the possible effect it had on the interpretation of their utterances.

4. Methodology

This study used both qualitative and quantitative research techniques. Interviews were conducted using open-ended interview schedule to get some of the utterances that parents used in discussions of sexual issues with their children. Hence the utterances we are dealing with here are reported utterances from parents who had teenage children. The utterances were categorized into identifiable patterns and analyzed.

5. Results and Discussion

This section discusses the stylistic features obtained from parents' utterances. The features are circumlocution, litotes, innuendos, metaphor and hyperbole.

5.1 Circumlocution

Leech (1991) says circumlocution is the use of unnecessarily large number of words in a speech situation where a fewer words would suffice. 45.1 percent of the utterances are circumlocutory. It would seem that many parents do not find it easy to speak about sex and rely quite heavily on circumlocution. For instance a parent had this to say: *I tell them they must think about their education first and forget about these other things that do not help them at all...* In making such an utterance, a parent could be warning the daughter not to get distracted from education by relationships especially with the members of the opposite sex. For communication to take place, the child has to understand the intention of the utterance. Thomas (1995) says that sometimes listeners may understand the meaning of our words but fail to understand the force of the utterance. Another circumlocutory utterance goes: *I tell them they must think about their education first and forget about other things.* In such a situation, while a child may not have a problem understanding that the parent wants them to take their education seriously, the bigger intention related to responsible sexual behaviour may not be apparent.

5.1.1. Circumlocution and Flouting of Conversational Maxims

Through circumlocution, a speaker flouts the conversational maxims of quantity and relevance (Grice 1975). The quantity maxim has been flouted through the use of more words than is necessary. Thomas (1995) says that when a maxim is flouted, it means the speaker wants to imply something other than what the words mean. In the utterance *I tell them they must think about their education first and forget about other things*, for instance,

reference to 'these other things' points to the possibility that the daughter can be distracted in her education by indulging in sex. Yet, 'these other things' is quite vague and could refer to so many things. It is up to the daughter to recognize the implicature in her mother's utterance and deduce what the latter means. In another utterance, a parent assures their child that they would fine 'if they walk in the right way'. Again, by flouting the conversational maxim of quantity, the parent creates an implicature. If the child gets the implicature and understands that 'walking' refers to behaviour, then they would get the message. If the child fails to get the implicature, then the message is lost.

5.1.2 Circumlocution and Politeness

The politeness principle by Leech (1980) states: 'minimize (all things being equal) the expression of impolite beliefs: maximize the expression of polite beliefs' (Thomas 1995: 159). When a parent takes education as a point of departure to make a statement on sexuality, she is being polite, pragmatically speaking. By not mentioning sex directly, she minimizes expression of impolite beliefs because as Dryfoos (1990) says, talking about sex to children is not the norm for parents.

In the politeness principle, the tact maxim states, 'minimize expression of beliefs which will imply cost to the other' (Thomas, 1995: 160). In a previous utterance related to education, the respondent applies the tact maxim by not stating directly that she is discouraging a potential sexual relationship. Since she has no evidence that the daughter is involved in 'these other things', she plays it safe by being indirect and only insinuates. In so doing, she is minimizing the expression of belief which implies cost to her daughter. This simply means she does her best to avoid hurting her daughter's feelings as she passes her message across.

Related to politeness is the face saving tact by Goffman (1967). People will go to any length to save their faces. In order to avoid damaging one's self worth, parents will avoid mentioning sex directly especially to their children. So by circumlocution, parents protect their face as well as pass their message across.

5.2 Litotes

Leech (1991) defines litotes as the figure of understatement. In contrast to circumlocution, parents will sometimes use few words to pass their messages. It is also a popular style of speaking, accounting for 45.1 percent of all the utterances. This implies that many parents would rather utter few words than sit in lengthy discussions about sex with their children. This again proves that it is not easy for parents to discuss sex with their children.

5.2.1 Litotes and Pragmatic Force

An example of litotes from parents was: *I tell x 'you are now grown up.'* This is an understatement. Parents who tell their children they are 'now big' or 'grown up' are unlikely to be intending to inform their children about their obvious increase in size and age. Since the question asked was what the parent said to her daughter about sexuality, then we must assume that there is a connection that the respondent makes between being 'grown up' and sexuality. We can assume that the parent's illocutionary force is a warning to the child not to engage in irresponsible sexual behaviour as this could lead to consequences such as unwanted pregnancy or HIV and AIDS.

5.2.2 Litotes and Flouting of Conversational Maxims

According to Grice (1975) Litotes can be said to give less information than is required thereby generating an implicature by flouting the conversation maxim of quantity. For instance an utterance goes: *I tell X that he went to school to study.* This is an understatement and from the surface, it does not seem to communicate much. It would seem obvious that the child in question knows why they went to school. But the parent wants the child to understand that there is little room for wasting time in school, not least by thinking or engaging in irresponsible sexual behaviour. By flouting the maxim of quantity, the parent wants the child to understand more than the statement means at the surface level. This underlying meaning in understatement meaning is captured by Leech (1991: 170) thus:

Litotes express an overt lack of commitment, and so implies a desire to suppress or conceal one's attitude; but paradoxically this may, like hyperbole be a mode of intensification, suggesting that the speaker's feelings are too deep for plain expression.

In litotes, therefore, lies a powerful form of communication. Hence when a parent tells a child they are 'now grown up', as many of them did, it is actually a warning about being responsible sexually. This same argument would apply for another utterance that featured prominently, *'I tell her that men are men'* though stated in

slightly different ways. In telling their daughters that ‘men are men’ the parents are making a powerful statement using very few words. By flouting the maximum of quantity, they create an implicature. When a parent makes the utterance, the assumption is that child will get the implied meaning in the utterance that generally men are not to be trusted and she must be careful in dealing with them. Sometimes it is possible for a hearer to get the force of the utterance without necessarily understanding the utterance meaning. In this case it is possible that the girl may make little meaning of the statement (because of the redundancy of the utterance) but still get the pragmatic force or the intention of the utterance. It is also possible that she may fail to get both the utterance meaning and the force and might therefore fail to get the message.

5.3 Innuendos

When we want to speak something that we deem unpleasant to our hearers, we may employ innuendos, which will help us insinuate and save our face as well as pass the message. Leech (1991) defines innuendo as an allusive remark concerning a person or thing, especially of a depreciatory kind. In this study, innuendos form only around 2.9% of the utterances, meaning the style is not prevalent. This low occurrence could be due to the fact that innuendos are best observed in natural conversation. In reported speech, it may be hard for an innuendo to come out. That is why innuendos could only be delivered from the parents who had had recent experiences and they were able to re-live them. In this case, they were able to give the experience in direct speech. Innuendos are ambivalent, i.e. they have more than one pragmatic force. In being ambivalent, we are able to convey messages that a hearer may find disagreeable without causing much offence. When the force of the utterance is negotiable, then the speaker reduces the risk of being embarrassed (Thomas, 1995). A parent for instance was not impressed by the attire the daughter adorned and asked her, ‘*are you going out like that?*’ Such a parent wanted the daughter to understand that he did not like the dress at all because as he explained, it was not decent. However the utterance carries two pragmatic forces in that:

- It is a question and the parent wants to know whether the daughter would go out adorning that particular attire.
- The parent does not like the daughter wearing that dress because he considers it indecent.

When the parent utters the words, though aware of the two pragmatic forces, he hopes that the daughter will get the second force. In being ambivalent, Leech (1988) says we try to be polite even in situations where this may be a bit difficult. The idea is to pass our message without offending. Parents want to keep good relations with children as much as possible but they must also put their foot down when need be and the delicate balance has to be maintained.

5.4 Metaphor

Parents make use of insinuations that are metaphorical to avoid talking about sex directly. Metaphors are subtle comparisons of familiar things to ideas or messages that we may not want to be so direct about (Leech, 1991). Metaphorical language takes 2 percent of the utterances hence it was not a very popular mode of speaking for parents. It could imply that much as parents may prefer speaking indirectly to their children, they are still careful about saying something that children may not understand altogether. The style was however striking because of the interesting figures of speech that came up. For instance, an utterance goes: *I usually tell her, ‘take great care of yourself. Men are nothing but animals. They will use you then dump you...’* Here a parent equates men to animals and warns the daughter against any association with them. By comparing men with animals, the parents create an image of ruthlessness and destruction. They want the daughter to be fearful of men and consequently, avoid them completely.

5.4.1 Metaphor and Flouting of Conversational Maxims

In the utterance ‘Men are nothing but animals. They will use you and dump you’, the speaker flouts the conversational maxim of quality, which states: ‘do not say that which you believe to be false’ according to Grice (1975). The parent is saying something that is untrue and in so doing, generates an implicature. Since the parent who says this does not do so in order to deceive the daughter, then she must be meaning to communicate something beyond the literal meaning of the utterance. Using a deductive process, we can arrive at the intended meaning of the utterance. The deductive process might go like this:

- It is false that men are animals. (‘animal’ as used here is not in the biological sense)
- The parent does not appear to be trying to make the daughter believe that men are animals.
- Unless the parents’ utterance is completely pointless, He/ she must be trying to put across some other proposition.
- This must be some obviously related proposition
- The most obviously related proposition is that like animals, men are dangerous

This deductive process helps in understanding why a parent would choose this kind of imagery. It helps her pass her message across and in a forceful way too. When a parent equates men to animals, she intends to warn the daughter about the dangers of associating with men intimately. The parent in such a case has no room for being polite. If the daughter gets the implicature created by the flouting of the quality maxim, then she will get the intended message. The daughter could also fail to get the message and instead get exasperated by the parent's blatant comment.

5.5 Hyperbole

Hyperbole is a figure of overstatement or exaggeration. According to Leech (1988), hyperbole is concerned with personal values and sentiments where a speaker makes subjective claims which are not easy to verify. The hearer has to rely entirely on the general standards of the society and knowledge of the speaker to judge the truth of such claims. 4.9 percent of the utterances were hyperbolic. It would seem that this mode of speaking is not very popular. The utterance 'men are animals' is both a metaphor and an exaggeration. Another example of hyperbole goes: *What can one say apart from telling that the world has become very bad with many bad diseases and many bad things...*

The exaggeration here is more overt than in 'men are men' and lies in the unsubstantiated claim made by the speaker that there are 'many' bad diseases and things.

5.5.1 Hyperbole and Pragmatic Force

In example 28, the respondent employs hyperbole when she refers to the world as 'very bad' and a place 'with many diseases and many bad things' the repetition and intensification in the utterance gives it an element of exaggeration. In making this statement to her child the mother hopes to communicate a strong message: that the child should be careful in their sexual behaviour so that the many diseases and many bad things don't get them. In such an utterance, the parent hopes to achieve her pragmatic goal of warning the daughter about the danger of getting sexually involved with men.

5.5.2 Hyperbole and Flouting of Conversational Maxims

By saying 'the world is a very bad place with very many diseases', a parents flouts the conversational maxim of manner which requires a speaker to avoid obscurity of expression according to Grice (1979). The statement may be said to be obscure because the relationship between many bad diseases and sexuality may not be immediately apparent to the child. The maxim of relevance is also flouted for the same reason. By flouting the two maxims, a parent creates an implicature and hopes the child understands their intention which is a warning against engaging in risky sexual behaviour. Figure 2 summarizes the features of style discussed.

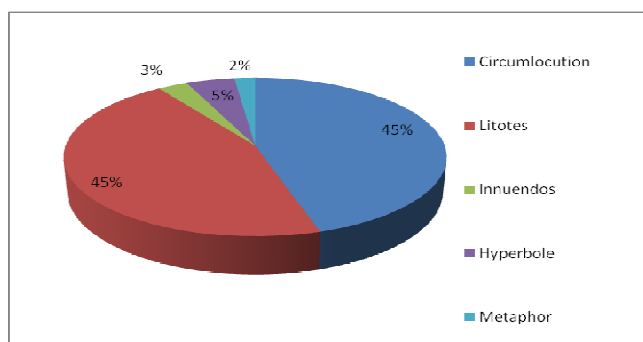


Figure 2: Features of style in parents' utterances

6. Conclusion

Circumlocution and litotes were the most common styles in parents' utterances. The other styles of metaphor, innuendos and hyperbole featured less significantly. In circumlocution the parents, tried to avoid the discomfort of speaking about sex by going around the issue. Litotes involved using fewer words than necessary to communicate a message. While these styles helped parents to keep face, we have seen that they could also interfere with communication. In circumlocution and litotes, the conversational maxims of quantity and relevance are flouted and this could hinder the parents intended message. This would happen if the child fails to get the implicature created by the flouting of the maxims. Parents to a less extent also used metaphors, innuendos and hyperbole. In all these styles, there was a clear attempt by parents to be indirect as they could when it came to talking about matters of sexuality to their children. In this study, parents' language was seen as possible hindrances to their children's grasping of sexual matters.

7. Recommendations

In cognizance of the fact that the subject of sexuality is sensitive and it's likely to remain a difficult issue for parents to raise with their children, the study gives several recommendations:

- Parents should understand that when they embark on talking to their children on matters of sexuality, they should have in mind that every human is sexual and must live in a sexual world (Adams, 1976). Hence parents must use a language that would make adolescents appreciate their sexuality as they teach them how to tackle challenges that come their way.
- If indirect language is to be affective, then parents should suitable teachable moments, drawing from everyday experience that are familiar to the teenagers. However, these familiar experiences must not be an end in themselves but a means to an end. That means that the parents' message must come out clearly.
- If parents realize their approach produces a negative response, it might suggest that the approach is not suitable and therefore call for change of tact to ensure that one has communicated their intention.
- It may be necessary sometimes to use direct language in order to makes one's point if one realizes that their intentions are not being communicated. In this HIV and AIDS era, parents must be prepared to talk plainly and directly about the disease. This could help the teenagers to think rationally and know how best to handle situations to avoid risks.

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