



## THE PRAGMATICS OF EDITORIAL CARTOONS: GRICE'S MAXIMS AND RELEVANCE THEORY INTERSECTION IN NIGERIAN NEWSPAPERS

<sup>1</sup>ADETOLA, Adesegun Samson Ph.D.

<sup>2</sup>RICHARD, Sholabomi Florence

<sup>3</sup>AYANTUGA-ODULE, Phebean Monijesu

<sup>1</sup>NAERLS Agricultural Media Unit, Ahmadu Bello University Kaduna State, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup>Department of Mass Communication, McPherson University, Ogun State

<sup>3</sup>Department of Mass Communication, Abraham Adesanya Polytechnic, Ogun State

**Corresponding Author:** Adetola, Adesegun Samson Ph.D. [adetoladesegun@gmail.com](mailto:adetoladesegun@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

This study examined the violation of Grice's maxims, discussed the rationale for relevance theory's conceptual-procedural distinction, and looked at how these two capacities interact in editorial political cartoons from two Nigerian national newspapers by identifying the types of maxims and the implied meaning behind their violation. The study employed qualitative textual analysis from two Nigerian national newspapers, *The Punch* and *The Guardian*. The study's data consists of 10 editorial political cartoons purposively picked using the criterion sampling technique between January and December 2017. Following data collection, the researcher analyzed it using Grice's conversational maxims and reassessing the notion of procedural meaning in the relationship between the capacity to understand a communicator's meaning, on the one hand, and the capacity to assess her reliability and the reliability of the communicated content, on the other. The study's findings indicate that Nigerian cartoonists fail to adhere to all of Grice's maxims - quality, quantity, manner, and relationship - when addressing political and social issues in Nigeria. Also, there are times when there are no interactions between the communicator's meaning and the communicated content because one or more of Grice's three assumptions about verbal communication are violated. The researchers, therefore, recommended that print media management and cartoonists not only see cartoons as an entertaining medium. They should also concentrate on how graphic images and messages can be readily understood with suitable drawings, texts, and captions, thus serving as a platform for messages' dissemination.

**Keywords:** Editorial cartoon, Grice's maxims, newspaper, political cartoon, relevance theory

### Introduction

Editorial cartoons, often referred to as political cartoons, are illustrations that provide commentary on current events or personalities. They serve as a visual critique of contemporary issues, typically adopting a satirical tone rather than simply being humorous. These cartoons frequently convey the political viewpoint of the cartoonist and can enhance the depth of editorial opinion pieces found in newspapers or magazines (Omolabi & Abiodun, 2020).

According to Adetola and Oluyi (2020), these hand-drawn images can occupy single or multiple frames and are often accompanied by dialogue bubbles and captions known as utterances. The written text serves as a guide for readers, indicating the intended discussion and prompting interpretation of the message directed at an individual, authority, or the general public.

Pragmatics, the study of meaning in context, explores the intentions behind a speaker's words. It seeks to uncover what is implied beyond the literal meaning of the speech. This field examines how speakers structure their language in relation to context and situation, recognizing that meanings are not always directly articulated. Given this understanding, it is essential to analyze the pragmatic aspects of interpreting editorial political cartoons in newspapers. Such analysis can significantly enhance our interpretation and comprehension of these visual commentaries (Puri & Baskara, 2019).

The cooperative principle, introduced by linguist Paul Grice, forms a key part of his pragmatic theory, exploring how individuals derive meaning from language. In "Logic and Conversation" (1975) and "Studies in the Way of Words" (1989), Grice identified four conversational maxims: quantity, quality, relation, and manner, each with further specific maxims (Betti, 2021; Betti, Igaab & Al-Ghizzi, 2018). These maxims guide effective communication, emphasizing that conversations are cooperative endeavours aimed at shared objectives (Betti & Hashim, 2021).

Grice posited that effective communicators adhere to these maxims, which can sometimes overlap. For example, the maxim of quantity concerns the amount of information provided, while the maxim of manner pertains to how it is communicated. Breaching these maxims can lead to misunderstandings, with subtle distinctions in violations (Betti & Hashim, 2018).

However, Grice's maxims have faced criticism for being culturally biased and overly vague, limiting their relevance in diverse contexts. Critics argue that these maxims are often misinterpreted as rules of politeness rather than as frameworks for effective communication. Despite these critiques, the maxims aim to outline the characteristics of successful interactions rather than dictate etiquette.

While it is commonly acknowledged that intentionally flouting Grice's maxims can create a humorous effect, research indicates that humour is not the sole objective of political communication. There are various communicative intents in such flouts, which supports the relevance of the Cooperative Principle (CP). As a result, the purpose of this study is to determine the interpretation process of editorial political cartoons that combine both image and text from the perspective of the Cooperative Principle (CP), as published in Nigeria's two selected leading national newspapers. - *The Punch* and *The Guardian*.

The specific objectives of this study are to:

- (1) examine the violation of Grice's maxims in the editorial political cartoons as published by *The Punch* and *The Guardian* Newspapers within the concept of the Cooperative Principle.
- (2) ascertain the rationale for relevance theory's conceptual-procedural distinction in
  - a. the editorial political cartoons published by *The Punch* and *The Guardian* Newspapers within the concept of Relevance Theory.

### Scope of the Study

Cartoon is a broad term that refers to a wide range of activities. For this study, only the political cartoons placed in the editorial section of the opinion pages of *The Punch* and *The Guardian* newspapers were considered. A collection of quantitative analyses within the periods of January 2017 to December 2017 highlights the ability of the cartoonists to describe the interpretation process of editorial political cartoons that combine both image and text from the standpoint of the Cooperative Principle (CP) on changing political news events as published in Nigeria's two chosen leading national newspapers - *The Punch* and *The Guardian*.

One notable thing about this period is that 2017 was the mid-term of Muhammad Buhari's first administration as an elected President. Hence, it forms the basis for the assessment of his government in line with the political campaign promises made to fight corruption in conjunction with high hopes and expectations from the electorates.

These newspapers were selected based on the criteria of frequency, geographical spread, circulation figures, and in addition with the regular feature of cartoon pages, as they publish more editorial cartoons than those that have not been selected based on their year of establishment. They are newspapers with the longest-running editorial cartoon feature in Nigeria.

## Theoretical Background

This section attempts to provide background information to this study by anchoring it on Relevance theory. Relevance Theory (RT), a cognitive framework for understanding human communication developed by D. Sperber and D. Wilson, was comprehensively outlined in their 1986 book (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 2nd edition, 1995). It originated in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a cognition-centered alternative to Grice's cooperation-based model of communication. Since its inception, RT has significantly influenced the field of pragmatics, contributing to a substantial body of research that both supports and critiques the theory, as well as applying it to various areas of pragmatic study (Yus, 2006).

According to Deirdre (2016), relevance theory is founded on a definition of relevance as well as two relevance principles: cognitive and communicative. The goal is to define relevance not only for utterances or other communicative acts, but for any external stimulus or internal mental representation that can provide insight into cognitive processes, so that sights, sounds, smells, thoughts, memories, or inference conclusions can all provide relevant inputs (for an individual, at a time).

More broadly, what makes an input relevant to an individual is that it interacts with contextual information he has available to produce worthwhile cognitive effects, and what makes it maximally relevant to the individual is that it produces greater effects with less effort than any other input available to him at the time (Deirdre, 2016).

Relevance theory, like other broadly Gricean approaches to pragmatics, takes three of Grice's assumptions about verbal communication as its starting point. The first is that a sentence's meaning is a vehicle for conveying a speaker's meaning, where a speaker's meaning is an overtly expressed intention that is fulfilled by recognition. The second is that the meaning of a speaker cannot be simply perceived or decoded, but must be inferred from her behaviour in conjunction with contextual information. The third is that the hearer is guided by the expectation that communicative behaviour should meet certain standards: a cooperative principle and conversational maxims for Grice, and a presumption of optimal relevance for relevance theorists (Deirdre, 2016).

Firstly, an important component that must be present for political cartoons to flourish is the audience. The cartoonist requires readers who are well-versed in the arts as well as politically aware. Without an audience that understands the conventions of political cartoons, such as satire and caricature, the messages contained within can be lost, and the message is frequently misinterpreted. Meanwhile, audiences must have a thorough understanding of political and social issues (Adetola & Abioye, 2020).

This factor is important in determining how a reader decodes the messages contained within a specific cartoon, resulting in the interaction of Grice's cooperative principle and its maxims and Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory. However, according to Adetola and Oluyi (2020), regardless of the audience's status, these cartoons provide comic relief like any other comic strip, except they raise a relevant issue and run a commentary on the lives of millions of readers, thus the synergy and the attributes these cartoons possess, just like the editorial.

## Method

The researcher employed qualitative textual analysis as a methodology to understand how people make sense of the world around them (Asemah, et al. 2022; Ndukwu & Onyebuchi, 2024). In selecting the population for this study, a purposive sampling approach was adopted, with attention paid to the proper representation of editorial political cartoons printed and published between January and December of 2017 using the criterion sampling technique from *The Punch* and *The Guardian* within the stated period. Forty-eight (48) editorial political cartoons (*The Punch* – 21 and *The Guardian* – 27) were obtained out of available five hundred and eleven (511) published weekly editorial cartoons by the two selected Nigeria prominent national newspapers during the periods.

Furthermore, the multi-stage sampling technique was adopted to get samples for the study. In the first stage, the purposive sampling technique was used to select *The Punch* and *The Guardian* as the national

newspapers to study based on the criteria of frequency, geographical spread, and circulation figures. In addition to the regular feature of cartoon pages, they publish more editorial cartoons than those that have not been selected based on their year of establishment.

They are newspapers with the longest-running editorial cartoon feature in Nigeria. In the second stage, the researcher randomly selected 10 editorial political cartoons out of the 48 editorial political cartoons – five (5) from each newspaper - depicting political communications, sceneries, and events during the mid-term of the Muhammadu Buhari's administration in 2017. In the third stage, a pragmatic analysis was done. Each cartoon was analyzed twice; firstly, within the frame of the CP, and secondly for the RT. The role of humour was also taken into account in all approaches.

## Result and Discussion

**Research Question 1:** Are there a violation of Grice's maxims in the editorial political cartoons as published by *The Punch* and *The Guardian* Newspapers within the concept of the Cooperative Principle?

To answer this research question, 10 copies of published editorial political cartoons – five copies from each - from *The Punch* and *The Guardian* respectively were firstly analyzed contextually and secondly considered within the frame of the CP.

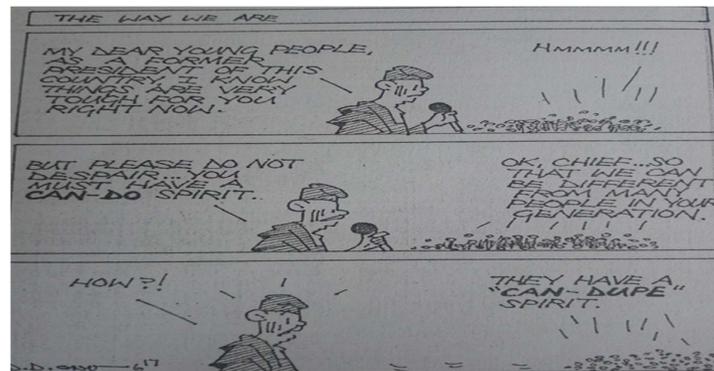


Figure 1. The Way We Are.

The Guardian (Wednesday, June 7, 2017, p.16)

**Cartoon 1:** The cartoonist in the cartoon titled 'The Way We Are' violated the maxim of quantity and the maxim of quality. The speaker provided less information than required and offered false information or information which lacked evidence. Ironically, the implied meaning here is about the double standard of the older generation who will advise the younger generation on the path to follow without towing the same path.



Figure 2. The Short Cut.

The Guardian (June 16, 2017, p.16)

**Cartoon 2:** The cartoon titled ‘The Short Cut’ violates the maxim of quality since "politics" is not a money-spinner but an opportunity to serve. The violation of the quality maxim indicates in a humorous way that anyone in Nigeria who ventures into politics is set to make more than enough ‘profits’ through embezzlement.

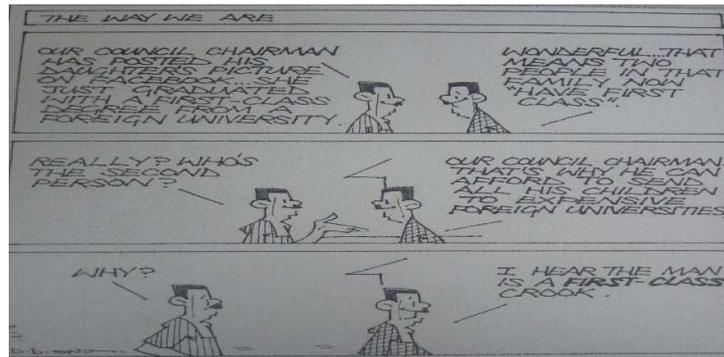


Figure 3. The Way We Are

The Guardian (August 14, 2017, p.16)

**Cartoon 3:** The cartoonist in the cartoon titled ‘The Way We Are’ violated the maxim of quantity and the maxim of quality. The responder provided less information than required and offered false information or information that lacked evidence. Ironically, the implied meaning here is about endemic corruption within our polity which affords a Council Chairman – ‘a First Class crook’ to send all his children to expensive foreign universities.

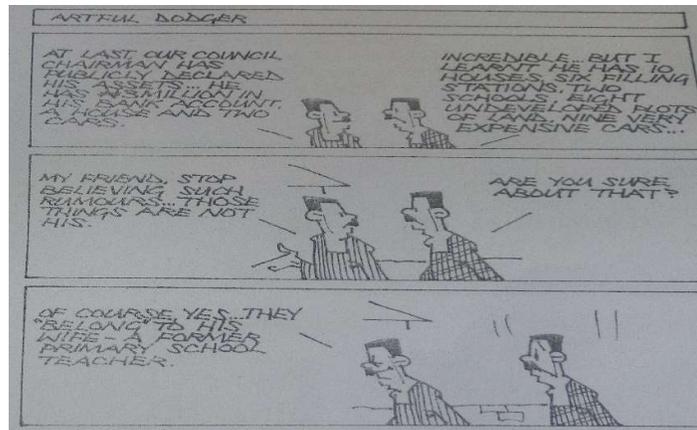


Figure 4. Artful Dodger

The Guardian (September 7, 2017, p.18)

**Cartoon 4:** The cartoonist in the cartoon titled 'Artful Dodger' violated the maxim of quantity and the maxim of quality. The man provided less information than required and offered false information or information that lacked evidence. Ironically, the implied meaning here is that the said undeclared assets belonging to his wife – a former Primary School teacher - are considered a lie because there is no way a Primary School teacher could have such assets in Nigeria.



Figure 5. Our Future Degeneration.

The Guardian (December 27, 2017, p.16)

**Cartoon 5:** The cartoonist in the cartoon titled 'Our Future Degeneration' violated the relation maxim since the son's answer is irrelevant to the question to imply, that being a legislator is not about making money for oneself but rather making good laws for the people.

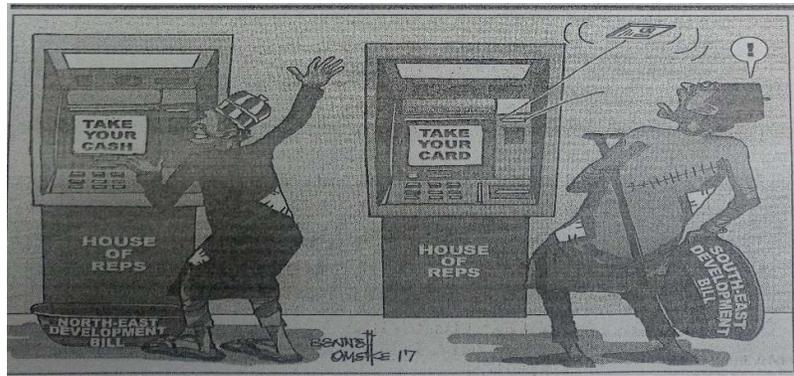


Figure 6. Untitled

The Punch (June 5, 2017, p. 22)

**Cartoon 6:** The cartoonist in the untitled cartoon violated the maxim of quantity and manner maxim. The cartoonist provides less information than required and is ambiguous as his receiver (audience) might not understand what he is talking about.



Figure 7. Untitled

The Punch (July 10, 2017, p. 22)

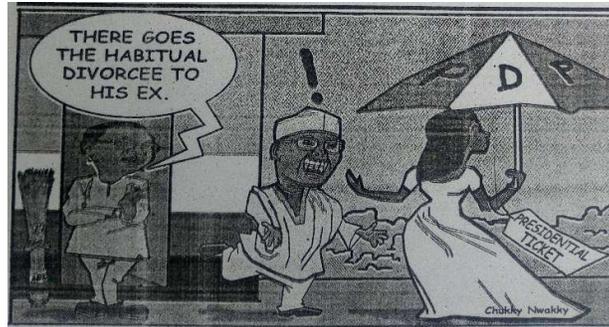
**Cartoon 7:** The cartoonist in the untitled cartoon violates the quantity maxim to imply the indifference stand of the federal government over the issue of restructuring in Nigeria.



Figure 8. Recall of Senator Dino Melaye

**The Punch (September 28, 2017, p.18)**

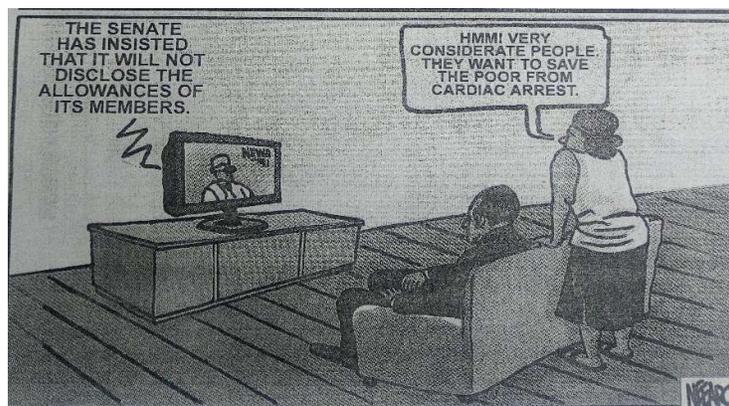
**Cartoon 8:** In this cartoon titled 'Nigeria Senators Close for the Day', the cartoonist violates the maxim of quality because he lies. The speaker violates the maxim to communicate another meaning rather than the literal one. The implied meaning is that the Senator depicted in this cartoon returns to his constituency when the electoral body sets machinery in motion to recall him.



**Figure 9.** Untitled

**The Punch (November 28, 2017, p.20)**

**Cartoon 9:** The cartoonist violates the maxim of the manner in the untitled cartoon because the word 'divorcee' is ambiguous in this context. More so, the man in the picture - a prominent politician in Nigeria - violates the quality maxim since the man in the cartoon is not known to be a divorcee.



**Figure 10.** On Legislators' Allowances

**The Punch (December 4, 2017, p.20)**

**Cartoon 10:** The maxim of quantity is violated in the untitled cartoon by the cartoonist since the woman's answer provided information more than is required. Ironically, the implied meaning here is the inconsideration of Nigeria's lawmakers on bogus allowances in a country populated by so many poor people!

**Research Question 2:** Is there a rationale for relevance theory’s conceptual–procedural distinction between the communicator’s meaning and the communicated content in the editorial political cartoons as published by *The Punch* and *The Guardian* Newspapers within the concept of Relevance Theory?

Interpreting these results, linguistic and non-linguistic semiotic resources co-exist with one another in such a way that, the linguistic semiotic resources which are the textual component of the cartoons provide the viewer with the ideals through which they can build or understand the meaning of other semiotic resources captured in the selected cartoons (Omolabi & Abiodun, 2020). Going by the aforementioned explanation, it was observed that not all editorial political cartoons have interactions between the communicator’s meaning and the communicated content as one or two out of the three of Grice’s assumptions about verbal communication are violated.

These were discovered mostly in editorial political cartoons published by *The Punch* newspaper, as many lack titles on one hand and communication on the other hand (See **Figures, 6, 7 and 9**) and this contradicts Oluremi and Ajepe's (2016) submission that “the subjection of the political cartoons and their elements to pragmatic analysis has aided the interpretation of the captured political figures, events, beliefs and activities critically within the Nigerian context” (p. 31) but in line with Gwandu and Ahmad (2019) which posited that “in some cases, other maxims were violated, as they do not provide the required amount of information, they showcase things for which they lack evidence and there was ambiguity and unnecessarily prolixity” (p.13).

## Conclusion

This study views cartooning as a means for cartoonists to communicate the subtle societal challenges they address, seeking remedies for political and social ills. It is noteworthy that cartoonists often draw inspiration from the editorials presented in newspapers, and this relationship is typically reciprocal. Analyzing the editorial political cartoons published in Nigerian newspapers - *The Punch* and *The Guardian* - in light of Grice's maxims reveals that Nigerian cartoonists defy Grice's maxims to convey their thoughts and ideas concerning political issues in a humorous, metaphorical, and satirical manner.

The study's findings indicate that cartoonists often violate conversational maxims to convey implicit messages to their audience. By presenting deliberately vague information, these cartoonists seek to distance themselves from the content and mitigate the strength of their claims, particularly when they lack the evidence to support stronger assertions that could jeopardize their credibility.

## Recommendation

Based on the study’s results, the researchers recommend that print media management and cartoonists should concentrate on how graphic images and messages can be readily understood with suitable drawings, texts, and captions, thus serving as a platform for messages' dissemination.

## Limitation of the study

The first limitation was the paucity of research in the area of violation of Grice's maxims, and its interaction in editorial political cartoons from Nigerian national newspapers. Consequently, researchers were constrained to a narrow frame of reference when developing the methodological direction for the study.

In addition, this study was limited to two Nigerian national newspapers and did not extend to other national newspapers in the country. This limitation means that the implications of the findings need to be used with caution and can only be generalized to samples of the same nature. Further studies should be conducted in other national newspapers to establish similarities and differences.

### Implication of the study

The study enhances the understanding of pragmatic strategies in cartoons, illustrating how editorial cartoonists use Grice's Maxims (Quality, Quantity, Relation, Manner) and Relevance Theory to effectively convey messages. It shows how cartoons can flout these maxims for humour, satire, or deeper meanings.

Additionally, the study offers insights into Nigerian political and social commentary, revealing how cartoonists critique government policies, corruption, and social issues through pragmatic techniques. This understanding helps readers grasp messages beyond visual elements.

For media analysts and scholars, the study provides a framework for analyzing non-verbal communication in media, contributing to discourse analysis, semiotics, and media pragmatics in Nigeria. The findings also offer practical applications for cartoonists and analysts, helping to refine techniques and assess the impact of visual satire on public opinion.

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