

# A Pragmatic Analysis of Selected Health Posters in FCT, Abuja

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## Abstract

Pragmatics as a field of linguistic science helps us understand how language is used, what it is used for and its meaning in a given context. Therefore, health posters are peculiar means of communicating information about diseases, identifying risk factors and promoting behavioural change. Language use aids healthcare providers to shape and define 'normal and healthy' behaviours and conditions. This study therefore aims at doing a pragmatic analysis of selected health posters so as to establish the relationship between the visuals and the captions of the posters and the relevance of the principles of meaning in the posters. Three health posters cutting across different diseases were collected and analysed, using Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory. It involves the analysis of direct and indirect relevance of pragmatic principles in the health posters. The study discovers that colour combination in the health posters communicates the desired message of the health care providers. The study also revealed that the health posters are informative and educational despite that, some of them appeared vague and ambiguous.

**Keywords:** Pragmatics, health posters.

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## INTRODUCTION

Health posters are means of communicating information about diseases, identifying risk factors and promoting behavioural change. It is in the language used that healthcare providers shape and define 'normal and healthy' behaviours and conditions. Pragmatics as a field of linguistic science helps us understand how and what language is used and its meaning in a given context. According to Mey (6), Pragmatics is the study of the way human beings use language in communication; it is a study of those premises around which a communicative event occurs.

Health posters are a common component of the health care system. They serve as a means of promoting ideas, dispelling notions and beliefs and providing advice on health issues by health care providers. It is believed that the health posters do more than create awareness. They implicitly encode hidden elements that affect the citizenry. However, health posters are not a mere collection of words; rather, they are systematically organized expressions that consider social, cultural and national representations, particularly as it relates to health issues. Consequently, the impact of health posters is strong upon the readers due to certain linguistic features which make them memorable and

effective. These linguistic items and cues go beyond their denotative meanings. They have pragmatic values inherent in them. It is believed that the understanding of the pragmatic value of the linguistic items inherent in the posters would go a long way in ensuring that the intended goal is achieved.

This paper, therefore, seeks to examine the influence of pragmatic elements on healthcare posters as encoded texts and how the meaning that is implied affects the addressees.

## 2.0 Conceptual Clarification Pragmatics

Historically, many linguists trace the origin of Pragmatics to Charles Morris whose concern was to outline the general shape of semiotics (Osisanwo 56). Morris distinguished three branches of semiotics thus: syntax (the study of formal relation of signs to one another); Semantics (the study of relation of signs to the objects to which the signs are applicable); and pragmatics (the study of the relation of signs to interpreters).

However, what may be described as 'pragmatics proper' began with the earliest writer on

speech act, J. L. Austin, who was followed by Searle and Grice, among others. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* was a posthumous collection of his lecture notes at Harvard University (Saeed 222). The lecture notes, and indeed, the book was a reaction to some philosophers (among his contemporaries) known as logical positivists (223) who proposed that any sentence that cannot be verified or tested for its truth or falsity should be regarded as emotive and therefore meaningless (Lawal 151). This position is of little or no interest to many scholars because people rarely utter something in order to be proven true or false (Mey21). In addition, we can understand a sentence even when we are unable to tell whether it is true or false (Fromkin and Rodman 187). In challenging the logical positivists' views therefore, Austin links words with deeds, arguing that many utterances are produced without any intentions to be true or false but to perform actions, hence his *How to Do Things with words* and his theory of 'Speech Act'.

Pragmatics is often described as the study of language use, and contrasted with the study of language structure. In this sense, it covers a range of loosely related research programmes from formal studies of deictic expressions to sociological studies of ethnic verbal stereotypes. In a more focused sense, pragmatics contrasts with semantics, the study of linguistic meaning, and is the study of how contextual factors interact with linguistic meaning in the interpretation of utterances.

### Text, Co-text and Context

The term *text* refers to the scripted language or information. It could be handwritten or printed. Pragmatically, the way a text looks contributes a lot to the message it carries. For example, the emphatic or foregrounded "my" in the sentence; "*This is my car*" implies not *yours*, *theirs*, *his* nor *hers*. The word co-text is concerned with the preceding and succeeding sentences or words to a particular utterance to be interpreted. For example, the meaning of the word 'bank' in the following two sentences is dependent on its succeeding words:

- a. I lost my money at the 'bank' where I just made the payment.
- b. I lost my money at the 'bank' where I just had my bath.

Context, on the other hand, refers to the relevant circumstances under which an utterance is made and which determines how the utterance should be interpreted; it means everything non-linguistic about an utterance, including the speaker, the hearer, and any other third party alongside their beliefs and their beliefs about what the others believe (Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams 199). Context also includes the physical environment, the subject of conversation, the time of the day, and so on. Almost all imaginable extra-linguistic factors may, under appropriate circumstances,

influence the way language is interpreted. Based on the above explanation, there are two notions of context: context of situation and context of culture.

### Theoretical Framework: Relevance Theory

According to Sperber and Wilson's (1986) Relevance Principle, every act of ostensive-inferential communication guarantees its own minimal relevance. In their theory, an utterance is optimally relevant if, and only if, the ostensive stimulus is relevant enough for the partner to feel it worth processing, or if the ostensive stimulus is the most relevant stimulus that can be expected based on the communicator's abilities and preferences.

Sperber and Wilson (1986) see things the second way. Following Grice's model, understanding what someone means by an utterance is a matter of *inferring* the speaker's communicative intention: the hearer uses all kinds of information available to get at what the speaker intended to convey. The semantic information obtained by decoding the sentence uttered is but one example of such information. But much more information has to be used to infer what the speaker meant — that includes both what she said and what she implicated — by her utterance. So central is intention-recognition to understanding language that the code model, with autonomous semantics at its core, should largely be abandoned in favour of the inferential model. One kind of pragmatic reasoning pervades language use, near-side and far- side, and the areas in which the code model is applicable are basically marginal.

The need for supplementary information is too pervasive and too important to be a matter of something specifically linguistic, as might be suggested by Grice's conversational principle and maxims. Sperber and Wilson see the fundamental mechanism of such inferences as going well beyond language, and beyond humans. In terms of Carston's distinctions, relevance theory departs from Grice's philosophical project, and aims at an empirical psychological theory of human cognition and communication. They see the phenomenon they call 'relevance' as a psychological phenomenon basic to the lives not only of humans but of all animals with a cognitive repertoire sophisticated enough to have choices about which environmental cues to attend to. Evolution shapes the phenomenon of relevance; an animal's attention is drawn to environmental cues that provide the most crucial information. Relevance theory emphasizes that the rules of language leave all sorts of issues open. Some words have too many meanings: ambiguity. Others have too little meaning: 'he,' or 'that.' Decoding alone won't determine which meaning the speaker is using, or which object she intends to refer to with a pronoun. So even before we get to what is said, communication involves intentions on the part of the speaker that go beyond what she "codes-up" into language, and inferences on the part of the hearer that go beyond decoding. And of

course when we consider what is conveyed beyond saying, the coding model is even less adequate. In all of these ways in which knowledge of convention falls short, relevance fills the gap

## METHODOLOGY

The data for this study was sourced from primary source. This involved health posters collected from some selected general hospitals in the FCT. The posters cut across a wide range of diseases and drug for the treatment of the diseases. Three health posters were

collected and analyzed. The analysis in this study is qualitative. The researcher employs a narrative technique based on Sperber and Wilson Relevance Theory. The study discusses the relevance of the texts under study in line with the relevance principles or ostensive-inferential communication and its relevance. It also involves giving, where necessary, the background information of the sampled health posters.

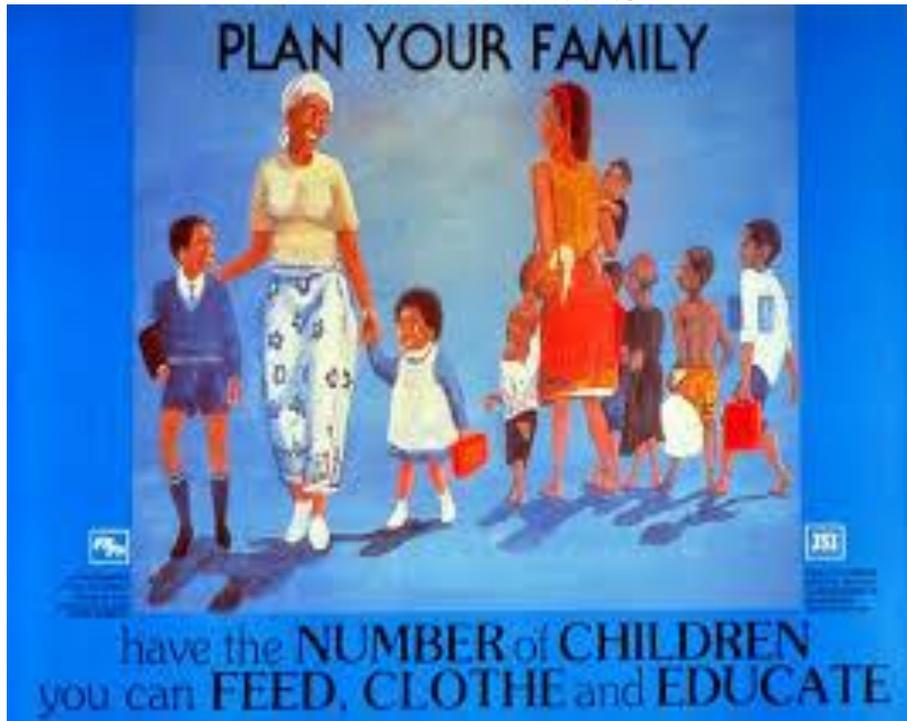
### 3.0 Data Presentation and Analysis

#### TEXT 1: CONDOMS



This text covers three participants. The characters are presented with each passing a message concerning the use, effect and importance of condoms. The choice of cartoons as characters in this health poster is predisposed on the need to guide against any cultural implication and to pre-empt any possible stigmatization that may accompany the use of humans, be it male or female. The participants have their hands raised so as to project their messages. Their sizes play a significant role and correspond with the message they bear. For instance, the biggest character has the message: “\$5 with a prescription from Family Planning of your doctor.” The character in the middle, though smaller, has the message: “When used correctly they are 98% effective at preventing pregnancy”. The last character which is bigger than the least character contains the message: “condoms protect against pregnancy & STIs”. The image act in this text is that of offer and demand. Following Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) every image performs two kinds of act: offer and demand. The latter usually request the viewer to do something while the former gives information.

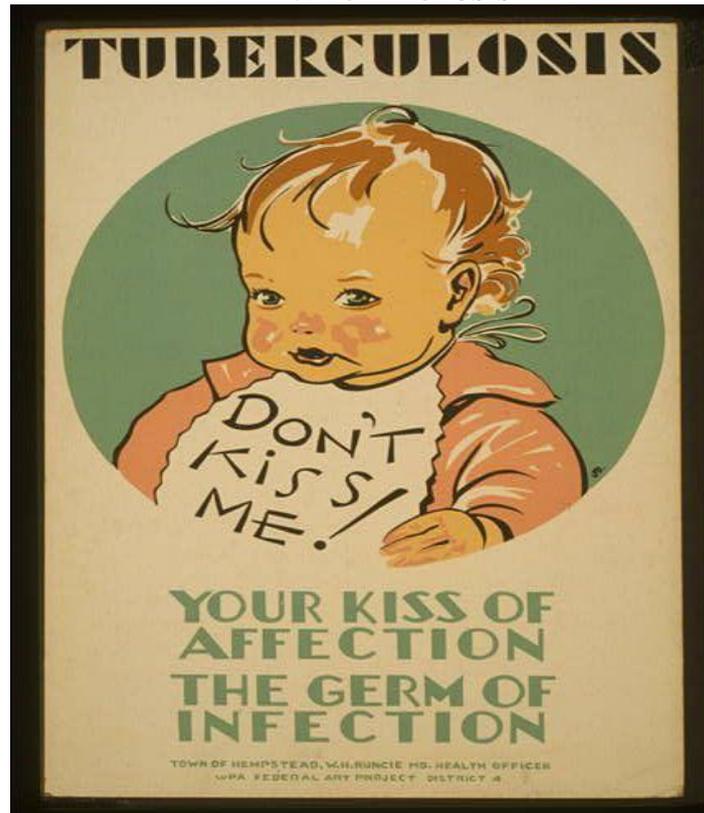
It is clear from the poster (Text 1) that condoms are safe and secure (SS) with the prescription from the Family Planning of your doctor. The *your*, as used is a general deictic referring to whoever would use condom for any intending reason(s). The second vector has it that: condoms protect against pregnancy & STIs. However, the success is dependent on what is contained in the third vector which says: “When used correctly they are 98% effective at preventing pregnancy”. That is to say, users of condoms have a role to play to achieve 98% success. It is obviously clear from the poster in question that even if the condom is correctly used, and it results otherwise, the user will not have any right or anything to use against the health deliverer since it guarantees only 98% success. Who then, should bear the blame for the 2%? Is the 2% not big enough to scare the users and potential users? What then guarantees that with the poster, the claimed ‘SS’ (safe and secure) is guaranteed? The poster creates room for doubts in the efficacy of condoms against all they are claimed to guide against.

**TEXT 2: FAMILY PLANNING**

Health posters' visual representations are made polysemous such that readers can choose several meanings. Although captions try to control this potential proliferation by selecting single specific meaning for each image, the reader cannot but give cultural and social meanings to the pictures. These pictures themselves (with or without captions) exemplify a set of possible meanings or have meaning potential (Halliday 1978 cited in Ogungbe 234). Which of these, where, when and for what reason? For instance, Text 2 presents the pictures reflecting the importance of family planning as the number of children one bears corresponds to the type of life he or she gives to the children. Hence, the text: "have the number of children you can feed, clothe and educate". Looking at this picture, it appears that the woman with two children is having a good time with the children. It is obvious from the picture that the woman is smiling alongside the children all because she has the number she can feed, clothe and educate. The picture further reveals that the three important things as highlighted in the text are carried out by the woman since she has a manageable number of children. Consequently, the other woman with six children is finding it tough with life as she has more than she can care for. Reminiscent

in the picture is the fact that the three key things mentioned in the poster are lacking in the family with six children. They look malnourished, not clothed and are not enrolled in school. The poster therefore informs those at the verge of having more than they can cater for to decide appropriately. This text curtly informs the public of the effect of having a good number of children and the negative effect of having more than one's ability.

Worthy of mention again, is the fact that the pictures are synonymous with the writing. The captions are however opened to different possible interpretations. Meaning is not sacrosanct as the poster designer cannot restrict the viewers to the meaning they attached to the pictures and the captions. It can be inferred from the pictures that they are promoting western culture against African culture if viewed from cultural perspective. To a farmer who needs more hands on his farm, it is a mere fabrication which holds no water therefore raising cultural issues in the stead of solving the problem hoped to be solved. So, it is pertinent to take into consideration cultural beliefs of the people so as to convince them to partake in the perceived benefits.

**TEXT 3: TUBERCULOSIS**

The picture in Text 3 is polysemous. In other words, it does not merely perform an act of preventing people from kissing the baby, but also identifies and states the implication of such a kiss. The participant in this pragmeme is a baby with a stern look, effecting the warning, ‘don’t kiss me’! This shows that people are fun of kissing babies without knowing the negative effect of what they do thereby infecting the innocent children. In the bid to curb the spread of tuberculosis, it became imperative to make posters such as the one being considered.

So, the picture and the text agree to the purpose of poster creation. ‘Don’t kiss me’, though a warning, is not merely issued but acknowledges that it may be a kiss of affection (your kiss of affection) but is rejected because it is the germ of infection as rightly presented in the poster. Also, the poster does not only stop those with tuberculosis but all should there be a hidden infection to be spread. The warning also goes to all including parents and however the level of affection they desire to share with their baby or babies.

In line with Relevance Theory, the first interpretation that lends itself at first reading is that this is a philosophical statement. Nevertheless, this interpretation has to be rejected since it is inconsistent with the Relevance Principle and since it occurs in the health poster against the spread of tuberculosis. After the rejection of the first interpretation and the recognition of the context of the text (a health poster

placed in a hospital) the relevant interpretation can be generated. The poster exploits the polysemy of the expression, *don’t kiss me!* And its real message is that since he could be infected, it is worth being avoided. Such a concealed communication of the message is seemingly uneconomical; however, it fully complies with claims of Relevance Theory: the ostensive stimulus transmitted by the poster, that is, the text of the poster, is the most economical device to achieve the intended effect. If the poster bore the message “*Do not kiss me because you can infect me with different infections by your kiss*”, probably people would be offended and it would not be effective. The price of attracting attention is the extra operational effort.

#### 4.0 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

It was discovered that health posters use cartoons as characters so as to guide against cultural implication and pre-empt any possible stigmatization that may accompany the use of humans, be it male or female. These cartoons therefore play significant role especially their sizes correspond with the message they bear. For instance, in Text 1, the biggest character has the message: “SS with a prescription from Family Planning of your doctor.” The character in the middle, though smaller, has the message: “When used correctly they are 98% effective at preventing pregnancy”. The last character which is bigger than the least character contains the message: “condoms protect against pregnancy & STIs”. The image act in this text is that of offer and demand. It was also discovered that some of

the health posters create room for doubts in the efficacy of the product or service advertised.

Again, it was observed that health posters' visual representations are made polysemous such that readers can choose several meanings. Although captions try to control this potential proliferation by selecting single specific meaning for each image, the reader cannot but give cultural and social meanings to the pictures. And that the pictures themselves (with or without captions) exemplify a set of possible meanings or have meaning potential.

Worthy of mention also, is the fact that the pictures in health posters are synonymous with the captions. The captions are however opened to different possible interpretations. Meaning is not sacrosanct as the poster designers cannot restrict the viewers to the meaning they attached to the pictures and the captions. So, possible inferences can be given based on the context of the health poster. We noted that since the posters are open to possible different interpretations, it is pertinent to take into consideration cultural beliefs of the people so as to convince them to partake in any perceived benefits that follow such a poster the study discovered that some of the pictures in health posters betray no emotion. Pictures and the expressions clearly asserted the designer's intention. Just two sentences: one imperative and one declarative. The message is precise and concise. All these add together to foreground the illocutionary force inherent in the intended meaning. It was noticed that some captions are situated in the context of metaphorical parallel and the

shared situational knowledge of the endemic effect of diseases on human health.

## CONCLUSION

Though, the health posters are informative and educative, some of their pictures and captions are polysemous, thereby resulting to ambiguous and vague information being passed to the viewers. By so doing, more problems are created rather than solving the existing health challenges.

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