

Discourse-Syntax Interface: A Study of Gricean Maxims in Computer-Mediated Discourse

Maria-Helen Ekah, Ph.D.
Aniedi Nsibiet Akpan, B.A.
University of Uyo, Nigeria

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Abstract

This article discusses the ways in which Gricean maxims of the cooperative principle are left unobserved in computer-mediated discourse. Non-observance of the maxims is done by flouting, violating, infringing, suspending and opting out. As evident in the topic, the theoretical framework for this research is H.P Grice's Cooperative Principle. The social media selected for this analysis are WhatsApp and Facebook. Seven chats were randomly selected from the researchers' (A's) chats with others. Results show that the Gricean maxims were mostly flouted in comparison with other ways of their non-observance. Of the four categories, the category of quantity is mostly flouted by the participants in the conversation. It is also discovered that interlocutors mostly deviated from the topic of discourse. This implies that the category or relation was mostly unobserved by the interlocutors.

Key Words: maxims, cooperative principle, syntax, computer-mediated discourse

Introduction

Conversational Cooperation

Language is an essential tool for communication both in its written and spoken forms. Mastery of the language does not only involve competence in the language but also the manipulative use of it to achieve desired ends. When humans interact, the choice of words is dependent on two factors: humans want to explicitly state their stance to fellow interlocutors or

leave fellow interlocutors to a wide range of possible interpretations. Whichever way, there is always a form of cooperation to achieve mutual conversational ends. This conversational cooperation manifests itself in the Gricean maxims, which we feel the need to abide by. Conversational Cooperation suggests that discourse has taken place. In making communication more effective and to make sentences more acceptable to the hearer, it can be measured by applying cooperative principle consisting of four maxims proposed by Grice (1975). When the principle is not obeyed by the speaker in any communication, the maxims are flouted or violated.

Discourse

Discourse refers to language in use (Brown & Yule, 1983) but Cook (1989) describes discourse as language used in communication. Whenever language is used in communication, discourse has taken place. Discourse always implies the presence of participants or interlocutors in a meaningful communication. Meaningful communication results from appropriate selection and arrangement of words in sentences while syntax is about the structural arrangement of words in sentences. In syntax, words are arranged according to a certain order, that is, according to some rules in conformity to the syntactic principles of a given language. However, the rules to follow are not only the rules of grammar but also the rules of use in what Chomsky (1965) refers to as communicative competence while Hymes (1972) calls it pragmatic competence. He states that language consists of text or discourse and entails the exchange of meanings in interpersonal contexts of different kinds. During discourse, interlocutors exchange meanings and in doing so flout certain maxims and these maxims are not syntactic but pragmatic.

Networked Communication

Communication today has shifted from the face-to-face method to a one involving networked computers. The exchange of messages in this kind of communication accords it the name ‘computer-mediated discourse’. Computer-mediated discourse is “the communication produced when human beings interact with one another by transmitting messages via networked computers” (Herring, 2001, p.1). This kind of discourse is not different from other kinds of communication except that it requires internet connected devices. The messages exchanged

between users of this interaction method can pass for the ones exchanged during the usual face-to-face human communication.

Herring (2008) sees computer-mediated discourse as one of the variant terms for internet language, which is a human or human-like language produced and displayed through computer-mediated communication systems that are mostly text-based and reciprocally interactive. Email, instant messaging (chats), text messaging via mobile phones among others, fall within this category. Of these, the instant messaging networks form the social media. Social media are fast becoming the most widely used means of internet communication. According to Wikipedia, social media are “computer-mediated technologies” for creating and “sharing of information, ideas, career interests and other forms of expression via virtual communities and networks.” What this implies is that social media is basically a sharing platform and this is done through social network sites. Social networks abound, among which are Facebook Messenger, Twitter, WhatsApp Messenger, Instagram, Blackberry Messenger and 2go Messenger.

Focus of This Research

This research anchors on the fact that in every form of communication (whether spoken or written), contributions on the part of each interlocutor have to be aligned with the theme of the discourse, timely, relevant, unambiguous, precise in terms of quantity, and true, and it is this principle that each interlocutor seeks to uphold. Put in a different way, just as the cooperative principle can be applied to verbal communication between or among people, it can be applied to the exchange of language between or among social network users and the cooperative principle can be upheld as much as it can also be violated, flouted, suspended, opted out of and infringed.

Gricean maxims of cooperative principle are about a linguistic interpretation of discourse. Wilkins (1976) asserts that “grammar is the means through which linguistic creativity is ultimately achieved and an inadequate knowledge of a grammar will lead to a serious limitation on the capacity for communication” (p.66). For Lyons (1977) grammar is indeterminate; it cannot be identified easily and in an exact way. The maxims may be abstract but coded in grammar in line with Levinson (1983) postulation that “grammar (in the broad sense inclusive of phonology, syntax

and semantics) is concerned with the context-free assignment of meaning to linguistic forms” (p.8). In discourse, linguistic forms are deployed in a tactical way to achieve communicative purpose.

Statement of the Problem

Diverse ways in which the Gricean maxims of the cooperative principle have been unobserved in other discourses other than the computer-mediated one (social network interaction) have been analysed severally. Also, several other linguistic tools have been used to explicate meanings or perform other linguistic actions on the conversations of social networks. This research however, utilises the cooperative principle as its theoretical framework to unravel ways in which the Gricean maxims have been flouted or violated in selected Facebook and WhatsApp conversations.

Methodology

For the purpose of this research, the primary sources are Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp. Data are randomly selected from social network conversations between people. Seven chats are selected and analysed. The social networks chosen for this research – Facebook messenger and WhatsApp are so selected due to space constraint otherwise other networks would have been included. Segments of the chats are selected strictly to portray instances of non-observance of the Gricean maxims. Secondary sources of data include the internet, textbooks and other scholarly publications.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research is H. Paul Grice’s cooperative principle. Grice (1975) says “make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged (p. 45). This is the Cooperative Principle. It is a rough general principle which participants are expected, all things being equal, to observe. The principle consists of four different categories namely: quantity, quality, relation and manner. They are otherwise called ‘maxims’.

The category of quantity relates to the amount of information provided, and under it falls the following maxims: make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current

purposes of the exchange), and do not make your contribution more informative than is required. The category of quality has a supermaxim: ‘try to make your contribution one that is true.’ Two more specific maxims under this category are: do not say what you believe to be false, and do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. The category of relation has the single maxim ‘be relevant’ while the category of manner is ‘be perspicuous’ and contains such other maxims as: avoid obscurity of expression; avoid ambiguity; be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity); and be orderly.

According to Grice, when the maxims are not observed, implicatures are generated. Gazdar (1979) sees implicature as “a proposition that is implied by the utterance of a sentence in a context even though that proposition is not a part of nor an entailment of what was actually said” (p. 38). It simply refers to what is suggested in an utterance beyond its literal sense. There are five diverse ways participants in a conversation fail to observe maxims. They include: flouting, violating, infringing, opting out of, and suspending maxims.

When a speaker blatantly fails to observe a maxim without any intention to mislead a hearer, such a speaker has flouted a maxim. Thomas (1995) cited in Hanifah (2013) states that: “the speaker expects the hearer to look for a different meaning from what s/he says literally” (p.138). In this case, the speaker deliberately intends to generate an implicature.” In violating a maxim, the speaker misleads the hearer intentionally by saying the truth but implying what is not true. A speaker opts out a maxim when s/he is unwilling to cooperate with the requirements of the maxim, that is, s/he cannot reply in the expected way. Infringing a maxim occurs when a speaker has an imperfect linguistic performance, cognitive impairment, or when a speaker cannot speak clearly or to the point because s/he is informatively impaired or lacks knowledge of the topic. Suspending a maxim occurs in, for instance, the case of taboo words, when there are culture-specific or particular events that force the speaker not to say something directly (Hanifah 2013).

Review of Related Literature

Herring (2004) cited in Androutsopoulos and BeiBwenger (2008) views computer-mediated discourse as all kinds of interpersonal communication carried out on the internet which may be by email, instant messaging, web discussion boards and chat channels. Herring (2001) sees

computer-mediated discourse as a specialized field within the broader field of computer-mediated communication (CMC). Its focus is on language and how language is used in computer networked environments and characterised by its use of methods of *discourse analysis* to address that focus” (p. 1).

Perez-Sabater (2012) in the examination of the comments published on the official Facebook sites of some universities to observe the level of formality or informality of online communication in English observes that in specific context of the university, the use of Facebook is not conventionalised, as the comments posted on Facebook present important stylistic variations. In most instances, non-native speakers of English display more formal traits than native speakers when communicating electronically on social networking sites in the academic world. To Pimentel and Diniz (2014), language use in social networks is an instrument of creativity and self-expression as well as “the creation of original forms of disseminating subjectivity” (p. 2135). They conclude that psychologists need to develop researches that make possible the building of an ethics position on the impacts of new technologies on intimacy, thus contributing to the development of a work capable of redirecting interpersonal relations in order to set limits between comfort and discomfort within the context of the social networks mediated by the internet.

Andresen (2013) explores how flouting of the Gricean maxims is used to create comedy in the television series *Community*, based on transcription of eight episodes of the series. The results show that the maxim of quantity was flouted most often, and some characters used more flouts than others. The results suggest that the use of flouts has to do with their different personalities. Hanifah (2013) while investigating types of maxims which are not observed by male and female Facebook users in a study which involved 16 male and 15 female students majoring in English at one university in Bandung who have Facebook accounts found out that male users commonly failed to observe the maxim of relation while the female users commonly failed to observe the maxim of quantity. Flouting of maxim is the most frequent non-observance of maxim in the conversations analysed. This flouting is done to make a joke, stay close with friends or just contribute.

Sobhani and Saghebi (2014) analyse recorded conversations between a male psychotherapist and his patients. They conclude that the recognition of conversational implicature is essential for the understanding of the non-cooperative attitudes of the speakers and their violation of one or more cooperative principle maxims. They observe that the message people intend to convey is not wholly contained within the words they use, but is also dependent on how hearers interpret the message taking into account context and implicated meaning.

This research employs Grice's cooperative principle to unravel ways in which the various maxims of the same principle have been unobserved by interlocutors. The computer-mediated discourse chosen for analysis are randomly selected conversations from the researchers' Facebook and Whatsapp conversations with others. Instances of violations, infringement, opting out, flouting and suspension of the Gricean maxims are identified and analysed.

Instances of Non-observance of the Gricean Maxims in Social Network Communication

Text 1: WhatsApp Conversation Between 'A' and 'PE'

- A:** Mama Peace, good evening.
Please, will the rehearsal take place before the ministration?
- PE:** Gudevng
Pls come to church
- A:** We're not around now. We intend coming straight for the rehearsal
- PE:** Ok
Come by 6
- A:** Okay. Thanks

In the discourse, the sentence structure is simple, that is, the discourse is dominated by single clause expressions with a mixture of one word sentences and abbreviations and ellipsis typical of informal conversation text. In response to A's question, PE flouts as well as opts out of the maxims of relation and quantity. The maxim of relation is flouted in that A poses a question as regards the rehearsal and ministration time precisely, while PE's response relates to the church in general. The quantity maxim is flouted here in that the most suitable response to A's question would have been "Yes, it will" or "No, it will not". In terms of the opting out the relation and quantity maxims, the addressee termed "Mama Peace" is worthy of note. In the geographical

location of the interlocutors, religious institutions refer to female executives as “Mama”. This is a form of recognition of the position of authority occupied by the female executive member. By implication, it is expected of **PE** not to disclose the rehearsal and ministration time to ordinary members since it may encourage laxity. **PE** opts out the quantity and relation maxim in that she is unwilling to cooperate with the requirement of the maxims.

From the standpoint of culture, it may be right to say **PE** suspends the relation and quantity maxims. It is usually the culture of any organization that certain information should be kept private by the members of the executive. This culture-specific phenomena forces **PE** not to directly disclose the rehearsal and ministration schedules as an executive member to an ordinary member. The implicature generated in **PE**’s response is that it is **A**’s duty to be in church whether or not the rehearsal will hold before the ministration; that it is not in **A**’s place to know the schedule for the activities.

Text 2: WhatsApp Conversation Between ‘A’ and ‘P’

- A:** How was the wedding?
It’s like I really missed
- P:** It was fine sha
We danced Cephas out
then took pictures as usual
nothing much
we left after tm
most of us didn’t attend the church wedding
- A:** When did the church wedding start?
- P:** About 5pm
- A:** Hmmm
Why that arrangement na
- P:** Was I the event manager?

In response to **A**’s messages, **P** flouts the maxims of quantity and manner. **P** gives more information than is required. The suitable response would have been “The wedding was fine. You did not miss much,” but **P** gives four other items of information besides the required two. This is regarded as a flout because **P** blatantly fails to observe the quantity maxim without any intention to mislead **A**. By virtue of **P**’s lack of clarity in expression and use of words difficult to

comprehend, **P** flouts the maxim of manner. The use of the lexical item “sha” signals uncertainty and as such there is no clarity in the response. This does not give **A** room for easy understanding of the intended message. The expression is also ambiguous. The interpretation, due to the use of “sha”, could be that the wedding was not good enough to meet **P**’s taste. It could also imply that after all said and done, the wedding was a success. The ambiguity in this is due to the fact that the tone of voice, gesticulations and facial expression which aid meaning interpretation are absent here, since this medium is computer-mediated.

Furthermore, based on her unnecessary prolixity and lack of brevity, the manner maxim is flouted on the part of **P**. She gives excess words and long-winded replies to a simple question. There is also no orderliness in her replies. The presence of “nothing much” disrupts the perceived order in her replies. The implicature generated could be that **P** deliberately gives more information than expected in order to forestall more questions from **A**. It can also be deduced that **P** gives those replies because she lacks adequate understanding of what **A** means by “It’s like I really missed”.

A inquires to find out why the arrangement was so and **P**’s reply is “Was I the event manager?” By this, **P** opts out the manner maxim. This portrays **P**’s unwillingness to cooperate with the requirement of the maxim, though it also done to evoke laughter from **A**. The implicature generated here is that **P** is not in the position to answer the question hence **A** should direct the question to the appropriate person – the event manager. The text and others previously discussed satisfies the tenet of discourse by using minor sentences. A minor sentence does not obey all the grammatical rules required of a sentence. Minor sentence includes wh- questions, sentence fragments and emotional expression. “How was the church wedding?, When did the church wedding start and Why the arrangement...?” are wh- questions deployed in the text. “Hmmm” is an emotional expression, that is, an exclamative sentence while “About 5 pm” is a fragmentary sentence among other fragmentary sentences employed in the text. Fragmentary sentences are grammatically incomplete by leaving out words but the missing words are extracted from the context by backtracking.

Text 3: WhatsApp Conversation Between ‘A’ and ‘H’

A: See it
H: Yea
 But won't it be chopping data?
A: It's this 2G subscription na.. It's unlimited
 You can download heaven and earth, but it won't finish until the appointed time
H: I'm saying for normal sub not d airtel
A: Well, I don't do any other sub
 But e go finish data o
H: Ehenn

A infringes the maxims of quantity and relation. Infringement in this case occurs as a result of A's lack of knowledge to the topic. H's question "But won't it be chopping data?" requires the simple response "Yes, it will" or "No, it won't". By virtue of A giving more information than any of the above, A infringes the maxim of quantity. H makes it known that A lacks understanding of the topic being discussed with the response "I'm saying for normal sub not d airtel." This shows that A has infringed the relation maxim, since A's reply is not in line with H's question. A goes further to flout the maxim of quantity after H enlightens him on what her question meant. He gives more information than is required. His first reply "Well, I don't do any other sub" is not required in this context, but the implicature is that A does not want to mislead H.

Text 4: Facebook Messenger Conversation Between 'A' and 'AB'

AB: U DON FINISH EXAMS?
A: Good afternoon, Sir.
 I finished my exams on the 14th oo..
 I'm writing my seminars and project
AB: U DONT WANT TO COME OR CALL. U DON TRY
A: I'm sorry sir o
 I've been quite busy. I'm under pressure right now

Syntactically, the question by AB is a polar question that demands yes or no for an answer but the interlocutor ignores that. Since the respondent is discourse conscious, A blatantly flouts the maxim of quantity which the response demands by giving extraneous information because in discourse a response is guided by certain norms. The most appropriate response in that context is "Yes, I have." Other pieces of information were not required of A. The sub-maxim of manner

which calls for brevity of information is also flouted by **A**'s response. However, the implicature of **A**'s flouting of the maxims is that by norm, one is expected to begin a new conversation by greeting the other participant(s). Hence, **A**'s reply serves as a reminder to **AB**. It also implies that **AB** is someone superior to **A** since **A** addresses **AB** as 'sir'. **A** also seeks to forestall more questions or blame by giving more information than is required. **AB**'s reply violates the maxims of relation and quality. **A** says he has finished his exams and is busy with other things while **AB**'s response talks about visiting or calling. It is a case of violation in that his reply "U DON TRY" is intentionally misleading. **AB** says the truth but implies the untrue. This prevents or discourages **A** from seeking for implicatures. However, **A** displays an understanding of **AB**'s viewpoint through the message "U DONT WANT TO COME OR CALL". It is this message that **A** gives response to and flouts the maxim of quantity. **A** gives more information by stating the busy nature of his schedule and the pressure he faces.

Text 5: Facebook Messenger Conversation Between 'A' and 'D'

- D:** I Tried His Number It Went Through So I Have Sent Him Text I Regret Eva Dating Him I Neva Knew He Is Like Dis
A: Refer all your messages and regrets to him
D: Sori About Dat

Though the chat is not selected from the beginning, **D** flouts the maxim of manner which calls for brevity and clarity in expression. **D** uses long-winded words which are not punctuated to aid adequate understanding. In response to **D**'s message, **A** opts out the maxim of relation. **A** makes it known that he is unwilling to cooperate with the requirement of the maxim. The implicature generated here is that **A** is not the right person for the conversation. Syntactically, sentence boundaries are not observed in the discourse thereby bringing the feature of informal conversation to bear on the written text. Sentences are lumped together yet the message is communicated: "I Tried His Number It Went Through So I Have Sent Him Text I regret ever Dating Him I never Knew He is Like Dis."

Text 6: WhatsApp Conversation Between 'A' and 'O'

O: Ani good morning
A: Omotee, food dey ya house? I want to come and eat. Seriously hungry
O: They Never pay my papa salary
A: I get small money to cook. I don't want to patronize cafeteria sellers. You know they don't allow cooking in the hostel na
O: I no even get pot sef... My pot dey leak
A: Ah ahn
 That your neighbour fit borrow us post na
 *pot
O: Me with that my that one fight yesterday...
A: What's the cause?
O: I caught her F**king my best friend guy
A: That's their business
 As for me, I dey hungry

In the text above, **A** flouts the maxims of quantity and relation. The reply to a greeting is expected to be another greeting. In this case, the reply on **A**'s part should have been "good morning". **A** flouts the maxim of quantity by giving more information than is required, and the maxim of relation by bringing up a discussion irrelevant to the discourse. The implicature generated here is that the two interlocutors are conversant with each other hence, the greeting is not necessary since the setting is highly informal. It also implies that **A** has been expecting **O**'s message and is impatient to respond to her greeting due to the level of his hunger.

O's response signals flouting of the quantity and relation maxims as well. Her response "They Never pay my papa salary" is in no way related to **A**'s question "...food dey ya house?" The adequate response would have been "Yes, there is food" or "No, there is no food", but **O** gives more information. There is also no relation between **A**'s message and **O**'s reply in that **A** talks about food and hunger while **O** talks about her father and the delay in the payment of his salary. **O** intentionally generates the implicature that she does not have the financial resource to cook due to the fact that her father has not sent her some money. It is this fact that **A** recognises and gives his reply that he has some money to cook, though he flouts the maxim of relevance as his response does not relate to the salary payment issue raised. **O**'s reply of having no pot further shows that she is not ready to entertain **A** in her house.

Further, in the last segment of the chat, **A**'s reply "That's their business" signals a suspension and an opting out of the maxims of relevance and quantity. **O** raises an issue which is often regarded as a taboo. This indicated by her use of the asterisks, leaving the taboo word incomplete in spelling. **A** indicates his lack of interest in the topic but emphasizes his hunger. **A** opts out of observing the maxims in that he portrays his unwillingness to cooperate with the requirement of the maxims. Using simple sentence and minor sentence is for focus and brevity.

Text 7: Facebook Messenger Conversation Between 'A' and 'W'

- W:** Just buy fresh fish every morning
A: Every morning
W: Lol
 i been de talk to my HOD that time
 By two
A: Na party food we wan cook nii...
 Which one be two fish?
 Besides, I wantu submit these stuff today. That waka no get head naun
 I calculated how much I'll spend on these seminars. It's roughly 2k
 #1,700
W: I said by 2 o'clock
 Orh
A: LOL!
 I kom dey wonder

A demonstrates a degree of linguistic incompetence and therefore, infringes the maxims of relevance and quantity. After **W** corrects himself with the phrase "By two", **A**'s replies become excessively informative where he talks about "party food", "two fish" and submission of "stuff" later that day. His reference to party food and two fish is as a result of his lack of understanding of what **W** says. His own interpretation is "buy two". The "party food", "two fish", submission of the "stuff" and expenses on the seminars are in no way related to **W**'s request for **A** to buy fresh fish by two. **W**'s response "I said by 2 o'clock" is what draws attention to the infringement of the relevance and quantity maxims. It can also be viewed from the perspective of flouting in the sense that **A** intentionally generates the implicature that he lacks the time and financial resources to purchase the fish since he will be busy later on and has what to spend money on.

Table: Non-observance of Maxims Distribution Based on Types of Maxim

Non-observance	Flouting	Violating	Opting out	Infringing	Suspending	Total
Quality	-	1	-	-	-	1
Quantity	4	-	-	2	2	8
Relation	2	1	3	2	2	10
Manner	3	-	1	-	-	4
Total	9	2	4	4	4	

From the table, it is observed that maxims were mostly flouted compared to other means of non-observance of the Gricean maxims. Of the four maxims, the maxim of quantity was mostly flouted by the interlocutors from the seven conversations analysed. This implies that the interlocutors deliberately gave more information than required to generate implicatures. The table also shows that violation of the maxims was rarely done as it records just two instances of it in the conversations analysed. Opting out, suspending and infringing of maxims had similar number of occurrences in the texts. Of the four maxims, the category of relevance was mostly unobserved by the interlocutors while the category of quality was rarely unobserved.

The analyses show that the maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner relate to language in use and not necessarily the rules of grammar because there are rules of use and rules of grammar. Rules of grammar do not dictate the output in discourse; it is actually the rules of use which do. This goes to justify Hymes (1972) submission that without “the rules of use ... the rules of grammar would be useless.” Use is actually performance which may be in speech or writing. In discourse, “performance is the product of social interaction” (p.271) as may be gleaned from the discourse texts analysed.

From the analysis, it is observed that discourse breaks syntactic restrictions on the construction of sentences and expression of meaning. Those syntactic constraints which question the grammaticality of a sentence are defied yet the utterances still remain within the bounds of grammaticality. Discourse uses discourse sentences such as declarative, imperative, interrogative, exclamative and fragmentary sentences to communicate sense between the interlocutors. Syntactic restrictions on sentence construction do not really exercise control over sentences in discourse

because discourse has its sentence style as the texts under discussion show. It is actually the sentence style that makes the text a discourse text.

Conclusion

In every exchange of language, interlocutors seek to cooperate with other participants in the conversation. One aim of this study is to make known the fact that just as the maxims of the cooperative principle can be unobserved in face-to-face communication; it can be unobserved in social media communication so long as language is the medium of interaction. This implies that humans speak through the social media. Cooperation becomes important if speakers do not want hearers to seek for meanings elsewhere. The maxims of the cooperative principle were left unobserved in all the conversations analysed. It may be right to conclude that in every conversation humans engage in, at one point or the other, one or more of the maxims can be unobserved, especially when the conversation is a lengthy one. This study justifies the fact that just as there are grammar norms in speech and in writing, there are also conversational norms in discourse.

As seen in the conversations analysed, flouting occurs more than any other non-observances. As stated above, flouting is done when a speaker deliberately leaves the hearer to seek implicatures. This implies that speakers leave hearers to a wide range of possible interpretations in conversations. Interlocutors also fail to observe the relation maxim than they did other maxims. This implies that in human communication, interlocutors mostly opt out of the relation maxim.

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Maria-Helen Ekah, Ph.D.
Department of English
University of Uyo, Nigeria
dr.mariahelen@gmail.com

Aniedi Nsibiet Akpan, B.A.

Department of English
University of Uyo, Nigeria
aniediakpan44@yahoo.com