West African Anansesem as Timeless Conversation Pieces: A Gricean Approach

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Abstract

The West African *anansesem* (short stories about the spider, *Ananse*) are considered ageless classics in many countries and continents; and their appeal has remained constant over generations. Although *anansesem* is a word taken from the Ashanti tribe in Ghana, the stories have impacted in the whole of West Africa and can also still be heard in Caribbean households. The appeal of *anansesem* is quite personal—but analysts have isolated varying characteristics; and these include linguistic, structural, characterisation, themes, plot, and a certain ambience. One quality of *anansesem,* which has enabled them to still command extensive audience, is their ability to reflect ''a conversation'' in line with Grice's maxims. Grice is a theorist in pragmatics, who outlined the salient features or maxims of verbal interactions that should govern a conversation. These four maxims are—**quantity** (make your conversation as informative as is required), **quality** (do not say what you believe to be untrue), **relation** (be relevant) and **manner** (avoid obscurity of expressions). The aim of this article is to analyse selected *ananse* stories as examples of conversation pieces in accordance with these Gricean maxims. The analyses was based on the assumption that these short stories exhibit features different from the attributes of traditional short stories, and that this difference is the essence of *anansesem's* timeless appeal. The results illustrated that despite the brevity of these stories, a certain ambience, created by their conversation-like writing style, ensures their ability to create sustaining humour, while being politically, socially, and economically relevant ''conversations'' for today.

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Introduction

Anansesem (literally meaning "matters/ tales relating to the spider") have been told and continue to be told in many countries of West Africa and the Caribbean. The word *anansesem* originated from the Akan language of Ghana; and although the stories may have originated from that region they have now acquired international status. *Anansesem* are reported to have migrated out of Africa during the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries[1]. Slaves were taken from many countries on the continent but the trans-Atlantic trade involved slaves from the western part of the African continent. The common ancestry of the people from these countries ensured that the original conversational characteristics of these stories were preserved, even in these foreign lands. What differentiated *anansesem* in these various countries was the addition or subtraction of indigenous cultural details such as those pertaining to food, clothes, names, and activities. Differences therefore, did not detract from the general structure of these stories—rather, the same ambience was created with their retelling in every new context. *Anansesem* has withstood the test of time— and although traditionally they were oral narratives, their current written and electronic forms have maintained the traditional intentions such as to educate, entertain, discipline, and unite. Additionally, the design of the stories show their common ancestry—they are in the form of conversation pieces, in line with Grice's conception of interaction between interlocutors.

The stories during the slave-trade era were told with a nostalgia that is common in the literature of the displaced people, and they were seen as linking slaves in different places, north of Africa, with their home countries. Those who were left at home and those transported told the stories with their lost relatives in mind, wondering how they were faring. *Anansesem* brought fond memories of how the diverse West African societies constructed their life realities, and how the slaves illustrated the stark differences in the way the foreigners culturally went about their businesses. The stories were seen as one aspect of the displaced people's lives that did not require any drastic transformation for their survival—unlike other aspects of their lives such as food, clothes, language, and behaviour. Sitting down and telling *anansesem* was acceptable in any environment that the displaced people found themselves—it was not threatening—it was not being told to be contrary; it was not being defiant; it was just a group of people who missed their home and used the manner and the messages of these stories to remember.

Anansesem are about a crafty character, *Ananse* (spider), who embroils himself in diverse unpalatable circumstances—usually due to a mistaken self-conception of his brilliance, and although audiences may lose patience with him during the unfolding of

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[1] https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/transatlantic

the narrative, they remain thoroughly entertained. The tales are told for many reasons—including historical, moralising, entertaining, teaching, and informing, and part of their appeal lies in the manner in which they perform these roles. Like most folklores, part of their attraction lies in their ability to speak to a certain environment and people—hence ensuring their constant relevance. These different contexts— Caribbean, West African, American, and others; have therefore, enriched the stories and have ensured their timelessness even in today's different media forms. For narratives to continuously entertain in different environments, they must have relevance to these audiences and embrace a certain format, which in the case of the *anansesem* is the conversation design.

Background to the Analyses

In the current rapidly transforming world of media, most things have a limited appeal to people before the emergence of another product, and limited life spans once an ''upgraded'' or ''upscaled'' version appears on the markets. This fact is even applicable to narratives, to an extent that genres, which were the most favoured, are no longer enjoying that status. These discussions examine the reasons why some narratives, such as the *anansesem* of West African continue to have this timeless appeal to audiences in different parts of the world.

Theoretical Framework

Our discussions on the attraction of *anansesem* and their timelessness is informed by the conversation theory of the pragmatician Grice (1975), and the allied theory of relevance by Sperber and Wilson (1986). Grice (1975) posits that there are underlying principles that determine how language is used with maximum efficiency to ensure rational interaction during communication events (Mey 1993; Thomas 1995; Yule 1996). Confusion does not usually occur because of the superordinate regulator known as the **cooperative principle**. Interlocutors come to a conversation event, narrative or story with the intention to cooperate in order for the event to unfold successfully— therefore restraining interlocutors from offering contributions not in line with the general theme of the conversation (Kaburise 2012). The notion of turn-taking in conversations is therefore, controlled by interlocutors' awareness that their contributions should further the interaction and not cause a diversion or defuse the progress of the interaction. Grice subdivides/classifies the "co-operative principle" into four maxims—quality, quantity, relation and manner.

Quality:

   a) try to make your contribution one that is true

   b) Do not say what you believe to be false

c) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence

Quantity:

a) Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the purpose of the current exchange)

b) Do not make your contributions more informative than is required.

Relation:

a) be relevant

Manner:

a) be perspicacious

b) Avoid obscurity of expressions

c) Avoid ambiguity

d) Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)

e) Be orderly.

Quality in conversation is achieved when interlocutors make truthful and appropriate contributions. During a conversation event, as interlocutors take turns, information is supplied on each occasion. Grice's maxim notes that the interaction succeeds because the interlocutors make an assumption that all contributions are truthful and there is evidence to support this. This maxim imposes conditions on the content of the contributions but not on the manner in which they can be phrased. Words and sentences, unless implied, will be understood in their literal sense. In that respect the denotative meaning is invested in words, and sentence forms and functions match— for instance, a declarative statement provides information, an interrogative statement requests information, and an imperative statement commands an action. However, users of a language do not behave in this manner; some words have become invested with positive and negative connotations and the form of our sentences do not always match our intentions. Consider the following utterances:

1) Maybe you could wash the car now.

2) I have no idea how to do this assignment that we were given last week.

3) Would you believe that Khathu is now 21?

Utterance 1 is in the form of a statement yet it is a command; utterance 2 is a declarative statement yet it functions as a request; 3 takes the form of an interrogative, and yet it is an information-giving statement. Despite this flouting of Grice's maxim of **quality,** interlocutors make meaning of conversations because users of a language agree that the truth or quality of an utterance is not dependent on the form it is expressed in. Interlocutors are at liberty to use innovative ways to express their intentions—and this they achieve by using strategies such as implicature. Interpretation of conversational implicatures is possible on the assumption that despite these individualised sentence constructions, interlocutors are still observing the maxims of quality. In such instances, interlocutors start with the most obvious literal interpretation, and if that is inappropriate in the context of the interaction, interlocutors automatically move to the next level and acknowledge that the speaker may be using some kind of implicature.

Sometimes interlocutors may use hedges or certain expressions to either violate or reduce their commitment to the **maxim of quality**. Expressions such as, *as far as I know; I'm not sure if this is true, but …; I may be wrong, but …; to the best of my knowledge…; as you probably already know; I can't say any more in this circumstance; since this was told to me in the strictest confidence*; *I probably do not need to say this but…* are attempts by speakers to manoeuvre their way out of the full observance of the maxim of quality. Despite these practices, quality, according to Grice is maintained.

Conversations are not held indefinitely—therefore, the **quantity** of information that can be provided, according to Grice, should be monitored. Grice's maxim of quality provides that we should provide just enough information to enable interlocutors to interpret each other's intentions. The implication is that if interlocutors do not observe this maxim, utterances lose their literal face value. In other words, if the quantity of your contribution is less or more than is necessary, interlocutors make the assumption that something more is meant than the mere interpretation of the words. For example,

  4) Your outfit is nice.

  5) This assignment is a reflection of you.

  6) The applicant was a student in my class from 2013–2014.

Each of these utterances, 4–6, can be said to have violated to some degree, the maxim of **quantity** depending on what the speaker actually meant. In utterance 4 the speaker, in calling the outfit **nice,** may be telling the hearer that her/his outfit is plain, just average, could be better, hence unexpected, in a negative way. The word **nice** has lost most of its semantic value and using it instead of giving more details is conveying a lot of information to the hearer. Sentence 5 in its brevity is saying a lot—negative or

positive—about the assignment. The full meaning of sentence 5 may be that the student has produced an unsatisfactory assignment. In effect, what the speaker may be saying is that the assignment shows lack of research and preparation, lack of application of the student to the topic, and basically show a below-average performance. Lastly, sentence 6 is a sample of what referees usually write about students who made no impact in the classroom. Writing a reference for anyone can create a moral dilemma—as on one hand, the referee is aware that the applicant had selected her/him because of the mistaken belief, on the applicant's part, that she/he had impressed you and had made some strong positive impression on you. On the other hand, a referee is also aware that businesses and organisations do make far-impacting decisions on references provided, and by appointing an unsuitable applicant can cost such organisations quite substantially. Caught in such a dilemma, referees may violate the maxim of quantity by providing a reference which is brief, unspecific, and vague. Huang (2007, 26) also adds that there are recognised situations and circumstances during which the speaker is not expected to follow some of these maxims. In a court of law for example, witnesses or an accused are often not expected to volunteer information, thereby violating the *maxims of quality and quantity*.

In advocating that conversations should be **relevant**, Grice was cautioning interlocutors to acknowledge all possible impinging contextual details. Relevance during a conversation event is achieved by interlocutors who make their contributions fit in terms of, for example; topic, location, occasion, words and expressions, objective, and status of the interlocutors among others. This implies that a contribution can be classified as ''irrelevant'' because of interlocutor non-acknowledgment of the multiple conditions surrounding the conversation event. For example, being colloquial and casual in language during a formal speech; using language which does not show that you are speaking to a person of higher or lower status; offering a lecture to students as if you are in a conversation with your friends, or going on at great lengths about your latest car when the topic is about support for interns would make all these contributions irrelevant. The maxim ''be relevant'' therefore, requires interlocutors to carefully ascertain the prevailing reason for their contributions before they make them.

Grice's last maxim—**be perspicacious**—admonishes us on our choice of words, phrases and expressions. This maxim therefore, refers to the surface structure of interlocutors' contributions. Words, for example, may acquire connotations which may be either positive or negative. In South Africa, words such as **Whites** and **Blacks** have connotations which they do not have in other parts of the world, while others' full semantic value is difficult to establish, for example, words such as **ubuntu** and **outdooring** (from West Africa) (Kaburise 2007; Kaburise and Klu 2014). Use and meaning of such words must be carefully negotiated so interlocutors' contributions are clear and a common understanding is arrived at by all. Ambiguous statements such as those below, should always be avoided for clarity in conversation.

7) I saw a man on the hill with a telescope.

8) The doctor's appointment was shocking

There is a mistaken notion in some circles that the use of non-common words, prolixity, and complexity in sentence construction is an indication of language sophistication—however, if such practices affect the perspicacity of the contributions, interlocutors need to rethink their utterance design.

Grice's cooperative maxims as an explanation of the interpretation of language use in conversations have generated some controversies, mainly around the role of the maxims in actually explaining the structuring of conversation (Green 1989; Neale 2005). These concerns have accumulated because of the acceptance that interpretation of interlocutors' contributions is based solely on their desire to be relevant. This has given rise to the later conversation theory— relevance theory. Originated by Wilson and Sperber (1986), relevance theory posits that utterance interpretation is mainly made possible by a general view of human cognition. The central thesis is that the human cognitive system works in such a way as to maximise the relevance of an utterance during communication interactions, and that it is part of the ''theory of mind.'' The communication principle of relevance, therefore, is responsible for the deciphering of both the explicit and implicit content of an utterance. As the name implies, relevance theory has as its central tenet the similar notion of relevance as outlined by Grice (1989), with the main difference being the categorisation into cognitive principle of relevance and secondly, communicative principle of relevance—although in Sperber (1995); Wilson and Sperber (1986, 2004) only one principle is articulated, which as a very ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of optimal relevance.

Relevance is said to be the function of two factors—normal human cognitive activities and the processing effort in establishing equilibrium in daily activitiess including communication. Cognitive principles of relevance start from the assumption that every individual comes to any new experience with an already existing accumulation of previous experiences; the same can be said when interlocutors face new utterances/stimuli during communication events. The intent of the new utterance/stimulus may impinge on the assumptions that are already established in the cognitive system. The principle is the effort an individual expends in order for the cognitive system to yield a satisfactory interpretation of the incoming utterance/stimulus. The communicative principle of relevance is based on the acceptance that interlocutors will opt for the optimal relevance in any interaction and discard low-relevance interpretations in a situation where the codes are at variance with the message. This notion also underlines the inferential model of communication, which connects the message with meaning by a sequence of inferences/implicatures.

Communication becomes successful when the hearer recognises the speaker's communicative intent and draws the relevant meaning out of the utterance. The Inferential Model of Communication avoids the challenges of the Message Model (Verma 2013) as it incorporates the notion of communication intentions and context factors.

Discussions

An examination of Grice's theory clearly indicates that it can be used to analyse conversation for various aims. The aims can include identifying how dissimilar or similar pieces of conversation are; and what had brought about the various features. Gricean theory can hence, be used to isolate factors which influence conversation such as culture, politics, economics, location, status, and society, which may all have a bearing on how interlocutors communicate. The aim of this analysis is to establish that although Grice can be expected to be writing for conversation pieces in the western world, similar patterns exist in a totally different narrative form, such as the West African *anansesem*. It is therefore the argument that differences, which could exist between conversations in two very different cultural environments are not captured when using a theory like Grice's conversation principles. The logical question at this juncture is whether *anansesem* exhibit conversation characteristics and whether they are in line with Gricean principles. The argument and analysis of the following sections show that indeed, these stories are conversation pieces—according to Gricean norms.

Quality as a conversation principle ensures that as much as possible of a narration/conversation has factual accuracies that are not far removed from the interlocutors' or the audiences' normal lives, and that this has been maintained in the stories through characterisation and context. One feature of *anansesem* is the combination of human and animal characters—hence *Ananse* is referred to in some stories—for example, *How wisdom became the property of the human race,* as Father *Ananse* or *Egya Ananse,* he has a wife and a son, known as Kweku Tsin, and lives in a village—a social unit with community members. In addition, there are animal characters such as lizard, squirrel, ants, and turtle, phenomena such as thunder and wisdom as well as objects such as , grinding stone, sticks, and cooking pots, which although not personified with human names have been invested with human attributes. Portraying *Ananse* and these other creatures as human and therefore part of a social unit behoves them to behave in a certain manner so as not to violate the human norms regulating life in the villages.

The principle of quality would be violated if these diverse characters had physical features or performed differently to what we have come to expect of them—hence in the stories the cooking pots do cook food, thunder roars and acts threatening, the white ants invade and destroy human property, and the lizards move their heads constantly.

The roles these characters perform are true to their nature, thus in *The squirrel and the Spider*, we have a hard-working, on-the-move, constantly-searching-for food squirrel. In *Why we see ants carrying bundles as big as themselves* —the ants behave in a manner that is consistent with their natural behaviour—busily running around with loads on their heads—in *Why white ants always harm man's property,* the white ants, in revenge, vow to destroy people's properties—and in *Why spiders are always found in the corners of ceilings, Ananse,* when disgraced, rushes to hide along the ceiling. Similarly, in ordinary conversations, interlocutors keep with the truth as known by all parties. In a conversation, common interpretation is only possible because interlocutors perform verbally and non-verbally in accordance with evidence and expectations. Getting the characters in *anansesem* to behave in a manner consistent with their human attributes makes whatever verbal exchange occurs to be ''true'' and according to human expectations.

With the principle of **quantity**, Grice recommends that our utterances should be structured in such a way that unnecessary, non-meaning contributions and details are be eliminated. This as elaborated on earlier ensures some economy in our choice of words, phrases, and structure of utterances—such that the full semantic value of words, what they entail, implications, and the total contribution provided by a comprehensive context are all taken into consideration. By virtue of *anansesem* being classified as ''short stories'' ensures to some extent that extraneous details are kept to the bare minimum. However, brevity of a conversation /story is not the only characteristic that Grice had in mind when formulating this principle. Stories adhere to this principle not only in the details but the whole design and structure of the story. *Anansesem,* on average, are two to three pages long—however, when narrated, they can be extended or contracted in accordance with the audience and the occasion. When told at night, around the fire, in the village centre, the audience can be enthralled for far longer periods than would a three-page story achieve. This arises because the length of the stories is determined by the occasion, or as Grice writes, "Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purpose of the exchange); do not make your contributions more informative than is required."

The telling of *anansesem* is an art form with full recognition given to factors such as the occasion, audience, context, and objective. Occasionally in the past, competitions were judged only on the way in which stories were narrated. When competing, people would focus on how captivating their manner was in the retelling of the stories. During these occasions ''props'' such as greatly exaggerated non-verbal communication, dances, and costumes were used, resulting in the need for extended dialogues. Similarly, the narration of the stories for different objectives—for example entertainment, teaching, bonding, and as a cultural activity influence the design of the telling. When the aim of the stories is to teach the essential human values of trust, respect, obedience, and loyalty to a younger audience, the amount of detail and

explanations are more precise as a certain ambience is sought. When anansesem are used to teach virtues, the desired or the undesired trait is embodied and exaggerated in one character, usually in *ananse. In *Thunder and Ananse*, the virtues of obedience, respect, and sharing are extolled and this is done by making *Ananse* more multi-dimensional, in order to embody the opposite virtues, which are shown to result in disaster, misfortune, and discontentment. This is an indication that the portrayal of the characters is dependent on factors such as the occasion or objective for telling the story. Characters are projected as either flat and one-dimensional or multi-dimensional, in relation to their roles in the stories. Characterisation and the design of the dialogue are therefore, dependent on the occasion, in accordance with Grice's maxim on **quantity**.

As short stories, anansesem are not usually noted for their attention to detail. Environmental and physical descriptions are kept to a minimum, presumably for the audience not to be ''distracted'' from the plot or due to the common background of the audience. In stories such as Ananse *and Nothing,* local food (unripe bananas with pepper, *okro,* yams, and palm oil) are included in the dialogues without any explanation. This reduces the quantity of the proffered details, while not compromising the plot's comprehension. This flexibility in the comprehensiveness of supporting details is an illustration of the commonality between the stories and conversations. Interpretation of conversational events are highly dependent on the selection of appropriate contextual clues due to the dynamic, non-static nature of conversations. The *anansesem* employ a similar strategy.

The conversation principle—**be relevant**—requires that interlocutors make their contribution relevant in the context of the utterance or the story. It is therefore, not unusual for interlocutors to utilise all contextual factors and clues to interpret a conversation in their bid to be relevant. In the case of short folk stories such as anansesem*,* the audience follows the same principle—the narrative must be relevant to their context (age, place, culture, socio-economic background, interest, among others). Relevance in *anansesem* is interestingly, generated by the subject matters around which the plots unfold. An analyses of the stories reveals one recurring theme—the expected social behaviour of the people. Most of the stories demonstrate the triumph or laudable consequences of good conduct and *Ananse,* who embodies the opposite of acceptable social behaviour, brings home to the audience the need to cultivate the correct social traits. In *Ananse and Nothing, Ananse's* untrustworthiness, greed, conniving nature, jealousy, and selfishness are amply demonstrated. The woes and trauma that he created because of these traits are intended to caution the audience, usually a young one. *Ananse's* arrogance, stupidity, lack of foresight, and impracticality are the focus of *How wisdom became the property of the human race.*

The diversity of factors impinging on the notion of relevance makes it flexible and open to different interpretations. Relevance in the context of *anansesem* relates to the relevance of the storyline to the environment and the audience. The stories are set in the villages of West Africa, where communal ideology is practiced and cultural values have significance. This requires, among other things, that one takes care of one's immediate and extended families, and that food and wealth be shared, that traditional leaders be respected and not tricked, and that harm is not perpetuated on one's neighbours. *Ananse,* throughout the stories, remain a figure of non-approbation because of his desire not to conform to these established social and cultural norms. In stories such as *Thunder and Ananse, The grinding-stone that grinds flour by itself, Ananse and Nothing* and *Why spiders are always found in the corner of ceilings, Ananse* is flouting these norms. The fact that in each case *Ananse* ends up as the loser is a testament of the relevance of these norms in the life of the community.

The *anansesem* are also relevant because of their topics. As mentioned earlier, the stories are exploited to emphasise the standards of behaviour acceptable to the communities and cultures in which they are told. Values are cultivated in young people, and these are expected to have been internalised by adulthood—hence young folks without knowledge of norms are not ridiculed— the same indulgence, however, is not extended to adults. *Anansesem* becomes an education tool for the inculcation of virtues in the younger generations. Using the stories suggests that the teaching is combined with entertainment, ensuring an enjoyable experience with profound life-changing concepts interwoven in. The continual calamities that befall *Ananse* are used to alert the young audience of the dire consequences that the lack of virtues and ignoring societal standards have. In the story of *Ananse the blind fisherman* gratitude, patience, and politeness are taught; and in *Why lizards continually move their heads up and down*, trust is the focus. In *Tit for tat* and *The squirrel and the spider* honesty, hard work, and love are emphasised; while in *Ananse and the turtle* and *The grinding-stone that grinds flour by itself,* the audience is cautioned against selfishness and greed. These topics are of relevance to a young audience to ensure that they grow up to become valuable members in a community—and are therefore, in line with Grice's admonition of relevance in conversation.

The fourth principle advocates **perspicacity,** which is related to the manner in which conversations are written or conducted. Conversations, as noted above, can become quite complex if interlocutors decide to exploit for example, strategies of implicature and inference. Interlocutors' desire to use these strategies in stating their intentions places a number of challenges in utterance construction and interpretation; such problems are not encountered with the *ananse* stories. The different versions of the *ananse* stories (Barker and Sinclaire 2007) over the years are noted for one feature, simplicity in style and the expressions used. Words and phrases are used in their literal sense— hence they have universal denotative meanings. Although the stories were

told in several languages of the West African countries, in their new homes in America, Britain, and the Caribbean the translations have not substantially transformed from the original. *Ananse* is spelt and pronounced differently—*Anansi* or *Anancy*—and contextual factors may have been altered in accordance with the part of the world where the stories are being narrated—*Ananse's* cunning nature as a ''con-artist'' and trickster, however, has been maintained throughout.

Conclusion

Concerns raised about the role of the maxims do not detract from the fact that conversations are complex endeavours and are not one-dimensional—rather, they qualify as events which are ''rigidly'' structured by rules and maxims. An analysis of a successful conversation event will demonstrate that the variables—both surface structural elements and contextual—are accorded recognition before a contribution is made in the conversation event. This ensures that interlocutors' contributions are relevant and therefore, meaningful. Folk stories such as the *anansesem* are structured along similar principles and maxims. The superordinate theory of relevance which governs conversation and ensures its interactive nature has been shown to also govern the *anansesem.* In being interactive and relevant, *anansesem* has maintained its appeal in each context where they are narrated.

Additionally, Grice conceptualised his theory within a western culture, and *anansesem* are folk stories from West Africa, yet these stories demonstrate their adherence to a common structure for conversations. Naturally, another analysis with a different aim, different theory, different *anansesem* stories, could come up with a different conclusion.

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