

# A Pragmatic Analysis of “T’i N Ba Gba Eti E” as a Precursor of Violence among Yoruba Speakers in Nigeria

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## Abstract

*Sometimes, there are pointers to an ensuing violent situation. Among Yoruba speakers in Nigeria, particularly in Southwest Nigeria, the illocution “T’in ba gba eti e” (“If I slap you”) is certainly a pointer to some ‘brewing Violence’, physically, or metaphorically. The paper’s aim is to reveal how this dependent clause functions as a precursor of physical violence i) if uttered loudly, curtly, sharply, angrily, as a **threat**, and this is usually the case; and ii) on the other hand and in fewer cases, how it could be said humorously, jokingly, casually, among friends, colleagues or siblings, and therefore would be interpreted metaphorically as a **warning**, with lesser force than the normal threat that accompanies the “statement”. The Paper relies on Pragmatics and particularly concepts like presupposition, inference, conversational implicature and relevant aspects of Speech act theory as the theoretical framework, to discuss four short discourse texts. As a participant observer and a native Yoruba speaker, instantiations of discourses involving this expression are pragmatically analyzed. The paper concludes that: i) the expression is gradually gaining ground among children or pupils, and is a signifier of violent behavior, just as it already manifests as a precursor of violence among adult Yoruba speakers; and ii) the perlocutionary effects of this statement can be pre-determined to be positive or negative, in the light of how listeners or decoders react, to curtail any violent behavior that might ordinarily follow in the long or short term, when they hear “T’in ba gba eti e.”*

*Keywords: pragmatic analysis, “gba eti e,” violence, Yoruba speakers*

## Introduction

The world has developed scientifically and technologically, to the extent that life has greatly improved for mankind in different aspects of living. Unfortunately however, violence in societies, perpetuated by mankind against fellow humans, cannot be said to have reduced commensurately. Violence within communities, families, among friends, colleagues or even siblings, occurs quite regularly and may be predicted before it occurs. Sometimes, there are pointers to an ensuing violent situation. A very significant pointer in this regard is language use. What people say and how they say it, could reveal their next line of action. Before communication breaks down and becomes violent, interlocutors can perceive such if they pay attention to the trend of discourse that unfolds during conversations. Listeners may

also perceive some brewing violence between a speaker and listener, from what they say, and how it is used.

Among Yoruba speakers in Southwest Nigeria, the expression “T'in ba gba eti e” (If I slap you!) is a pointer to some ‘brewing violence’ – physically or metaphorically. The aim of this paper is to reveal how this illocution “t'in ba gba et e” (If I slap you) is 1) a precursor of violence – if uttered loudly, curtly, sharply, angrily, as a threat, and 2) in fewer cases, a humorous joke among colleagues or friends, uttered as a warning. The illocutionary force of a threat is stronger than that of a warning; even though both the threat and the warning might eventually result into violent acts thereafter. Explaining how interlocutors understand the expression to be a threat in one instance, and warning in the other instance, is part of our task in this paper, through a pragmatic analysis of four discourse excerpts in which the expression was used.

## Literature

Violence is defined as action which causes destruction, pain or suffering; action that involves force, particularly extreme force; action that involves fighting. Figuratively, violence could refer to acts of injustice or wrong doing. (English Dictionary Online). How can one tell that a discussion or conversation would most likely result in violence? Pragmatics provides us with great insights and understanding here. Before we discuss and explain the term ‘Pragmatics’ it must be clearly stated, according to Adebite (2020:24) that:

Pragmatics, as ‘the linguistics of language use, has neither its own units of analysis, nor its own correlational objects; it is all encompassing and accommodates relevant contributions from any field of knowledge or experience that can throw light on the interpretation of utterances at any units or levels of description.

Akhimien (2019:541) defines pragmatics in great detail by highlighting different definitions of the term and its scope. He concludes with his own definition of the term with the main points summarized thus:

Pragmatics is concerned with mechanisms of and motivations behind choices made by users of language, and the effect that such have or are intended to have on the audience; it studies variables that constrain or govern speakers’ choices in verbal interactions such as the range of speech events, acts performed, participants, relationship, shared background knowledge, etc. and how they affect what is verbalized or unverballed; also it involves speaker’s intentions and how interlocutors make meaning of what is said or heard.

In the same vein, Adebite (2020) discusses the term “pragmatics” from different perspectives, highlighting nine different definitions that underlie the mean-

ing, scope, focus and concerns of Pragmatics, from Morris (1938) to Wilson (2006). From the nine definitions, two stand out distinctly as being particularly relevant to the focus of this paper. First, pragmatics is the study of the linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed (Stalnaker, 1970, in Adegbite, op.cit.). Second, pragmatics is the study of meaning as communicated by a speaker (or writer) and interpreted by a listener (or reader)... Pragmatics is the study of speaker meaning... Pragmatics is the study of contextual meaning... pragmatics is the study of how more gets communicated than what is said (Yule, 1996, in Adegbite 2020:21).

When a speaker addresses a listener, it must be understood that certain conversational principles are at work. Both the encoder and decoder understand the language of discourse and can ordinarily understand the meanings of words uttered within the verbal space, as well as presuppositions. Likewise, conversational implicatures are deduced or arrived at, particularly when the discussants share common ground or common knowledge. In other words, cultural and situational contexts are considered in the interpretation of meaning. In fact, speakers of any language can use the sentences of that language to convey messages which do not bear any relation to the linguistic content of the sentence used (Kempson 1977:68). This is because the participants rely both on their knowledge of their common language system, and the cultural situational factors of the specific communicative event they are engaged in.

We briefly define the term inference, implicature and presupposition, which shall be useful in the analysis and discussion of the data in this study. Inference refers to the derivation of a specific conclusion from specific premise. An inference could be a logical inference or a deductive inference (Atolagbe 2010:65). Implicature is that which 'a speaker can imply, suggest, or mean, as distinct from what the speaker literally says.' There is conventional implicature and conversational implicature (Leech, 1983). The former is determined by the conventional meaning of the words used, while the latter is determined by an understanding of the general principles of conversation and maxims which speakers obey normally in conversation, such as the cooperative principle (and its four maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner (Grice 1981). Presupposition can be defined in terms of assumptions which the speaker makes about what the hearer is likely to accept without challenge (Givon 1979:50), the notion of 'assumed common ground' of the participants in the conversation (Stalnaker 1978:321). Atolagbe (2010:64-65) explains these basic terms in some detail; so do Osisanwo et al (2018).

Speech Act Theory, as propounded by Austin (1962) and developed further by Searle (1969) provide the main theory that serves as the theoretical framework for this study. Further studies in the field of Pragmatics, such as Mey (2001) prefer to discuss Austin and Searle's illocutionary acts as practs. We would rather reserve illocutionary acts in their five basic classes of Assertives, Directives, Commissives,

Expressives, Declarations, for this study; they provide the major 'Macro' illocutionary arts, under which threats, warnings etc. as 'Practs' can be freely discussed. There is the locution, then the illocutionary act and then the perlocutionary act which could be a violent act.

## Methodology

Four discourse texts sourced from conversations in which this writer was an active observer, are presented and analysed as data for this study, using Pragmatics as the theoretical framework. Some basic concepts which enhance our understanding of the discourse texts are employed in the data analysis and discussion.

## Data: Analysis and Discussion

### Discourse text 1

2 Street Urchins (Motor park touts) at the Bus station (or Motor park) collecting daily returns or payment from transporters/commercial drivers.

*Speaker A: Ola, owo to pa da? (where's the money you collected?)*

*Speaker B: Ah ah, se bi eyin na pa owo ti yin? (What? But you too have collected some money, and it's with you)*

*Speaker A: O ya were ni? T'in ba gba eti ẹ! (Are you mad? If I slap you) (shouting and moving towards speaker B)*

*Other colleagues move in, holding both speakers, who were about to start fighting.*

## Analysis

There is some common ground shared by the discussants, as well as shared (cultural knowledge). This is the fact that: Each of the touts is expected to collect as much payments as possible for the day from the commercial drivers. Such collections are to be retired to the senior/supervisory officers daily to enhance the promotion or upward social and economic mobility of each tout. There is some presupposition, subsuming some entailments here, namely: Speaker A is senior to Speaker B in some capacity – by age, rank or whatever, hence he believes Speaker B should submit his own 'collections' for the day to Speaker A. This can be inferred from his indirect speech act in form of a question which functions as a directive illocutionary act: Ola, where's the money you collected? And, consequently from the subtle refusal to surrender the 'collections' by Speaker B, in form of an assertive, and the use of a pronominal expressing respect – "Eyin" (you + respect) which is common among the Yoruba when addressing a singular, senior or superior person; senior or

superior in age, economic or political status or power, etc. Speaker B replies “what? But you too have collected some money and it’s with you.”

Then comes the interesting part- Speaker A feels his face has been threatened by Speaker B, Ola, so the former replies angrily, immediately followed by a threat: Are you mad? If I slap you! in other words, Speaker A infers that as a ‘senior colleague’ to Speaker B, how dare Speaker B challenge him by refusing to submit his collections for the day to him Speaker A. The comments accompanying the discourse text reinforce the threat – ‘shouting and moving towards Speaker A’ – suggesting that a fight was about to ensue, as a perlocutionary act.

Ordinarily in such circumstances, when other colleagues standing close by hear ‘t’in ba gba eti e’, they understand the conventional and conversational implicatures playing out from the context of this discourse and would swiftly try to prevent a brawl or a fight. If on the other hand, no one attempts to intervene or mediate between such interlocutors, instances of severe fighting, escalating into groups or gangs supporting either party, resulting in severe casualties, have been known to break out at these motor parks. In essence, this dependent clause in Yoruba ‘t’in ba gba eti e’ has come to be associated with some potential violence in a discourse context such as this, and can be said to be a precursor of violence.

### Discourse text 2:

*Wife:* *Daddy Kemi, what of the money you promised to give me? This is your second or third bottle of beer today.*

*Husband:* *And so? T’in ba gba eti e (The wife walks away, grumbling and muttering some words to herself).*

### Analysis

In this very brief discourse text, there is some common ground shared by husband and wife, as well as shared (cultural) knowledge. These can be explained by the following facts: The Yoruba wife respects her husband and does not normally call him by his first name, hence she addresses him by their child’s name - ‘Daddy Kemi.’ There is the understanding that the husband is the breadwinner who provides financially for his wife, despite the fact that the wife works and earns some income (even if more than the husband). There has been some prior agreement that the husband would give his wife some money for some needs.

Then come some presuppositions and inferences, based on the following premises. (1) My husband is spending money to drink beer – 2, 3 bottles and he may still drink some more. (2) My husband (as before) may refuse to give me the previously agreed amount of money if he continues this way, so I must ask him now.

Expectedly, as the wife makes her request, supporting it with her observation

of her husband's drinking habits, the husband reacts negatively. His face has been threatened by his wife's remarks. Reacting from the position of the 'more powerful, senior partner' in the conversation or discourse, he retorts *t'in ba gba eti e!* Realizing the potency of this threat, and not just a warning to stop nagging or harassing him for money, the wife walks away, muttering some words to herself in disappointment or resignation to her fate.

This discourse text is contextually similar to the previous text, in the sense that the discussants are certainly not 'equals' in the situational context and culture of the Yoruba setting, thereby enhancing the usage of this Yoruba clause as a threat and precursor of violence. If the wife did not walk away, the probably tipsy or drunk husband could stand up to physically assault her, resulting in domestic violence. The locutionary act would have proceeded not just to the level of an illocutionary act of a threat, but further still to the perlocutionary act of domestic violence.

### Discourse text 3

A brother and sister watching 'cartoon' on television (DSTV)

Brother: Maureen, change it to 'cartoon network' now. ↴

Sister: But you've watched your own. ↵ Let me watch my own too now. ↴

Brother: I said you should change it! ↵ T'in ba gba eti e. ↴

Mum: (Their mum interrupts them) Stop it! ↵ You want to start again, abi? ↴

### Analysis

In this discourse text, the brother (8 years old) was two years older than the sister. However, a similar incident has been witnessed, where the brother was the younger sibling, but by virtue of being a boy, he felt he could bully his slightly older sister.

As revealed in the previous discourse texts discussed above, there are two interlocutors here. The older one, as in discourse text 1, initiates the conversation with a locutionary act which is a clear directive illocutionary act, an outright command. Similarly, as in discourse text 1, the younger sister, wielding less power and authority, subtly refuses to obey. She first asserts in Nigerian English "But you have watched your own", following it up quickly with a request which is also a directive. "Let me watch my own too now". The tones employed are indicated for a better understanding. The brother who also feels his face is being threatened by the seeming act of disobedience from his sister, swiftly gives a counter order or directive, followed by the popular Yoruba threat he has heard in adult discussions – *t'in ba gba eti e'*. Interestingly, many Yoruba adults know the conversational implicature of this popular clause *t'in ba gba eti e'*, as a precursor of violence, so it is no wonder that the mother swiftly interrupts as a mediator. The mother issues her own authoritative command, which over-rules both the brother and the sister's positions.

It is most likely that the mother would change the television station entirely, or drive both siblings away to engage in some other tasks – school work or house chores, where a male child is not made to feel superior to the female. On the other hand, if it is a home where boys are made to feel superior, especially older brothers, as in some African (or Yoruba) families, the discussion might end differently, with the mother taking sides with the brother, who would have his way, while the young girl is lectured on the virtue of being a girl, lady, or woman and told to engage in ‘female chores’ rather than watch television all day.

From personal experience, young African (or Yoruba) male children who have been encouraged, especially by their mothers, to behave like the boy in this discourse text, have sometimes grown up with an entitlement of ‘superiority’ over females and have sometimes been guilty of domestic violence. This would be an interesting area of research to investigate further, as we do not intend to make any authoritative claims in this regard. The fact remains however, that more children, more younger persons among Yoruba speaking communities in Southwest Nigeria, whether male or female, are beginning to use this expression in similar circumstances, where they think they need to assert their seniority, superiority or even their legitimate rights, especially when they feel that their face has been threatened. This is a developing trend, an observed and almost certain precursor of violence, which should not be allowed to fester, because of its eventual negative consequences.

#### Discourse text 4:

Two friends/colleagues ‘gisting’

Speaker A: Bros, you and that girl again. I saw you going out together again today.

Speaker B: Oh, you saw me? It’s not who you think O. It’s actually....

Speaker A: You think I’m a kid? That girl, that slept in your house for almost one week the last time.

Speaker B: T’in ba gba eti ẹ! You’re not serious! What if my wife hears you? (He grins)

(Both look at each other and burst into laughter).

#### Analysis

The situational context of this discourse is slightly different from those of texts one to three discussed earlier, in the sense that both parties in the discussion are friends and colleagues, even though there may be a slight difference in age or socio-economic status of the two men; Speaker B is certainly married and probably older, unlike Speaker A who may still be a bachelor. Speaker A initiates the discourse, ac-

cusing Speaker B of infidelity, although in a jovial manner. Calling Speaker B 'Bros' suggests some act of respect or politeness, as well as indicating some informal relationship between them.

There is a lot of shared common ground and shared cultural knowledge between both Speakers. These include the following unspoken facts which serve as premises on which the discussion is based: Speaker B has been seen before with the girl in question. They had been seen going out together before. In fact, the girl had slept in Speaker B's house for at least a week before. Speaker B has a wife. It is presupposed and inferred that Speaker B is unfaithful to his wife and Speaker A is concerned about this act of infidelity, so the latter challenges the former with assertives that are not severely face threatening, using marked politeness or positive politeness. Speaker B initially admits his 'offence' by replying 'oh, you saw me', but quickly retracts his admission on realizing both the conventional and conversational implicatures of his illocutionary act encased in the questioning illocution. 'It's not who you think', he exclaims; the 'o' at the end of the sentence representing an exclamation. But Speaker A would not buy into the deception as he provides more concrete evidence to support his earlier claim and accusation of infidelity.

Realizing that the game was up and he could no longer hide his unfaithfulness to his wife from his friend, Speaker B attempts to get Speaker A to shut up or keep quiet over the matter and issues a warning jocularly by saying "t'in ba gba eti e". The locutions which follow this warning, coupled with the grin afterwards, reduce the force of the popular threat, to that of a warning- 'stop this joke my friend' is the meaning here. Metaphorically, Speaker B's warning to his friend and colleague is to the effect that the latter should consider the implications of his wife over-hearing their discussion, or getting to know of his adulterous escapades, hence Speaker A should end the discussion. Certainly a physical fight would ordinarily not have followed, as the discourse ends with a look at each other's faces as they burst into laughter.

## Summary and Conclusion

It has been observed in the data analysed that:

1. The discussants or participants normally share some common ground and shared (cultural) knowledge, as well as the same linguistic background.
2. Some premises provide the basis for presuppositions and inferences made by the speakers/listeners, who take on reversal roles of Speaker and listener consecutively. The presuppositions subsume entailments of some kind.
3. All of the above, further the direction of the discourse, as different locutions play out as different illocutionary acts – assertive, directive and expressive in particular. These speech acts (which otherwise may be seen as practs) carry out the various



functions of language – emotive, expressive, affective; conative, directive, vocative, from the perspectives of the addresser and addressee (Jakobson 1960, Osisanwo et al, 2018).

4. Faces are threatened through different categories of Impoliteness; impoliteness being more likely to occur when the speaker is more powerful than the addressee (Culpeper 1996:354).
5. The conversation or discourse gradually moves towards the **usual threat** ‘t’in ba gba eti e’ or the **less common warning** ‘t’in ba gba eti e’; resulting in some perlocutioanry act of violence if not properly understood and resolved amicably by the direct participants or third party participants who get involved in some damage control.

In conclusion, among Yoruba speakers, the expression “t’in ba gba eti e” (If I slap you) is becoming rampant among both the young and elderly and could be an indicator of some brewing violence, especially if it is uttered loudly, curtly, sharply, angrily as a threat, and this is more often the case. On the other hand, it could be said humorously, casually, among friends, colleagues or siblings, with less pragmatic force, and to be interpreted as a warning. Either way, the expression is a precursor of violence if not understood and handled socio-pragmatically. Speakers and listeners must therefore understand the context of use when they hear ‘t’in ba gba eti e’ and act circumspectly.

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