

## **Linguistic manipulation realised on Hoatiti Facebook political statements and comments: A gricean relevance maxim violation**

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**Abstract** - Adherence to Grice's maxims assumes that speakers and writers engaged in a conversation are understandable to both their listeners/readers such that words used do not have ambiguous or overlayed meanings that can be misinterpreted to deviate from the actual intended meanings. This study outlines how interlocutors communicate in digital spaces in cases where either the writer/reader does not fully cooperate in a conversation thus violating the Relevance Maxim in political discussions. The proposed study objective is to assess the degree of relevance in political posts and responses, examining whether followers maintain focus on the topic under discussion, or if they deviate into tangential or irrelevant issues on the Hoatiti Facebook page. Therefore, the study is premised on a qualitative method approach limited to a case study. It comprises of Hoatiti Facebook group page randomly extracted statements n=3 and comments n=5 (3x5) to allow for interaction analysis between the writers and the readers using purposive-convenience sampling. Data is analyzed thematically and inductively. The theoretical undertaking to guide this study is premised on Sperber & Wilson's theory expounded on the 1985 Relevance theory and built on the Gricean model of pragmatic inference and conversation. The findings of the study revealed various fallacies including ad-hominem, tangential, red-herring, or personal attacks fallacies that violated the relevance maxim. It therefore recommends that for interlocutors to stay informed about a topic they must critically evaluate the statements before responding to contribute and give meaningful insights to the conversations through literacy campaigns to inform them of the importance of relevance in online political conversations.

**Keywords:** Facebook, Flouting, Grice's Relation Maxim, Linguistic Manipulation, Violation

## **1. Introduction**

Currently, much attention focuses on how followers are manipulated on Facebook political discussions. As a result, adherence to Grice's maxims assumes that speakers and writers engaged in a conversation ensures that they are understandable to both the writers and readers such that the words used do not have any overlaid meaning. Researching the maxim of relevance in political communication is critical in shaping public discourse, influencing political perceptions, and maintaining democratic integrity. Political leaders or politicians often manipulate relevance in order to spread false narratives to give misleading information. As a result, politicians often exploit irrelevant or tangential arguments to distract from core issues, misleading their followers. In the era of polarisation, political discourse irrelevance can be analyzed to expose manipulative rhetorical strategies that can deepen divisions. Therefore, other than manipulation of text, communication on Facebook according to Sperber & Wilson in Harju & Lillqvist (2018) has also been frequently violated and breached the optimum relevance presumption for its own economic gain attracted through retaining its users. This according to Harju and Lillqvist has been achieved by manipulating context to best suit its advantages because without obscuring the context, it would expose its shortcomings. Shigapova, Tivova, Morozova & Sabirova, (2021) are also of the view that manipulation is realized in political speeches as they contain certain tactics and strategies in most political dialogues intending to manipulate others to achieve their aims of persuading the readers or Facebook followers.

Hence, violating the relevance maxim has several consequences such as public distrust, democratic instability, and poor decision-making because Facebook users never realize the techniques employed by politicians and continue using its services. Understanding how relevance is violated or used strategically can aid in identifying and eliminating future disinformation in political dialogue. Thus, identifying irrelevance patterns in political dialogue through social media platforms such as Facebook which is viewed as promoting and escalating tensions and inciting violence can be mitigated to promote responsible discourse. By addressing these issues, Facebook can maintain a responsible and political culture as a trusted information social media platform.

### **1.1 Research Gap**

While previous studies have explored political discourse in different settings such as misinformation, framing, and defamation etc, there is still a gap in relation to the maxim of relevance in political discourse. This is because these studies have not so far addressed nor explored how language manipulation flouts, violate or obscure the relevance maxim in political settings. Identifying this gap helps guide future research in understanding how violations of relevance impact public perceptions and democratic processes. Addressing the gap can further contribute to an in-depth understanding of linguistic manipulation on social media platforms especially in relation to relevance in Facebook political discussions.

### **1.2 Purpose of The Study**

The purpose of the study is to investigate the value of political discussions by concentrating on Facebook followers' effectiveness in observing relevant political discussions. Deliberations on Facebook political group pages often suffer interferences caused by followers' failure to stick to the topic under discussion leading to misinterpretations or derailing of fruitful deliberations. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate Hoatiti Facebook group followers to find out how well they observe Grice's relevance Maxim which emphasises that contribution to a conversation should be relevant. It also focuses on locutionary relevance which asserts the literal meaning of an utterance must align with the communicative purpose and the context in which it is delivered. In political discourse, maintaining locutionary relevance ensures both the writer's and reader's conversation is clear and meaningful and directly addresses the issue at hand. Failure to maintain relevance can lead to violence, confusion, misinformation, and strategic public discourse.

### **1.3 The Aim of The Study**

Hence, the study aims to investigate the extent to which political dialogue is manipulated on Facebook political group pages based on Grice's relevance maxim i.e., to find out how readers comprehend and interpret messages regarding the maxim of relation and locutionary relevance. The study is therefore

guided by the research question to dig deeper into the quality of conversations within the Hoatiti political group page and the transparent implications of political discourse on Facebook political platforms.

#### 1.4 Research Question

RQ1: To what extent do Facebook political followers adhere to Grice's Relevance Maxim when responding to posted Facebook comments or topics?

RQ2: How often do posted statements on the Hoatiti Facebook Political group page remain relevant to the topic posted?

The objective of researching Facebook users' or political followers' adherence to the Maxim of Relevance in communication is to understand how the audience engages with posted statements and how it affects the quality of discourse. This is also to assess the degree of relevance in political posts and responses, examining whether followers maintain focus on the topic, or if they deviate into tangential or irrelevant issues that might sometimes trigger misinterpretations.

#### 1.5 Literature Review

Manipulation of public opinion is not new on social media and has been present from era to era through disinformation, launching, personal attacks, truncated information, and so forth to divert attention from the main issue or topics under discussion to promote manipulative political ideologies (Kulichenko & Polyezhaev, 2020). These according to Aliyeva, Borymska, Kyshenia, Kovalchuk & Zoya (2023) are strategies or methods used by politicians daily to achieve personal or partial goals. This is supported by Van Emeren (2017) stating that it is deceptive as it is often intentional and concealed, meaning the writer deceives the reader by wanting them to perform an act in their own interest. Krisagbedo, Eze & Mamah (2021) are of the view that the power of language in manipulation is established at the discourse level because it is a fact that both language and thought are intertwined as language controls the cognitive process of human beings which allows manipulation to happen. According to Van Dijk (2006), manipulation is a form of illegitimacy through discourse to influence others to perform acts in the manipulator's best interest which is against the manipulated's awareness.

Since one's thoughts are not visible or transparent for others to see, it is through language that people's thoughts can be analyzed by converting them into discourse (Akwanya (2005). Therefore, political groups are capable of manipulating the less powerful through controlling their minds. This according to Krisagbedo, et.al., (2021) validates the fact depending on one's status, power realized in the political class is crucial in controlling the minds of others in a given society as those in power have access to social media which enables them to manipulate the masses.

Therefore. Cooperation is very crucial in any conversation to avoid any form of misunderstanding or taking advantage of another person. According to Grice's cooperative principle, interlocutors try to be as cooperative as possible to make appropriate utterances to keep the conversation moving to solve a problem or an argument (Birner, 2013). As a result, the conversation must continue but appropriately, whether they are arguing, disagreeing, etc which could sound as if they are being uncooperative, but the fact is they are being cooperative. Sticking to the topic under discussion and making utterances that can be interpreted to complete their thoughts and being relevant without confusing the other person is regarded as being cooperative. According to Grice (1975), writers and readers can't engage in a successful argument if the other is being uncooperative in the discussion because they would not contribute enough to the conversation.

Similar to Grice, Finnegan (1988), in Davies (2000) also assert that for a conversation to be successful, interlocutors rely on each other by cooperating to achieve an effective conversation to be explicitly understood. Hence, the cooperative principle by Grice describes how people engaged in a conversation can achieve an effective conversation in social situations to mutually accept each other and be understood in a certain manner. Yule (1996) and Grundy (2000) are of the view that the cooperative principle plays a vital role in pragmatics hence, Grice proposed that "Make your contribution such as required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged." Therefore, the cooperate principle was thus divided into four maxims by Grice to describe the principles people followed in a quest to succeed in an effective conversation. Grice's four Maxims are some forms of rules or expectations that people must follow in a conversation (Grice, 1975). These are the maxim of quantity, (providing necessary information), the maxim of quality (avoid saying what is not true) maxim of manner (be clear and to the point), and lastly, the maxim of relation (utterance

relation to the context) According to Ngenget (2017), the relation maxim can only be fulfilled if an utterance can be construed by the reader as contributing towards the conversation's goal.

### **1.6 Theoretical framework**

The theoretical undertaking guiding this study was premised on Sperber & Wilson's Relevance Theory built on the Gricean model of pragmatic inference and conversation coined in 1985. The theory of Relevance postulates the importance of the Cognition principle and Communication Principle as its basic principles (Napis, 2008; Igaab and Al-Bdeary, 2016). What the theory states is that the purpose of communication is for the reader or hearer to interpret the utterance as having optimum or ideal relevance to them in the context, depicting the discourse prominent in a way and thus valuable to the reader or hearer interest (Sperber & Wilson, 1987).

However, the expectation is such that the communication should not be irrelevant but relevant at all costs otherwise it would result in miscommunication. "What is communicated in Facebook conversations is interpreted against an immensely rich and varied canvas of a context that is not limited to the immediate context" Harju & Lillqvist (2018). Provided that followers and users are unaware of the deception of Facebook's manipulative statements, it remains a challenge for them to collectively resist manipulation.

Because the relevance maxim has a single sub-maxim stating that interactants must always be relevant in a given dialogue, Grice, (1975) asserts that the word 'relation' would therefore, refer to the relation of the utterance and the general context. The connection between Grice's relation maxim is closely connected with Sperber and Wilson's theory of relevance making it become closely intertwined to Grice's Relation Maxim as an improved version. It is an explanation of behaviors realized in conversation in terms of information provided during each turn in a conversation. As a result, Grice (1975) postulates that when interlocutors are engaged in a conversation it is assumed to be relevant.

## **2. Methodology**

This section includes research design, data collection instruments, participants/samples, procedure of data collection, and data analysis. This study adopted a qualitative method approach confined to a case study to analyze extracted Facebook statements and comments. The focus of the study was to spot if the comments failed to observe the relation maxim rule. This made it possible to answer the stated research questions on what linguistically manipulative statements were realized in Grice's relation maxim on Hoatiti's Facebook page comments and also the violation and flouting of the relation Maxim as realized on Hoatiti statements and comments that could cause misinterpretations.

### **2.1 Paradigm**

This research is premised on hermeneutics as an interpretivist qualitative paradigm to offer a profound comprehension of how and why politicians manipulate Grice's Relevance Maxim in their statements and comments. It places a strong emphasis on understanding the context in which conversations occur to understand why the maxim is manipulated. When applied to political talk, it assists in understanding how political conversations are deliberately manipulated.

### **2.2 Sample**

The study comprised Facebook extracted statements and comments from the Hoatiti political group page using a purposive-convenience sampling with intentionally selected content that allowed turn-taking in the political discourse identified. The small sample size of statements and comments from the Hoatiti group page statements  $n=3$  and comments  $n=15$  (3x5) allowed for interaction between the writers and the readers. However, the researcher was cognisant of the fact that the selection of a small sample could impact negatively on the generalizability of the population in terms of sampling bias and sampling error. To overcome or address the challenges of using small sample sizes the Facebook text ought to be selected deliberately to replicate political talk that is crucial to the study and as a result, it can strengthen the representativeness of a small sample. This mitigated the limitations of the small sample but still supplied significant and reliable insights. Data was later analyzed thematically through inductive thematic analysis procedures and the comments and statements were later translated into English as indicated in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** Extracted Statements and comments from Hoatiti Facebook page for analysis

Extract 1	Extract 2	Extract 3
<b>Post:</b> BREAKING NEWS: Prime Minister oa itokolla. #MapholiFM. <i>(BREAKING NEWS: The Prime Minister Resigns. #MapholiFM).</i>	<b>Post:</b> Taba ea hore Mokhothu e tla ba Tona Kholo ke leshano le tsoileng matsoho. <i>Information on Mokhothu becoming the Pime Minister one day is a lie.</i>	<b>Post:</b> Happy Birthday ho Moetapele oa DC among fela Ntate Mokhothu. <i>Happy Birthday to Democratic Congress's only leader Mr Mokhothu.</i>
<b>Comment 1</b> Tlo bone comment ea Libuseng. <b>Come and see Libuseng's comment.</b> <b>Comment 2</b> U sure u ntso batla re supporte taba ea hore u fuoe license. <b>Are you sure you need our support to get a license.</b> <b>Comment 3</b> Yes, ke e bone tona kholo ea Hait. <b>Yes, I saw Hait's President.</b> <b>Comment 4</b> Lenyora. <b>Thirst</b> <b>Comment 5</b> Motho ea sebeletsang ho flop license hakaalo. <b>A person who so much want to jeopardise his chances of getting a license.</b>	<b>Comment 1</b> Seshabo sena ha se batle o se jelle ruri, ha se senye ka maleng fela!! (canvassing beans). <b>This food does not need to be eaten frequently it can destroy your abdomen.</b> <b>Comment 2</b> Joale ke phoso ha fana ka linaoa? <b>Is it wrong to give out beans?</b> <b>Comment 3</b> Moloi ke uena. <b>You are a witch/wizard.</b> <b>Comment 4</b> Ke ea kholoa mmau o nyonyela leshano. <b>I trust your mother despises for lies.</b> <b>Comment 5</b> U tsoa kae? <i>Where are you from?</i>	<b>Comment 1</b> Mokhothu o ntsa phela? <b>Is Mokhothu still alive?</b> <b>Comment 2</b> Banna! Le ea hola lesholu la Molimo. <b>Man! God's thief is aging.</b> <b>Comment 3</b> Le Matekane oa hola haufinyane. <b>Matekane will also be celebrating his birthday soon.</b> <b>Comment 4</b> Joale re etseng ha a hola? <b>What do you expect us to do with his birthday?</b> <b>Comment 5</b> Re molakaletsa mahlohonolo le Bophelo bo botle. <i>We wish him all the blessing and a healthy life.</i>

#### Relevance Criteria

- Off-topic responses
- Personal attacks
- Emotionally charged rhetoric does not contribute to the discussion.

#### Data Collection

Manual Coding: The author reviewed every  $n=15$  comment under the three statements/posts to categorize them as relevant, irrelevant, or partially relevant.

### 2.1 Ethical Consideration

For ethical considerations, informed consent was issued to the Hoatiti Facebook group to use the statements and comments from its wall to extract data for the study. Permission was granted stipulating the type of information to be used and the purpose of the study. Hence permission was granted through a letter. Issues of anonymity were also clearly stipulated in the consent forms that the names and identities of the users were to be protected and the study would not mention their names but assign codes where necessary to their responses.

**Data Validation:** To ensure data validation the study's findings about adherence to the Maxim of Relevance in political discussions on Facebook are deemed *accurate* and *reliable* through the following;

**Confirmation Bias:** The researchers' own political biases or preferences did not influence the categorization of responses as relevant or irrelevant.

**Selection Bias:** Ensured that the posts and comments selection for the study represented a balanced cross-section of political views and opinions rather than skewing toward one side of the political range.

**Contextual consideration:** The author considered examining how emotional language or framing of the post could influence the relevance of responses, as a result, it was considered when validating whether a response was truly off-topic or if it was addressing an emotional subtext.

### 3. Results

This section indicates whether the maxim of relation maxims have been observed or not in the comments and statements. The following Extract has a total of 5 comments responding to the extracted statement. Irrelevance of statements between interlocutors is realized when used to introduce an irrelevant piece of information that distracts both the reader and listener. This could be intentional or unintentional. As a result, the misconceptions committed on Hoatiti seem to be intentionally committed to influence and mislead others. Therefore, further findings revealed Hoatiti Facebook group users' tendency to divert away from the topics under discussion by introducing irrelevant topics within a dialogue by distracting other readers away from the original conversation through red herring fallacies. This happens when an unfavorable topic is introduced, and the readers attack the writer rather than addressing the problem itself, making the statement *ad hominem*.

These violations of the relevance maxim are realized through fallacies of relevance as they concern statements that seem relevant although they are not but are used to distract interlocutors from the discussion. They are categorized as formal and informal fallacies that include logical, red herring, and *ad-hominem* fallacies, tangential arguments, and personal attacks discussed next.

#### 3.1 Red Herring Fallacy

Findings revealed followers respond irrelevant to the posted statement in order to divert attention away from the main posted statement. It can be assumed that the goal of the followers is to distract and mislead other followers or readers to lose focus from what has been originally posted on Facebook. For example, in Extract 3 above the writer wishes the Democratic Congress (DC) leader a happy birthday but from the responses, most of the comments seem to be deviating from the statement but coming up with other issues such as if he is still alive and personally attacking the political leader.

The implication is that the reader or follower intentionally avoids the topic by diverting the discussion to something irrelevant to what has been stated sometimes because they feel uncomfortable with the topic, or they want to manipulate the conversation by using a strategy to mislead others by diverting attention in a different direction.

#### 3.2 Ad-Hominem Fallacy

Hoatiti Posted Facebook political statements are also realised to personally attack the writer which is regarded as an *ad-hominem* fallacy. This happens when the comments attack the attribute of the person posting the statement. For example, Extract 2 states that DC shall never rule even in the next life. The responses do not comment on the Breaking news but instead personally attack the writer or poster to the point of insulting the person.

All three comments responding to the statement, have violated, flouted, and failed to observe the maxim of relation. From the above-mentioned extract, readers commenting on the statement fail to observe the relevance maxim. The comments are mostly violated and flouted through sarcastic responses that are disguised as humor. Writers violate the maxim of relevance by implying some facts as important when they are not (Betti, 2020). The writers responding in the comments are swaying the conversation by not denying what is being uttered but deciding to talk about irrelevant issues such as when the political leader canvassed with soya beans. The irrelevance in the statements was also realized when some statements asked whether the person was a witch or where it asks where the writer came from.

The Facebook writers through their comments from the above statements switch the conversation as realized from Extract 3 fail to observe the maxim of relation by not sticking to what is relevant in a conversation. If the Democratic Congress (DC) Political leader is being given well wishes for his birthday and the comments from other writers state a completely different response regarding the utterance by mentioning that he is a thief, asking whether he is still alive or "why care if it is his birthday". As a result, readers easily divert other readers' attention away from the original discussion topic or avoid responding to the topic or question stated. The relevance maxim requires the Writer and reader to be relevant to the context and situation in which the utterance occurs (Thomas 1995). The responses from the conversation should not say much more than the utterance requires. Meaning, the responses in a dialogue should not be irrelevant to what is being discussed.



### 3.3 Tangential Fallacy

The findings also revealed a disconnection from the discussion. The comments were mostly irrelevant from all three extracts as they had no bearing on the topic posted. The conversation goes off from one direction and does not link or connect. As a result, it causes other followers or readers to feel tangential and not relevant to the conversation. It starts with a certain topic and then gets sidetracked to go on a tangent. For example, in Extract 1, the writer states that the Prime Minister resigns from government and the responses or comments deviate from the topic by indicating different issues from the topic (see Extract 1 comments under table 1). It can be assumed to be a communication disorder in which readers and followers lack focus by never returning to the preliminary topic.

The assumption is that Hoatiti Facebook followers and readers reroute or divert the discussion to attract a larger audience or even confuse others involved in the conversation by introducing vague statements just in the middle of a discussion to sway away from the original topic. However, findings also revealed that it is not always the case that people who commit fallacies always intend to manipulate others. Sometimes, it is done without realizing it, and it can sometimes be acceptable to change the subject or topic. It is suggested that interlocutors critically assess and evaluate Facebook statements and their arguments to respond thoughtfully to avoid being irrelevant.

## 4. Discussion

The focus of this study lies in the application of Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory to analyze linguistic manipulation in political statements and Facebook political comments. Findings from the statements revealed that the relevance maxim was not observed as interlocutors seemed to alter and manipulate the topics of the conversation intentionally or unintentionally involving the strategic use of language to shape public opinion, persuade followers, and influence political discourse. Therefore, in the context of Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory adopted by the study, (which posits that communication is guided by the principle of achieving maximum cognitive relevance with minimal processing effort), political leaders and those who comment on posts often violate the maxim of relevance to achieve explicit rhetorical efforts. Hence, the statements and comments on Hoatiti's Facebook page are often irrelevant depending on what the topic is about. The statements are linguistically manipulated by readers and users to reflect irrelevant responses by followers and other readers from the topic at hand. Political language is a powerful tool for shaping public opinion and violations of the maxim therefore play a vital role in linguistic manipulation through ambiguity, implicature, and politicians' framing of how messages should be processed and understood by the followers or commenters. Thus, political linguistic manipulation is realized to occur through intentional relevance maxim violation where writers provide ambiguous and misleading or sometimes emotionally charged statements that serve strategic purposes that are realized in shaping ideological frames that trigger emotional responses. Therefore, strategies identified included ambiguity, elusiveness, sarcasm, and mockery presupposition, implicature, as strategies used to shape public opinion and influence political discourse on the Hoatiti Facebook political group page.

### 4.1 Ambiguity and Elusiveness

Statements from Hoatiti are observed to use vague accounts without specifying their real meanings or intentions. For example, the comment that says "*come and see Libuseng*" violates optimal relevance as it lacks detailed information which gives diverse interpretations from the readers. It violates forces readers to infer the intended meaning based on their cognitive biases. Literature confirms any failure to observe the relevance maxim can be referred to as breaking it because it compels the reader involved in the conversation to seek implicatures since they could assume the cooperative principle to be operational (Grundy, 1995). When the relevance maxim is used intentionally in a discussion the responses arouse humor to avoid any discomfort brought by direct replies. This confirms Grundy's view that breaking the maxim of relevance is a prototypical way of conveying an indirect message.

The implication is that those in support of a certain leader or political party would lie or fend for them by ignoring some information shared by violating, flouting, or not observing (obscuring) the relevance maxim. It is, therefore, suggested that interlocutors engage in active listening by not letting their attention drift by staying attentive and focusing on the discussion. This can assist in the active processing of the response to be shared next by paraphrasing what others in a conversation have uttered.

## 4.2 Mockery and Sarcasm

Public discourse often includes satirical or mockery, especially in comments that often distort the post or statement for rhetorical effect. For example, the statement that reads, *“This food does not need to be eaten frequently”* is sarcastic and has a sense of mockery in it. The sarcasm forces the readers to process implicit meaning, violating the expectation of clear relevance while influencing opinion through mockery. The relevance maxim is flouted through the comments by conveying opposite meanings of what is being literally said in the statement. This is realized in the comments where it is done to produce a negative pragmatic effect that is sarcastic and ironic but disguised in humor. Humour is considered inappropriate for serious topics, and thus automatically considered irrelevant as an approach to weighty matters. Therefore, this failure to observe the relevance maxim is made to deceive the hearer, and therefore it is considered a flouting of the maxim of relation. This further corroborates with Betti, (2020) that flouting in a conversation may result in ironic understatement through irrelevant praises, (Betti, and AlFartoosy, 2019). Writers from Hoatiti intentionally flout the maxim for the reader to understand the implicatures underlined in the statements, i.e., the writer purposely wants the reader to look for the implicature or the implied meaning from the statement by not directly stating what he/she is saying in the statement. However, when writers sometimes flout a maxim, they are not intentionally trying to mislead the reader but want them to search for the meaning which they could fail to observe if they fail to connect the dots of the missing information.

When flouting a maxim, the writer intentionally manipulates the readers by wanting them to look for the conversational implicature, i.e., the meaning of the utterance not directly stated in the words uttered. Therefore, when the readers and followers intentionally fail to observe a maxim, the purpose may be to effectively communicate a message (Thomas 1995). Accordingly, if working under the cooperative principle the hearer will interpret the message and fill in the missing information relying on the context. For instance, in Extract 3 where the Democratic Congress (DC) leader is wished a happy birthday, the writer is not in any way misleading the readers of the information shared but it could be a reminder that the leader still exists and leading the DC party.

It could be concluded that the readers flout the maxim as realized through the comments they give or share on the Facebook wall by refusing to fill in the missing information from what is stated by the writer (that the leader is still so much active in the political space). The readers decide to flout the maxim by not filling up the missing communication by sarcastically replying with negative responses that do not connect or link with what has been earlier stated. The irrelevant responses could imply that the readers do not like the DC political leader, and they are not interested or were unaware of his existence at all. It is suggested that interlocutors consider the context in which an utterance occurs to ensure that the intended message is clearly understood.

## 4.3 Presupposition and Implicature

Sperber and Wilson's theory argues that communication is guided by the principle of achieving maximum cognitive relevance with minimal processing effort. However, the political statements on Hoatiti's Facebook page exploit or violate this principle to control meaning, shape perception and persuade followers and readers. The Relevance Theory suggests that each utterance must carry implicit assumptions (presuppositions) that the writer expects the reader to accept. In political discourse, these presuppositions play a vital role in manipulating perceptions that can trigger violence. When posting statements, the writers assume that the readers or followers of the page share the same worldview. For example, *“BREAKING NEWS: The Prime Minister Resigns. #MapholiFM”* the comments of the statements did not seem to be on the same level of information as the writer as all the responses responded differently from what has been posted because readers often assume the writer provides truthful and relevant information. This allows the writers to mislead and manipulate the readers without direct lies. This makes the opposing views seem immoral or illegitimate.

Hoatiti readers break the conversational guidelines by straying away from the topic under discussion and introducing unrelated content as realized in Extract 2. The threads from the readers are spammed with irrelevant comments which is seen to disrupt the discussion flow. The readers violate the maxim when they decide not to respond to what the statement intends to share. It could be concluded that they do not want to get involved in petty politics or they just do not feel like being part of a conversation of lies. It could also be concluded that they deviate from the relevancy of the topic in the statement because they have the personal information of the writer. It could also be that the readers



decided to suspend the maxim of relation because they understand that what is being said is not completely true or that there are things they ought not to respond to.

It is implied that interlocutors share irrelevant messages or off-topic responses for various reasons that include provocation to reactions or simply showing less engagement to the topic under discussion. It is, therefore, suggested that interlocutors consider context and feasible motives before they can draw conclusions on a particular topic.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examined the extent to which Facebook political followers adhered to Grice's Relevance Maxim as stated under the research questions while engaging with political statements, using Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory as a framework for analysis. The findings of this study revealed that political dialogues on Facebook often diverge from the expected optimal relevance, influenced by various cognitive, ideological, and rhetorical factors. Comments to the statements posted often introduce unrelated arguments, personal attacks, and or exaggerated emotional appeals deviating from the original statement or post. It has been realized that some relevance violations occur intentionally as the readers employ sarcasm, mockery satire, and exaggeration to critique political leaders and political parties while others are unintentional where messages are misinterpreted from the original statements due to cognitive biases or ideological framing.

However, while Facebook political followers often violate the relevance maxim, their interactions remain relevant within their ideological framework. This implies that political relevance on Facebook is subjective and is shaped more by persuasion and rhetorical strategies than by adherence to conversational principles. Understanding these violations is important for analyzing how political communication evolves around digital spaces and how language is strategically used to manipulate public opinion and views.

### 5.1 Limitations of The Study

Data was analyzed according to Grice's relation maxim to categorize occurrences of failure to observe the maxim. Not all statements or comments could be included in the analysis because if they had, there analysis would have taken too much time to complete though the results would have been more reliable. Nonetheless, only three statements with five comments each were considered sufficient to produce interesting results. Validity was regarded to measure the intended aim of the study and also perceived as producing an honest, in-depth, and rich scope of the data attained from this particular research (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2011). However, this study was very subjective in terms of judgment of violations and flouting of the maxim negatively influencing validity in some way. If the study could be replicated, the outcomes of the results could slightly differ.

### 5.2 Recommendations

It is therefore recommended that for interlocutors to stay informed about a topic they must critically evaluate the statements before responding to contribute and give meaningful insights to the conversations. This can be achieved through literacy campaigns to teach followers the importance of relevance in online political conversations and how they productively engage in such conversations.

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