

THE MECHANISM OF IMPLICATURE AND INFERENCE AS INFLUENCED BY PRIMARY STIMULI

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Abstract: *This paper attempts to explain language as a process of meaning creation by a speaker (implicature) and meaning disambiguation by a hearer (inference) at the basis of which there is a complex mechanism of reality perception, internalization and verbalization. This mechanism of implicature/inference is studied from two interconnecting perspectives: Conversation Analysis and Neuro Linguistic Programming. While the former investigates the function of the utterance in context, the latter explores the way speakers and hearers internalize reality depending on how they see, hear and feel the world around them.*

Keywords: *Conversation Analysis, NLP, Discourse Analysis*

1. Introduction

Language is a living entity, a process of knowledge acquisition and of meaning creation, forever inventing and re-inventing reality. When used in dialogue, language constructs the social, it builds social selves, relationships and institutions.

The most important vehicle of reality-maintenance is conversation. One may view the individual's everyday life in terms of the working away of a conversational apparatus that ongoingly maintains, modifies and reconstructs his subjective reality... It is important to stress, however, that the greater part of reality – maintenance in conversation is implicit, not explicit. Most conversation does not in so many words define the nature of the world. Rather, it takes place against the background of a world that is silently taken for granted. (Berger and Luckmann 1966:172-173)

Language is changing incessantly; language means freedom and a creative act (Coşeriu 1996:68). A Chomskyan ideal model, of an ideal speaker and listener that leaves aside the issue of language variety would be inappropriate here (Coşeriu 1996:143). Language is extremely complex, with physical and physiological, psychic and logical, individual and social issues that cannot be ignored (Coşeriu 1999).

In “Sincronie, diacronie și istorie”, Coşeriu (1997:27) states that language changes only to continue functioning as such; he sees it both as “energía”, a creative process that invents and re-invents matter and as “ergon”, product, or finite act (Coşeriu 1996, 1997, 1999). Languages are phenomena under a permanent process of creation by individuals, each speaker being a part of this dynamic process of language creation, like a grain of sand which is so small but so important for the pile. Within the dialogue, speaker and listener interact, language is an asset, and the result of speech is language again, but this time it is a concrete manifestation of this asset in speech (Coşeriu 1997:70). While analysing dialogue, we are to witness linguistic change, since this happens through the passage of linguistic modes belonging to one speaker to the interlocutor's knowledge (Coşeriu 1997:70).

This paper attempts to explain language as a process of meaning creation by a speaker (implicature) and meaning disambiguation by a hearer (inference) at the basis of which resides a complex mechanism of reality perception, internalization and verbalization. The hypothesis of this

study is that the mechanism of implicature/inference might be influenced by paralinguistic elements such as how interlocutors see, hear and feel the world around them.

2. Concepts

Meaning creation and disambiguation represent complex processes that make the study object of various disciplines, such as Conversation Analysis (CA), Interactional Sociolinguistics, Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP), Pragmatics, Discourse Analysis (DA), all of which attempt to explain from different perspectives what interlocutors mean and how they understand ideas.

CA is the study of talk-in-interaction considering contextual elements to find how people make sense of the world they inhabit through the language they use. Words become different in context, they serve totally different purposes depending on who uses them and on how, when and where they are uttered. Coșeriu says that “within textual linguistics [...] units of meaning [...] combine and [...] always result in other higher level meanings” (Coșeriu 1996:58, my translation).

NLP is about experience, about how we know the world and people, how we do what we do, how we create our own realities. “NLP studies how we structure our subjective experience – how we think about our values and beliefs and how we create our emotional states – and how we construct our internal world from our experience and give it meaning. No event has meaning in itself, we give it meaning, and different people may give the same event different meanings. So, NLP studies experience from the inside.” (O’Connor 2000:1) Reuniting two disciplines, Neurology and Linguistics, NLP studies how individuals sequence thoughts and actions to achieve goals (O’Connor 2000:129).

NLP seems to be centered more on how individuals internalize their experiences, how they pass the outside stimuli through a kind of internal lens and how they apply their own personal filters to the mass of information that bombards their brain every second of their lives. Comparatively, CA is about the explanation of how speakers create an implicature on the basis of what they attempt to render and of their contextual background and of how hearers create an inference on the basis of their own contextual background and expectations.

In a study made as early as 1934, a long time before the advent of pragmatics as a science, Mikhail Bakhtin underlines the fact that participants cooperate in dialogue:

The living discourse, part of the spoken language, is undoubtedly oriented towards the future discourse - it elicits the answer, anticipates and welcomes it. Born in the environment of what has already been said, the discourse is at the same time determined by what hasn't been said yet, but already foreseen within the answer word. This is what happens in any living dialogue. (Bakhtin 1982:135, my translation)

Bakhtin puts forward the thesis that it is not language that lies at the basis of conversation, but the other way around. Understanding language outside dialogue is only a part of linguistic perception, only an abstract portion outside the living language we find in interaction.

NLP attempts to go a step further in the understanding of this complex process of implicature and inference, taking into consideration how participants see, hear and feel the world.

Talk is at the same time creative and destructive: the spoken word is given, by the simple fact of being uttered, an exceptional value, it becomes so powerful that it can forge relationships, it can bring about peace and war, love or hatred, it can build, give life or murder. (Dimulescu 2014:20)

The question that prompted the idea of this study is related to the mechanism of implicature and inference creation and, consequently, of frame maintenance and change in casual talk-in-interaction where main contextual elements, including those defining the participants are more or less the same. My assumption is that the filters people apply to reality influence the way they engage in verbal and non-verbal communication. This is the domain of NLP, which states that the way we perceive reality has only one source – our mind. NLP, this relatively new discipline, not only attempts

to understand, but also to change human behavior patterns by way of a technique called modelling. Modelling would be the observation of outstanding behavior and results in “discovering the mental strategy that a person is using. This strategy, together with that person’s beliefs, values and physiology, gives you the structure of how they get their results” (O’Connor 2010:116).

Different people may find themselves in the same situation, but react in dissimilar ways, given a unique combination of their particular circumstances at the time of the interaction, the way they think and act and their model of the world. Interlocutors tend to assume that other participants share their assumptions and expectations and leave out vital parts of the message, thus leading the way towards an incorrect implicature and unwillingly producing the mistaken inference in participants’ minds. On the other hand, participants will create the incorrect inference as they fill in the gaps in the interlocutors’ utterances from their own map of reality based on their own assumptions and expectations, rather than finding out their interlocutors’ maps. Miscommunication in talk-in-interaction does arise even though participants share the same code. The use of the same language does not automatically involve sharing the same life experience, the same contextual background and, last but not least, the same filters.

3. Primary and Secondary Stimuli

Language is a representational system, a secondary way through which we perceive reality. Nevertheless, we consciously think in words, but unconsciously in sights, sounds, feelings, tastes and smells, that are primary ways of reality assimilation.

Language makes our internal world visible, audible and tangible to others but, at the same time, it represents an incomplete reflection of experience and it deletes, or generalizes, or distorts part of our experience. Sensory experience such as what we see, hear and feel represents primary experience, whereas words are secondary input to our consciousness. Misunderstanding arises from confusing words with the experience they represent, NLP assumes. “We may think our experience is constructed in the same way as the language we use to talk about it and act inside those limits. We allow the words to limit us. The words bar us from wider choice, action and understanding” (O’Connor 2000:132).

Between reality understanding and utterance formation there is still unknown ground made of the mechanism of experience internalization at the level of the human brain.

When we speak, we take the richness of our sensory experience and attempt to convey it with words. The experience is transformed in three ways when we do this: Deletion: we leave out some aspects. Generalization: we take one example to be representative of a class of experiences. Distortion: we give more weight to some aspects than others. (O’Connor 2000:133)

Both primary and secondary experiences, called anchors in NLP (O’Connor 2000:130-134), determine states, ideas and understanding. Anchors are those primary and secondary experiences that unchain the flood of mental images and verbal expression in human beings.

The mechanism of cause and effect starting from anchors has been artfully described in prose and poetry along history. Marcel Proust considers that senses unlock the memory path: taste; for example, in the “Madeleine” episode, the sound of a Vinteuil sonata and the touch of a slate in front of a cathedral. Proust artfully demonstrates how the cake flavour changes the character’s inner state from sadness to intense happiness:

No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory - this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me it *was* me. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I sensed that it was connected with the taste of the tea and the cake, but that it infinitely

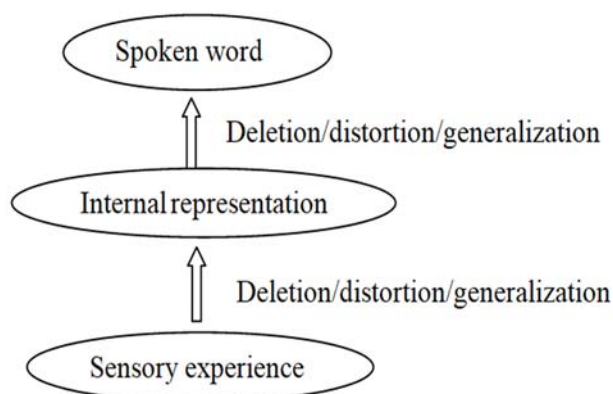
transcended those savours, could, no, indeed, be of the same nature. Whence did it come? What did it mean? How could I seize and apprehend it? (Proust 1992:48)

Utterances, on the other hand, represent anchors for experience and, like primary experiences, they induce changes of internal states and reflect ideas and understanding (O'Connor 2000:130-140). CA and Interactional Sociolinguistics explain the way we think in words and the way a Speech Event is created.

The sociolinguist and anthropologist Dell Hymes, in an attempt to demonstrate the importance of the social context of everyday life in linguistic interaction, developed the concept of *speech event*, an exact schema for the analysis of the background of talk-in-interaction. There are eight components of any speech event, the first letters of which create the acronym SPEAKING: setting and scene, participants, ends, act sequence, key, instrumentalities, norms of interaction and interpretation and genre (Hymes 1972:55). The values of the factors identified in the speaking grid determine our interpretation of what people say and our own use of language.

Levinson continues this theory of context in an essay on activity types which he defines as “a fuzzy category whose focal members are goal-defined, socially constituted, bounded, events with constraints on participants, setting, and so on, but above all on the kinds of allowable contributions” (Levinson 1992:70). Activity types go on a scale from the pre-packaged ones, totally scripted, such as a Roman Mass, to those where social roles are given from the beginning, such as teaching, a job interview, a football game, to those largely unscripted, such as a chance meeting in the street. Levinson explains that an activity type has a certain structure, being made of some pre-structured sequences, roles of participants, time, place, topic and goal. If any of these undergoes a change and the constraints are not met, the activity breaks down or it switches to a different one.

The context that defines the speech event (Hymes 1972:70) or the activity type (Levinson 1992:67) might go much further than these broad sociolinguistic categories. NLP explains what happens inside the human brain when it processes primary experience into secondary experience, namely words. Underlying the pragmatic pair implicature/inference lies a mechanism of transformation of unconscious deep structures into a surface structure that we understand and communicate to interlocutors using linguistic and para-linguistic means. The three NLP processes of deletion, generalization and distortion facilitate the turning of Deep Structures into Surface Structures, going from the primary, sensory experience to an internal representation that occurs inside the brain and finally to the verbal realization, the Surface Structure, the word.



(O'Connor 2000:136)

The spoken word is the top of an iceberg of internal representation based on multiple contextual elements that start with the sensory experience and continue with the information we know or we think we know about the interlocutor, about the place and time of the interaction.

Nevertheless, NLP, a new and not very much documented discipline at the crossroads of psychology and medicine, has been strongly criticized. The Polish psychologist Tomasz Witkowski, in an attempt at debunking pseudoscience in the fields of psychotherapy and psychology, conducted an analysis of the majority of scientific articles devoted to NLP, “315 articles, by and large empirical, written by 287 authors and published in the years 1974-2009” (Witkowski 2010:59). He evaluated the articles using the criterion of whether the journal where the article was found was recorded on the Master Journal List of the Institute for Scientific Information in Philadelphia. His most important finding following this study was that “the NLP concept has not been developed on solid empirical foundations. Less than one-third of the analyzed works shows supportive evidence, more than a half – non supportive, and the remaining papers – uncertain results and doubts.” (Witkowski 2010:62)

What Witkowski blames NLP for is the ambiguity regarding representational systems and the lack of empirical evidence regarding subjects using primarily one predominant representational system, plus the lack of evidence that “matching the primary representational system brings beneficial effects in communication and therapy” (Witkowski 2010:63).

4. The Study

As I have been working for a long time in the field of Conversation Analysis and as I have studied the utterance using solely linguistic tools, I have decided to start researching the less obvious path that goes from sensory experience to the spoken word. To this end, I designed a questionnaire (cf. Appendix) that aims at identifying how the five senses (smell, taste, touch, hearing, sight) may influence an existing inner state and how this newly acquired state determines what interlocutors utter in talk-in-interaction. There were 70 respondents, ranging between 18 to 22 years of age, all students at the Faculty of Letters of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov. The questionnaire was distributed over a period of two weeks, the respondents answered the questions online and later on, after the interpretation of the results, they received feed-back on their answers. In the case of all the seven questions and with all the 70 students involved in the research, I used respondent validation, so I tried to look at the issue of inference/implicature creation via primary stimuli from several standpoints, disclosing the outcomes and discussing them in class.

The initial part of the questionnaire broadly identifies the respondent's background with respect to age, sex and social status. The body of the questionnaire features seven questions; the first two questions deal with the creation of implicature at the level of how senses might, first, change an inner state, and second, determine a certain verbal reaction. Questions 3 and 4 have to do with mental inferences as they firstly refer to utterances that give rise to a possible change of inner state and secondly to utterances that determine positive or negative verbal contributions. Question 5 researches into an assumed mismatch between an internal representation of reality and its verbal manifestation. Question 6 deals with an assumed mismatch between the implicature and the speaker's internal representation of reality. Question 7 inquires into a possible feed-back from the speaker mentioned in question 6.

The first question targets the mechanism of inference production in the case where a visual/auditory/gustatory/tactile feeling has determined a change of inner state. In questions 1 and 2, many respondents do not detail their answers as they are unable to recall memories regarding sensations or emotions they have experienced. 11 subjects do not give a description in 1c, four answer “no” and one does not remember the experience. 15 respondents do not give a description in 2c, 14 answer “no”, and four do not remember the experience. On the other hand, there are some subjects who answer “no” when asked if they have ever had a change in feeling or attitude when under certain stimuli, or if they have had any verbal or physical reaction when under certain stimuli.

Most subjects respond by describing their experiences while watching movies, expressing how the emotions or the feelings of the character or the scenario instilled the same state in them (31 respondents). Listening to music is reported to produce a similar effect, calming them down in moments of anxiety before important events (exams), or simply giving them a better mood, a more relaxed attitude (19 respondents). On the other hand, sharp, loud sounds, such as metal music, irritating sounds produced by scratching chalk on blackboard, or annoying voice tones might trigger anxiety, discomfort and even anger (six respondents). Sounds can also be calming, as was the case of a subject who felt sad but experienced a change in attitude when hearing rain.

Smell usually triggers distant memories of dear people, desire to taste the drink or the food they smelled back then, or even the action of entering a restaurant because of a particular flavour in the air (seven respondents). Familiar scents also bring about feelings of contentment, especially when smelling a flower or spring in general, but they can also bring about nostalgia. One respondent mentions that a pleasant smell reminded her of beautiful moments of her childhood and although she had not been feeling very well that day, her inner state immediately changed for the better. There are other examples of comfort, joy and peace brought about by smelling lilac, or certain foods, such as a favourite dish or chocolate, trees in blossom. Strong or unpleasant smells such as strong perfume in six cases and sewage in two cases have been reported to trigger anxiety and even sickness.

Tasting certain foods leads to experiencing nostalgia and happiness, whereas lack of food triggers frustration (seven respondents). One respondent mentions that certain dishes bring about memories of when she ate them and of the company she had back then, and the experience is reported to have made her feel exactly the same way she had felt at that time.

Images have their strong effect, as well. Subjects claim that images featuring spring blossoms, or letters from friends bring about happiness, a feeling of pleasure, or even excitement (eight respondents). On the other hand, respondents describe that seeing old and homeless people made them feel pitiful and sad, but seeing a person work and smile triggers the opposite feeling, a huge amount of happiness, one subject explains. Strong light is mentioned as a negative stimulus, which triggers anger in one subject.

Touch can have two opposite effects, respondents explain. One reports that they become confident when receiving hugs from dear ones, whereas another claims to feel anxiety when touched without consent. One peculiar, yet interesting subject, says she felt all the emotions mentioned in the question when thinking of dear people of the past.

The second question targets a hypothesized verbal reaction determined by a visual/auditory/gustatory/tactile feeling (an implicature production). I have found that taste is a strong stimulus that leads to verbal expressions interrupting the conversation (e.g.: wow). At the opposite side of the spectrum, tasting something the subject does not like leads to a negative verbal reaction. Whereas appealing savours (such as freshly baked pastry) raise hunger or the desire to taste the food they smelled, such as coffee or pastry, verbal remembrance is also a form of reaction to specific, familiar smells in two cases. On the other hand, one subject describes that the smell of sewage caused not only a change in feelings and attitude, but also in speech. Beautiful sights, such as landscapes or flowers also trigger verbal reactions. Respondents report on verbal reactions triggered by inability to cope with the cold, by hitting a part of the body by accident, by hearing funny things and feeling the need to imitate them, or a patient being neglected in an ER room, or situations when an animal was abused.

The third question, which inquires about a possible change of inner state triggered by the interlocutor's words or utterances, namely an inference production, has shown both positive and negative reactions; only 19 respondents of 70 do not develop when asked to provide details. Nevertheless, respondents mention more negative reactions rather than positive ones: 11 say that they have felt sad or depressed, four say that they have been disappointed, six that they have felt inferior, seven have become angry and three melancholic, three have felt happy and 13 encouraged.

Many respondents report on the ascertainment that an utterance is enough to change inner state, make the subject feel depressed or on the contrary, joyful; inappropriate words are reported to change states to the worse, while a parent's motivational utterances, or compliments (in many cases) are reported to change states for the better. One respondent says that one of her friends, talking about her wedding, mentioned that she would only invite very close friends, something that would exclude her. The utterance made the subject feel disappointed and hurt.

Several subjects report on their frequent modelling of the interlocutor's behavior if the latter seems irritated. On the other hand, the same phenomenon may appear in many cases under the guise of the interlocutor's usage of words and lines that the respondent frequently utters, situation which is reported by one respondent to have brought about a positive change of inner state, a connection between the participants.

Question 4 deals with an implicature formation: a positive or negative verbal reaction determined by the interlocutor's words or utterances. Of the 70 respondents, 27 do not detail on their answers, some report on a negative verbal reaction (one felt inferior, one became angry and ironic, three said they were disappointed, four became sad or depressed, five felt the need to react immediately but they regretted afterwards, seven were angry); some others report on positive reactions (10 were happy or they felt good, 13 felt encouraged).

Question 5 targets an implicature and internal representation mismatch, namely an actual utterance not matching what the respondent had in mind or wanted to say. Out of 42 respondents who developed on the answer, most did not express what they felt due to emotions (anger, stress, and disappointment), lack of patience, and impossibility of finding the right words. Many respondents admit not expressing what they thought as they wanted to protect the interlocutor's feelings (three respondents), or their own feelings (two respondents), some others acknowledge the impossibility to express feelings, negative ones in particular (two respondents), one respondent reporting on a slight panic attack before the evidence that the interlocutor cannot make sense of their words.

One respondent mentions that he has the tendency to show gravity in facial expression, causing his interlocutors to understand the opposite of what he means. One of the students says that, although she knows English very well and she plans what to say in advance, the very moment she starts speaking, her utterances are neither logically nor grammatically correct. Several respondents mentioned that when they use text messaging, their interlocutors often misunderstand them.

Question 6 deals with inference production, focusing on the interlocutor's utterance mismatching what he had in mind or wanted to say. 30 respondents develop on their answer, most of them feeling that the interlocutor expressed the idea incorrectly due to fatigue, lack of interest in the topic, gaps in conversation causing conflict, disagreement and insecurity.

Question 7 targets feedback on the respondent's assumption in question 6 and only 28 of them develop on the answer and report on the interlocutor's confession. There are no examples given by the 28 respondents; they only mention the fact that their interlocutor told them later on what they had had in mind and that there was mismatch between what they thought and what they uttered.

The working hypothesis of this study was that the mechanism of implicature/inference might be influenced by paralinguistic elements such as how interlocutors see, hear and feel the world around them. This hypothesis was brought about by readings in NLP and it was confirmed after the analysis of the questionnaire responses. The overall aim of the questionnaire was to shed light on a little researched area and to begin a larger study of the influence of the primary stimuli on reality internalization.

The present study builds upon existing knowledge in Conversation Analysis (CA) and Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP). Nevertheless, qualitative and quantitative studies in CA exceed by far those performed within the framework of NLP, where the most important problem is the lack of

sufficient research (Witkowski 2010:59-63). The present paper is significant against the background of advances made in the study of implicature and inference creation, as it clearly proves the existence of a pre-linguistic stage which precedes the conscious development of the message. Nevertheless, because of the limited number of respondents, the present research has obvious limitations as to the generalizability or significance beyond these specific cases selected.

The validity of this study is internal as comparison of results is limited due to a lack of statistical or case study research in the field of NLP. However, the research outcome still remains on unstable ground. The questionnaire was distributed among a limited number of respondents and just because most of the answers seem to validate the hypothesis of the research, it does not necessarily mean that this cause-effect relationship will be true in all cases. One cannot generalize from a sample survey to a larger population, as participants' contextual variables will differ, consequently changing the outcomes of the research. The 70 respondents share the same age, cultural background, level of education, language spoken. The moment this questionnaire is distributed to a larger population where some or all these contextual elements change, the complex process of reality internalization, followed by implicature and inference creation might fundamentally change. Ultimately, the questionnaire results should be analyzed qualitatively, to the extent to which the outcome analysis is an interpretation.

The internal validity of results will be further strengthened within the framework of a future larger study which will compare both quantitative and qualitative data, and will use analysis of talk-in-interaction and interviews.

5. Conclusion

The present study explains verbal communication as a game of implicature and inference determined by a complex apparatus of reality perception, internalization and verbalization. Within the context of the complexity of language, the message is built at the crossroads of physical and physiological, psychic and logical, individual and social aspects. The present study has proved that the mechanism of implicature/inference is definitely influenced by paralinguistic elements such as how interlocutors see, hear and feel the world around them. Besides concepts from Discourse and Conversation Analysis, this paper has used NLP elements that stress experience, how we know the world and the people, how we do what we do, and how we create our own realities.

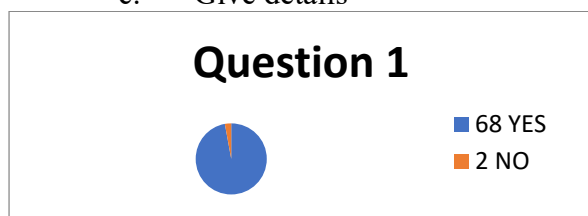
Appendix

Questionnaire

- Respondent nr...
- Age ...
- Sex...

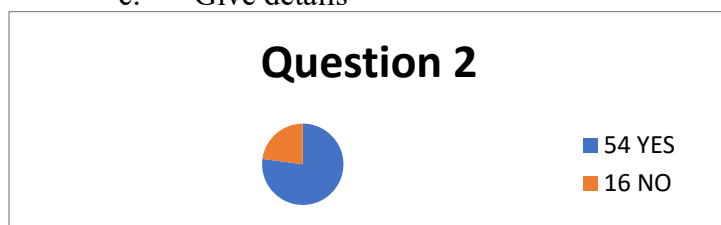
1. Have you ever noticed that a visual/auditory/gustatory/tactile feeling has determined a change of inner state? (eg. confort, discomfort, well-being, malaise, joy, sadness, fury, anger, depression, enthusiasm, apathy, desperation, optimism, pessimism, contentment, discontent, faith, mistrust, peace, worry, anxiety, impatience, sweetness, aggression, happiness, unhappiness etc.)

- a. YES
b. NO
c. Give details



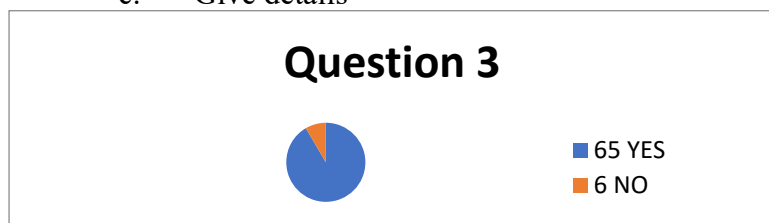
2. Have you ever noticed that a visual/auditory/gustatory/tactile feeling has determined a verbal reaction during casual conversation? Do you remember what you said at the time?

- a. YES
b. NO
c. Give details



3. Have you ever noticed that some of your interlocutor's words/utterances have determined a change of inner state? Explain what you felt.

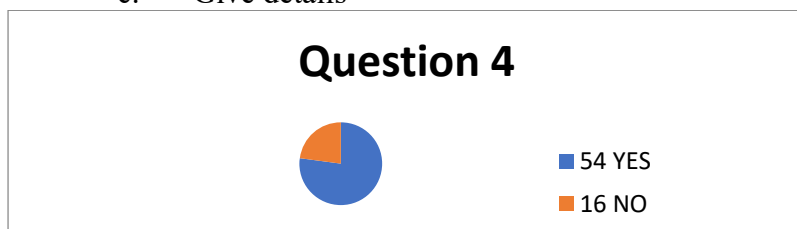
- a. YES
b. NO
c. Give details



4. Have you ever noticed that some of your interlocutor's words/utterances determined a positive or negative verbal reaction during casual conversation? Do you remember what you said at the time?

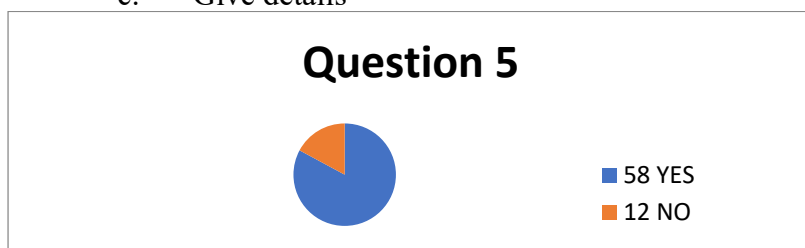
- a. YES
b. NO

c. Give details



5. Have you ever noticed that what you uttered did not match what you had in mind or wanted to say?

- a. YES
b. NO
c. Give details



6. Have you ever noticed that what your interlocutor said did not match what he had in mind or wanted to say?

- a. YES
b. NO
c. Give details

Question 6



7. In case you answered YES in question 6, have you had feedback on your assumption? In what way?

- a. YES
b. NO
c. Give details

Question 7



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