

The Current State of Research and Analysis of Pragmatics

Minghui Li and Jianguang Sun

School of Foreign Languages, Jiangsu University of Science and Technology, P. R. China

doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/ejells.2013/vol11n319>

Published April 10, 2023

Citation: Minghui Li and Jianguang Sun (2023) The Current State of Research and Analysis of Pragmatics, *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, Vol.11, No.3, pp.1-9

ABSTRACT: *Pragmatics is everywhere in life, and now pragmatics has formed a trend of combining with other disciplines. As a newly developed discipline, pragmatics brings a new perspective to the development of English language and literature. This thesis mainly studies the definition, branches and future trends of pragmatics, which can provide some reference for interdisciplinary research.*

KEY WORDS: pragmatics, literature review, linguistics

INTRODUCTION

Since the development of pragmatics, different scholars have given different definitions of pragmatics from different perspectives. However, in the final analysis, pragmatics is the study of how to understand and use language, and how to make language appropriate and appropriate. Pragmatics is the study of the speaker's meaning from the speaker's point of view (Yule, 1996); pragmatics is the study of how people use language to achieve successful communication (Kempson, 1975). From the perspective of the listener, pragmatics studies how people "understand what is said in communication" more than they "hear what is said on the surface" (Yule, 1996); pragmatics studies how to understand people's deliberate speech acts (Green, 1996). Pragmatics is the study of contextual meaning from the perspective of context (Yule, 1996); pragmatics is the study of how discourse acquires meaning in context (Leech, 1983); pragmatics is the study of how context is used to infer meaning (Fasold, 1993); pragmatics is the study of the conditions of human language use as determined by social context (Mey, 1993). From the perspective of socially dynamic communication, pragmatics studies the ability of language users to formulate words and sentences flexibly in appropriate contexts (Levinson, 1983); pragmatics studies the meaning of people in mutual conversation (Thomas, 1995); and pragmatics studies the way people express the intimacy of their interactions (Yule, 1996). An overview of language functions Pragmatics is the general overview of the functions of all aspects of language i.e. the study of the cognitive, social, and cultural functions of language in human life (Verschueren, 1995).

The premise of pragmatics is to reflect the relationship between discourse and the context in which it is spoken, which can include at least the speaker, the listener, the audience, the physical environment

of the discourse, and the cultural environment of the discourse (Hu, 1980). The scholars have to study the research area of pragmatics at the micro level, and then determine the direction of exploring the pragmatic issues at the macro level. Pragmatics studies “the relationship between the sign and the sign interpreter” (Morris, 1971). The scope and objects of pragmatics research are divided into the following areas.

First, it studies the pragmatic properties of specific words and language structures, a cross-faceted study between pragmatics and semantics, in which some pragmatic ambiguities are also observed and analyzed. Second, pragmatics focuses on the study of speaker meaning, exploring how speakers express specific intentions through particular discourse. It focuses its research on the linguistic and pragmatic factors that influence the expression and understanding of such intentions. The study includes how to identify speech acts like requests, suggestions, refusals, apologies, and other direct or indirect expressions while using pragmatic strategies, as well as how to distinguish the benefits and drawbacks when a speaker is redundant and when information is reduced, and to respond emotionally to the message conveyed by the speaker. Third, it studies the meaning of the listener and how the listener understands the real intention of the speaker's message. The study focuses on observing the speaker's discourse features so that the listener can use contextual factors to understand the message conveyed by the speaker. It allows for an analysis of the factors that lead listeners to misunderstand what the speaker says and the different levels of the impact these words have on the listener. Fourth, it focuses on the study of discourse meaning, which includes the study of topic variation, how the participants in a conversation elaborate and expound on the ideas of the discourse, how they express the order and level of particular speech acts, observe whether they are expected by the listener, how to determine whether the speaker's attitude is sincere or ingratiating, and how to gain access to the speech.

Theoretical sources of pragmatics

Since Saussure divided of language into its “internal” and “external” components, linguistic research has moved more clearly along two directions that are both intersecting and juxtaposed. The historical origins of pragmatics can be traced back to the study of linguistic signs by Morris, Carnap, Peirce, and others in the 1930s. In their views, pragmatics explores the relationship between signs and their users and comprehenders, which implies a broad view of pragmatics, because the relationship between signs and their users and comprehenders can be manifested in different ways.

In 1938, the American philosopher Morris first used the term “semantics” in his book *Foundations of Symbol Theory*, in which he pointed out that semiotics consists of three parts: syntax, which is the study of the relationship between symbols and signs; semantics, which is the study of the relationship between signs and the things they refer to; and pragmatics, which is the study of the relationship between signs and users.

In the 1970s, pragmatics became an independent discipline of linguistics, and the International

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

Symposium on the Pragmatics of Natural Language held in Boston in 1970 marked the beginning of the era of pragmatics research and became an opportunity for its flourishing. Levinson (1983) divided the different understandings of pragmatics into two major schools: the Anglo-American school and the continental European school. Pragmatics, or pragmatics of language, is the application of pragmatics of semiotics in the field of linguistics. Based on this, two schools of pragmatics have been formed in foreign countries: the Anglo-American school of micro-pragmatics and the continental European school of macro-pragmatics. The difference between the two schools is that the former considers pragmatics as a relatively independent field of linguistics like phonology, syntax, and semantics, i.e. “phonology”. Most of the works on pragmatics published in recent years (Levinson, 1983; He, 1988, 1997; He, 1989; Green, 1989/1996; Blakemore, 1992; Mey, 1993; Thomas, 1995; Grundy, 1995; Yule, 1996) suggest that pragmatics studies are all still guided by the idea of phonological differentiation. The latter considers pragmatics as the study of the cognitive, social, and cultural aspects of language and communication. It asserts that everything related to the understanding and use of language is the object of pragmatics researches, and that it is an overview of language functions, or “synthesis”. This view sees pragmatics as existing at all levels of language use, rather than as a mere branch of linguistics. However, we cannot assume that the Western pragmatics community is a dichotomy between the Anglo-American school and the continental European school. The pragmatics created by the German philosopher and thinker Habermas in recent years has taken a completely different path (Qian, 2003). Habermas studied the prerequisites and conditions of convergent understanding from the perspective of the relationship between communication and social evolution. He emphasizes the study of pragmatic norms in linguistic communication, and thus calls his pragmatics “normative pragmatics”.

From the early 1950s to the end of the 1960s, the British philosopher Austin and the American analyst's Sayer and Grice made significant contributions to the development of pragmatics. Austin was “dissatisfied with the traditional study of reference, meaning, and the truth and fallacy of statements in the philosophy of language” (Leech, 1981). Leech first proposed a theory of speech acts, challenging logical positivism, and after the 1970s, based on Austin's indirect speech acts, he proposed indirect speech acts, which argued that the form of discourse does not directly reflect the communicative intention of the sentence. He also proposed the “principle of conversational cooperation”, and Sayer even proposed that “language theory is part of behavior theory”. At present, speech act theory has become one of the important elements in the study of pragmatics. The study of meaning in pragmatics is the study of the meaning of the language used in a certain context. Its core theory is based on speech act theory, that is, the meaning of language exists in the actions that people perform when using language. The fact that people need to refer to certain instructional phenomena in order to perform their communicative functions is itself evidence of language's dependence on context.

Morris, in his 1946 book *Sign, language and behavior*, adjusted the scope of these three branches of research according to the behaviorist theory of signs of the time: pragmatics, semantics, and the interpretation of signs. Morris, in his 1946 book *Sign, Language and Behavior*, adjusted the scope of

these three branches of research in light of the behaviorist theory of signs at the time: pragmatics shifted to “the study of the sources of signs, their usage, and the role they play in behavior.”

The relevance of pragmatics to other disciplines

For a long time before the birth of pragmatics, the syntax was placed in a supreme position, but syntax focused only on the study of language itself, which formalized language and ignored its functions and their effects on all levels of language. Later, with the development of functional linguistics and pragmatics, the relationship between the form and function of language began to attract attention. Pragmatics and syntax cannot be separated from each other, and they are mutually influential and constraining. From the co-temporal point of view, the same syntactic function can be expressed by different syntactic structures; the same syntactic structure can also express different syntactic functions; different syntactic environments need different syntactic structures to adapt to them; from the ephemeral point of view, the present syntactic structures and rules are the result of the grammaticalization of previous pragmatic factors.

The research interests of the pragmatics community in recent years show that there is also a close relationship between pragmatics and psychology (and its related psycholinguistics). On the one hand, psychological theories can not only provide explanations, verification, or theoretical bases for certain linguistic phenomena, but also provide effective guidelines for the acquisition and development of linguistic competence; on the other hand, linguistic theories can also be used to guide psychological and psycholinguistic research and experiments. For example, communication therapy, which is used to guide adults with aphasia to recover their language skills, is an application of pragmatics theory in psycholinguistic research. In short, pragmatics and psychology or psycholinguistics maintain a mutually reinforcing relationship.

The relationship between pragmatics and sociology (and its related sociolinguistics) is even broader. Pragmatics is, in the minds of some scholars, part of sociolinguistics, and the sociolinguistics of language. Because pragmatics is a discipline concerned with sociolinguistic practices, it is concerned with all aspects of social life, such as politics, economics, culture, and diplomacy. For example, different cultural communities have different perceptions of the principles of politeness and the appropriate conditions for speech acts, which need to be explained by different pragmatic theories; and political and economic factors have a constraining effect on the choice of language.

The main branches of pragmatics

Pragmatics refers to the study of the pragmatic aspects of language itself, the relationship between linguistic structures, and their pragmatic meaning. It refers to the study of the different pragmatic functions of the same or similar language structures in different contexts. The study of pragmatics from the language itself helps us to understand the nature of language, its structure, and the laws of language use.

Cross-cultural pragmatic linguistics studies the similarities and differences in the pragmatic functions of identical or similar language forms in different languages and cultures, and the similarities and differences in how people understand these language forms and use them to achieve speech acts. The study of grammar, rhetoric, and discourse is concerned with the pragmatic issues that arise in the use of a second language, i.e., in the process of sexual cross-linguistic communication, and includes the study of the pragmatics of speech acts, the study of socio-cultural pragmatics, the study of comparative pragmatics, and the study of interlingual pragmatics. The scholars who have actively explored the formalization of pragmatics in domestic linguistics are Lv Gongli, Jiang Yan, and Xu Shenghuan. Lv Gongli's research has two main aspects. Firstly, it is explored through the formalization of the interrogative logical form of discourse information. Secondly, it reveals the unified information mechanism of discourse and the basic features of linguistic informativeness. Cross-cultural pragmatics is a cross-cultural study of the various dimensions of discourse, which has many components and can be broadly summarized into the following three main areas. Cross-cultural pragmatics, i.e., the study of the differences in the pragmatic functions of the same or similar language forms in different cultures, the study of the differences in the choice of speech act strategies in different cultures, and the study of cross-cultural social pragmatics, i.e., the study of the different interpretations of various pragmatic parameters in different cultures, the differences in the adherence to conversational principles and their guidelines in different cultures, the differences in the adherence to the principles of politeness and their guidelines in different cultures, etc. The study of Social-cultural pragmatic research focuses on culturally influenced social pragmatic phenomena. Since language is a part of the culture, culture is always deeply imprinted on the use of language.

Research in the field of cross-cultural pragmatics generally divides the following four areas (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989), including (1) Speech act pragmatics; (2) Socio-cultural pragmatics; (3) Contrastive pragmatics; (4) Interlanguage pragmatics.

Leech (1983) proposed sociopragmatics, which refers to the study of communication skills and strategies. Sociopragmatics includes social pragmatics but has a broader scope than social pragmatics. At the macro level, it is a study of language planning and language policy, language and culture, language and folklore, language and education, language and economy, language and politics, and language and diplomacy; and at the micro level, it is a study of the use of language in different industries, such as medical language, legal language, economic language, political language, and advertising language.

Cognitive pragmatics is to analyze and describe the process of language comprehension from a cognitive-psychological point of view. One of the basic theories of cognitive pragmatics is the association theory related to communication and cognition, which was proposed by (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995) in their book *Associative Cognition*. According to the association theory, people can successfully communicate with each other by constantly cognizing each other's communicative

intentions. There are two main reasons for this. The first is that both sides of the communication are trying to make each other understand, so “mutual manifestness” is required; the second is that communication is a cognitive process that requires both sides to understand the implicit content of each other's words, mainly because there is an optimal cognitive model for finding associations.

With the development of cognitive linguistics, cognitive science, cognitive neuroscience, neuroscience, and other disciplines, the breadth and depth of cognitive pragmatics research have been further expanded. Both theoretically and methodologically, cognitive pragmatics has made very remarkable achievements.

Formal pragmatics is mainly a new edge discipline that applies modern mathematical methods and logical means to depict and analyze the non-formal concepts and pragmatic reasoning in pragmatics formally. The research aims is to construct formal models in the strict sense, which can provide effective ways and methods for artificial intelligence and computer science to achieve natural language and machine intelligence.

Montague (1974) used mathematical logic to describe the semantics of some utterances in English, breaking new ground in the study of the semantics of natural language using a rigorous mathematical approach. (Searle & Vanderveke, 1985) established a logical analysis system for speech act theory, “pragmatic logic”, and Roberts (1996) established a logical analysis system for speech act theory, “pragmatic logic”. Kadmon (2001) focuses on some topics in the border area between semantics and pragmatics, such as presupposition and focus. She proposes the Focus-Induced Interpretation (FII) theory and tries to use it to analyze various linguistic phenomena related to focus effects, such as focus-triggered presuppositions, focus adverbs, negation, omission, etc.

Descriptive pragmatics is a pragmatics that describes the application of language in different contexts. It is empirical, that is, it describes the principles of natural language application that people derive from experience, and analyzes how natural language is related to contexts. It also explains the contextual factors that govern the meaning of words and structures. Descriptive pragmatics focuses on the following areas: indicators, conversational meanings, presuppositions, speech acts, conversational structures, politeness principles, face principles, and metaphors.

Applied pragmatics refers to the specific application of pragmatic knowledge in other disciplines. The principles and methods of pragmatics are applied not only to the core disciplines of linguistics (e.g. phonology, syntax, etc.) and the peripheral disciplines (e.g. sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, etc.), but also to other fields related to understanding discourse, such as language teaching, artificial intelligence, anthropology, etc., to solve problems or obstacles in language use.

Contrastive pragmatics refers to the comparison of different aspects of the communicative functions of two languages, different pragmatic skills and strategies of two languages, and different cultural

connotations of two languages. Research in this area has positive implications for foreign language learning and foreign language teaching, successful intercultural communication, reducing or avoiding pragmatic errors, and promoting the development of translation studies.

Interlingual pragmatics is defined as the study of the patterns in the use and acquisition of second language behavior by non-native second language operators. The task of interlanguage pragmatics is to study people's cognitive abilities in the use of a second language, the causes of pragmatic errors in the use of a second language, and the pragmatic effects of the mediated language on the use of a second language for communication. Besides, the pragmatic effect of the second language. Interlingual pragmatics is a guide to both intercultural communication and second language acquisition.

Current status of pragmatics research and its development direction

For a long time in the early development of pragmatics in China, it followed the lead of Western pragmatics. However, with the development of the discipline, it is obvious that this phenomenon is no longer suitable for the development of the discipline. In the past, the field of domestic pragmatics research paid too much attention to the translation and interpretation of foreign research theories and results, and used to interpret Chinese pragmatics facts with Western pragmatics theories. This situation has begun to hinder the progress of domestic pragmatics. The future of domestic pragmatics research should create a localization of theory. According to Xiang Mingyou (2006), the current status and trend of research in pragmatics are along the lines of improving the theoretical system and broadening the fields of application. The improvement of the theoretical system is developing in the following three directions: (1) To break through the British and American traditions of language studies, and to concretize language studies into a comprehensive view of language phenomena from the cognitive, social, and cultural perspectives as a whole, forming a "comprehensive view" of language that contradicts the British and American traditions. (2) An effort was made to innovate the methodology of language studies, so as not to limit language studies to the stereotypes of linguistic philosophy. (3) The third direction in the development of language theory is to focus on the relationship between language use, socialization, and the brain.

Domestic pragmatics should respect the discipline and combine it with the actual situation of domestic research, to create a higher level of theory; the second is the localization of corpus selection. In the early days, domestic pragmatics research used translation and imitation as the main research methods, and therefore the choice of the corpus was mostly based on the foreign corpus. In the future, domestic pragmatics research will take into account the current situation in China and choose the appropriate language materials for itself. Since domestic pragmatics was developed based on foreign pragmatics, most of the early research teams grew up directly or indirectly under the training of foreign pragmatics researchers, or were guided by Western pragmatics research to engage in pragmatics research. Nowadays, the pragmatics in China has been relatively well developed, and we should build up our research team in the future.

CONCLUSION

Linguistics is a long-established discipline whose content has been of interest to scholars since ancient Greek and Roman times. However, it is a young discipline with a promising future, and it has been recognized as a relatively independent branch of linguistics by the international academic community for only a few decades since 1986. In light of the current research situation, we should continue to explore new connotations of pragmatics based on previous research, to better help people understand the various linguistic communication phenomena encountered in their lives and effectively guide their practice.

References

- [1] Blakemore D. (1992) *Understanding Utterances*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- [2] Fasold R. (1993) *Sociolinguistics of Language*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- [3] Green G. (1989/1996) *Pragmatics and Natural Language Understanding*. Hillsdale NJ: LEA Publishers.
- [4] Grundy P. (1995) *Doing Pragmatics*. London: Edward Arnold.
- [5] He Z. X. [何兆熊],1989, 语用学概要. 上海: 上海外语教育出版社.
- [6] He. Z. R. [何自然],1988, 语用学概论. 长沙: 湖南教育出版社.
- [7] He. Z. R. [何自然],1997, 语用学与英语学习. 上海: 上海外语教育出版社.
- [8] Hu Z. L. [胡壮麟],1980, 语用学. 国外语言学(03),1-10.
- [9] Kadmon, N. (2001) *Formal Pragmatics: semantics, pragmatics, presupposition and focus*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc..
- [10] Kasper G. (1968) *Variation in interlanguage speech act realization*. In S. Gasset al (eds.). *Variation in Second Language Acquisition: Discourse and Pragmatics*. 37–58. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- [11] Kempson R. (1975) *Presupposition and the Delimitation of Semantics*. Cambridge: CUP.
- [12] Leech G. (1983) *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Long-man.
- [13] Levinson S. (1983) *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [14] Mey J. (1993) *Pragmatics: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- [15] Montague, R. (1974) *The Proper Treatment of Quantification in Ordinary English*. In: R. H. Thomason ed. *Formal Philosophy: Selected Papers of Richard Montague*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 247-270.
- [16] Morris C. W. (1971) *Foundations of the Theory of Signs*. In *Writings on the General Theory of Signs*. Mouton, The Hague.
- [17] Qian G. L. [钱冠连],2003, 语用学的大格局. 外国语言文学(01),1-2+32.

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK

- [18] Roberts, C. (1996) *Information Structure in Discourse: Towards an Integrated Formal Theory of Pragmatics*. In: J. Hak Yoon & A. Kathol eds. Ohio State University Working Papers in Linguistics, Vol. 49: Papers in Semantics.
- [19] Searle, J. R. & D. Vanderveke. (1985) *Foundations of Illocutionary Logic*. Cambridge University Press.
- [20] Sperber D. and Wilson D. (1986/1995) *Relevance; Communication and Cognition*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- [21] Thomas J. (1995) *Meaning in Interaction: an Introduction to Pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- [22] Verschueren J. (1987) *Pragmatics as a Theory of Linguistic Adaptation*. IPRA Working Document.
- [23] Xiang M. Y. [向明友], 2006, 语用学研究现状谈. 中国外语(1), 10—11.
- [24] Yule G. (1996) *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.