

THE ROLE OF PRAGMATIC KNOWLEDGE IN THE INTERPRETATION AND PRODUCTION OF MEANING IN EFL EDUCATION

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Abstract

This article examines the role of pragmatic competence in achieving effective communication in a foreign language. It argues that successful interaction requires not only grammatical and lexical knowledge but also the ability to use language appropriately in context. The study explores the theoretical foundations of pragmatics, tracing its development from classical semiotic theory to a modern interdisciplinary field. Particular attention is paid to speech act theory, the cooperative and politeness principles, and the role of context in meaning construction. The article highlights how pragmatic norms influence the interpretation of both explicit and implicit meanings, including implicatures. The analysis demonstrates that language functions as a dynamic system shaped by social, cultural, and cognitive factors. It concludes that the development of pragmatic competence is essential for learners of foreign languages, as it enables them to perform communicative acts effectively and achieve intended perlocutionary effects in real-life interactions.

Keywords

Pragmatics, Speech act theory, Cooperative principle, Implicature, Politeness theory, context, semantics; speaker meaning; communicative interaction.

Introduction. Communication plays a key role in the development of human society, serving as the most important instrument for the exchange of knowledge and ideas. A human being, as the main driving element of social progress, must constantly transmit information and acquire new knowledge. This requires active interaction both in everyday and in professional spheres, using both the native and a foreign language. However, when communicating in a non-native language, it is not always possible to achieve full and effective dialogue, since each language is characterized by its own unique rules, norms, and cultural features that should be taken into account. The simple construction of phrases in a certain grammatical sequence is insufficient for successful communication. It is necessary to possess not

only lexical and grammatical knowledge, but also to be able to use the language taking into account the specific speech situation, the addressee, and the goals of communication. That is why, in the process of communication, particular importance is attached to observing speech norms that underlie pragmatic competence.

Literature review. In general, the field of research of pragmatic competence includes knowledge of the use of linguistic structures and strategies in a specific context. Before focusing on the significance of pragmatic competence, it is necessary to define what pragmatics means, its aspects of study, and what role it plays in achieving a successful communicative act.

The term “pragmatics” (was first introduced into scientific terminology by the American philosopher Charles Morris in 1938. Developing the ideas of Charles Peirce in the field of semiotics, Morris continued theoretical research and formulated his own concept of signs. Within this theory, he distinguished three interrelated branches: syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. According to his approach, syntax studies the interrelation of signs with one another; semantics studies the relation of signs to the objects they denote; and pragmatics studies the relations between signs and their users. Thus, the classification proposed by Morris helps to structure the language system, ensuring coherence between the elements of sign communication and bringing logical order not only to the structure of language but also to its practical use (Morris, 1938; 6).

Compared with this definition, the real boundaries of modern pragmatics have significantly expanded. Today, pragmatics is understood as the cognitive, social, and cultural study of language and communication. In essence, pragmatics is an interdisciplinary field that uses the methods and theories of various sciences (semiotics, philosophy, sociology, psychology, etc.) (Krongauz, 2005; 294). Based on this, it can be assumed that pragmatics represents one of the most significant and demanded areas of research in contemporary linguistics and methodology of foreign language teaching. In this context, it is especially important to realize that a full understanding of the nature of language is impossible without comprehending its pragmatic aspect that is, without studying how language functions in real communication.

It should be noted that the study of pragmatics did not always arouse interest among scholars. It was a branch of research that was not given proper attention. For example, Geoffrey Leech noted that in those distant times pragmatics was usually regarded as a bag into which it was convenient to put everything that could not be explained and where it could be forgotten (Leech, 1983; 1). While George Yule characterized it as material that is not easy to process within a formal system

of analysis (Yule, 1996). Only after some time did the understanding of pragmatics gradually become established as a direction connected with solving the most diverse problems of describing the functioning of language (Karaziya, 2006; 2).

Thus, the communicative-pragmatic turn in linguistics marked a shift of researchers' interest from the study of the internal properties of the language system to the analysis of language functions in the complex structure of human communication. The abstract, ideal speaker had to give way to a specific, real speaker who carries out communicative activity each time in a new situation, in a new communicative-pragmatic space. Now the focus is on living language in action, in all the diversity of its functions and socio-functional variants (Susov, 2009; 37).

As a result, the new direction and understanding of language can be represented as a mechanism whose task is aimed at studying the structural composition of language and determining functional features oriented toward achieving specific communicative goals. Consequently, from the question "What is language?" the focus shifts to "How does language function to achieve the set tasks in the process of communication?"

It is obvious that if Morris considered pragmatics as a connecting link between the user and the word, later pragmatics began to be considered from the point of view of the functional approach. Representatives of the school of linguistic philosophy, J. L. Austin and John Searle, developed the theory of pragmatic functions. The initial premise of their research was the understanding of language as action, which led to the emergence of the theory of speech acts (Karaziya, 2006; 4).

As is known, the theory of speech acts constitutes the core of pragmatics, and the speech act is rightly declared the basic minimal pragmatic unit of communication (Formanovskaya, 2002; 25). A speech act represents the basic unit of communication, and each of them performs a specific communicative task such as greeting, request, apology, farewell, and others. Speech acts are realized through a certain set of speech strategies or options that the speaker uses to achieve his communicative goal. Teaching these strategies within the framework of speech acts can be effectively applied by teachers seeking to integrate elements of pragmatics into the educational process, offering students valuable models for imitation.

A speech act in linguistics and philosophy of language has a performative function in language and communication. According to Austin, speech acts can be analyzed at the following three levels: locutionary act; illocutionary act; perlocutionary act.

Obviously, knowledge of the pragmatic norms of a foreign language ensures obtaining the desired perlocutionary act from the interlocutor, i.e., ensures effective communication (Zolotov, 2020; 20).

Research method. The analysis of theoretical literature gives grounds to assert that pragmatics does not focus only on speech acts. It has a broader concept and studies the general conditions of communicative use of language. According to I.P. Susov, language communication is to a certain extent organized and ordered, although this is observed in formal situations and institutional communicative events. However, in an ordinary, informal environment, participants in communication voluntarily or involuntarily, consciously or intuitively follow certain rules and principles of conversation (Susov, 2009; 141). Depending on how communication proceeds and whether its principles are observed or not, keys to interpreting the meaning of utterances are revealed, especially implicit meanings that are not expressed literally. Observance of the cooperative principle is connected with compliance with four communication postulates introduced by H. P. Grice, formulated as rules (Guzikova & Fofanova, 2015; 55-56).

The pragmatic principle of politeness (Politeness Principle) is often placed alongside the Cooperative Principle as one of the leading laws regulating language communication. However, if the Cooperative Principle is oriented mainly toward the semantic, content side of communicative contributions and the ways of expressing and interpreting meaning, the Politeness Principle is oriented toward the social or associative side of communication, toward the relations of the speaker to the addressees or sometimes to third parties, to the positions they occupy in the social (status-role) hierarchy.

Analysis and results. Proceeding from this, it can be argued that in order to highlight the pragmatic aspect of meaning, it is extremely important to understand the role that the speaker occupies in the linguistic world. At the center of this world is "I," and "here" and "now" serve as local and temporal reference points that help organize perception of reality. This egocentrism of the speaker manifests itself in speech in various ways, and all linguistic units and constructions reflecting such manifestations are united under the concept of pragmatics. The pragmatic aspect thus not only records how the speaker perceives the world but also how he seeks to influence it and interact with others through language.

It should be assumed that the pragmatic approach presupposes consideration of that significant component of linguistic units which is connected with the person using language as an instrument of communication and making choices to achieve set goals while orienting in the situation as a whole and in the social characteristics of the addressee. Moreover, language fixes diverse relations of the speaker to

reality, and the person using language in communicative activity a) names, b) indicates, c) expresses these relations, while the addressee perceives and interprets these meanings (Formanovskaya, 2002; 5–6).

The topic of perception and interpretation of meanings between addressee and addresser finds its theoretical justification in the “Theory of Pragmatic Meaning.” This theory was developed in the works of H. P. Grice. It was he who drew attention to the analysis of non-literal meanings of expressions and established that an addressee possessing linguistic competence is able to understand that the speaker’s intention differs from the literal meaning of the utterance. Communicative postulates make it possible to derive from the utterance components that are not part of its explicit meaning but are perceived by the listener directly in the act of communication. Thus, Grice put forward the term “speaker meaning,” linking the category of meaning with the speaker’s intention engaged in conscious purposeful speech activity, the main goal of which is to produce some effect on the addressee, causing him to recognize this intention. The semantic inferences drawn from the utterance were called implicatures (Karaziya, 2006).

Considering the functional significance of language, it is nevertheless impossible to deny how closely pragmatics and semantics are related when it comes to word meaning. This connection attracted the attention of many scholars who, in our opinion, drew a line between the two disciplines. Meaning in pragmatics primarily relates to the speaker or language user. Meaning in semantics is determined exclusively by the meaning of an expression in a given language in abstraction from the specific situation of speakers or listeners (Leech, 1983; 6). From our point of view, Betty Birner quite successfully identified the distinctive aspects of word meaning in pragmatics and semantics. Semantic meaning is not connected with context (context-independent) and has a strictly conventional meaning. Whereas in pragmatics, word meaning is completely connected with context (context-dependent) and does not affect the truth conditions of the utterance (Birner, 2013).

According to Levinson, pragmatics implies the study of language use and is directly connected with context. In fact, it is clear that contexts do much more than simply select among available semantic readings of sentences. For example, irony, understatement, and the like are types of use that actually create new interpretations in contexts. In general, pragmatics, according to Levinson, can be defined as the study of the ability of language users to relate sentences to the contexts in which they would be appropriate (Levinson, 1983).

Conclusion. According to the above, the development of pragmatics as a field has shifted the focus of linguistic research from abstract language structures to language use in context, emphasizing the role of the speaker, the addressee, and the communicative situation. The analysis of key theories, including speech act theory, the cooperative principle, and the politeness principle, demonstrates that meaning is not only encoded in linguistic forms but also constructed through interaction and interpretation. Special attention to implicatures and context-dependent meaning highlights the complexity of communication processes. For EFL learners, mastering pragmatic competence is essential for achieving communicative effectiveness, avoiding misunderstandings, and appropriately interpreting and producing language in diverse social and cultural contexts.

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