



## Discourse Pragmatics and Language Variation

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the relationship between pragmatics and language variation in English language. It begins by defining the concepts of pragmatics and language variation and the factors that influence language variation. The main part of the paper discusses the role of pragmatics in language variation and how pragmatic factors such as context, culture, and social norms influence language use. The paper also examines the impact of language variation on communication and the potential for miscommunication due to differences in pragmatic understanding. The conclusion highlights the need for language learners to understand the role of pragmatics in language variation and for educators to incorporate pragmatic instructions into language teaching programs.

**Key words:** pragmatics, discourse analysis, context, discourse pragmatics, and critical discourse analysis

### Introduction

Barron and Schneider (2014: 1) suggest that the study of discourse is not perceived as falling outside the realm of pragmatics: Rather it can be seen as an integral part of it. Language is a dynamic system that is constantly evolving and adapting to the social, cultural, and communicative needs of its users. One of the most fascinating aspects of language is its variability, which manifests in the form of dialects, registers, styles, accents, and other forms of linguistic variation. While traditional linguistics has focused on the structural aspects of language, such as grammar, syntax, and phonology, the field of pragmatics has attempted to explain how language is used in context in order to achieve communicative goals and convey social meanings.

Pragmatics is concerned with the study of language in use, rather than language as an abstract system of rules. It explores how speakers and listeners make sense of utterances by taking into account various contextual factors, such as the speaker's intentions, the audience's expectations, the discourse situation, the cultural norms, and the communicative functions of the speech act. Pragmatics also investigates how linguistic choices are influenced by social variables, such as gender, age, ethnicity, class, and regional identity, which can shape the way people use language to signal their social identity, assert power, negotiate meaning, or perform speech acts.



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## **Introduction to Language Variation in English**

Levinson (1983: 1) suggests that the use of the term pragmatics is pioneered by the philosopher Charles Morris denoting a branch of semiotics (1938). English is a widely spoken language with a long history of linguistic diversity and variation. From the early Middle English period to the present day, English has undergone many changes in its grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and usage due to various social, cultural, and historical factors. As a result, English is now spoken in many different dialects, accents, registers, and styles, each of which reflects the linguistic and cultural identity of its speakers.

## **Pragmatics and Language Variation**

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that deals with the study of language use in context. It focuses on how speakers and listeners make sense of utterances by taking into account the social, cultural, and communicative factors that influence their interpretation. Pragmatics also explores how language varies across different contexts and communities, as well as how linguistic variation is shaped by social variables such as gender, age, ethnicity, and class.

One example of language variation in English that is closely related to pragmatics is the use of discourse markers. Discourse markers are words or phrases that are used to signal the speaker's attitude, stance, or discourse organization, such as "well", "you know", "I mean", and "like". Discourse markers can vary across different dialects and registers of English, and their use can signal different social and cultural meanings.

For example, in British English, the discourse marker "innit" is often used at the end of a statement to seek agreement or confirmation from the listener, as in "It's a nice day today, innit?". This use of "innit" reflects the pragmatic function of seeking confirmation or agreement, as well as the cultural norms of informal speech in British English. In American English, a similar discourse marker is "right?", which is often used in the same way to seek agreement or confirmation, as in "That's a good idea, right?". However, the use of "right?" reflects different cultural and pragmatic norms in American English, as well as the dialectal variation between British and American English.

## **Pragmatics and Politeness Strategies**

Politeness strategies are a fundamental aspect of pragmatics, which involves using language to manage social relationships and to avoid or mitigate potential face-threatening acts. Politeness strategies can take various forms in the English language, such as indirectness, hedging, and mitigation, and can be influenced by cultural, social, and contextual factors.

One of the most common forms of politeness in English is indirectness, which involves using indirect language to convey a message or request in a more polite and non-confrontational way. For example, instead of saying "Can you do this for me?", a speaker may use indirect language such as "I was wondering if you could possibly help me with this?" This use of indirectness allows the speaker to avoid potential face-threatening acts by making a request in a more polite and less confrontational manner.

Hedging is another politeness strategy commonly used in English, which involves using language to soften or qualify a message. Hedging can take various forms, such as using modal verbs (e.g., could, might), using vague or general language, or using conditional language (e.g.,



"If it's not too much trouble, could you please..."). By using hedging, speakers can convey their message in a more tentative and less imposing way, which can help to avoid potential face-threatening acts.

Mitigation is another politeness strategy that involves using language to mitigate or lessen the impact of a message. This can take various forms, such as using positive or mitigating language (e.g., "It's not a big deal, but...") or using apologies or disclaimers (e.g., "I'm sorry to bother you, but..."). By using mitigation, speakers can help to avoid potential face-threatening acts and to maintain positive social relationships.

However, it's important to note that different cultures and social contexts may value different politeness strategies, and what may be considered polite in one context may not be in another. For example, in some cultures, directness and assertiveness may be valued over indirectness and hedging, and using too much politeness may be seen as insincere or even disrespectful.

We can conclude that politeness strategies are an important aspect of pragmatics in the English language, which involves using language to manage social relationships and to avoid or mitigate potential face-threatening acts. By understanding the different forms of politeness in English and how they are used in different contexts, we can better navigate social interactions and maintain positive relationships with others.

### **Pragmatics and Code - Switching**

Mey (2001: 6) believes that a genuine pragmatic account has to deal with the language users in their social context; it cannot confine itself to those grammatically encoded aspects of context.

Code-switching refers to the phenomenon of switching between two or more languages or dialects within a single conversation or discourse. Code-switching is a common practice in multilingual and multicultural communities, where speakers use different languages or dialects for different social, cultural, and communicative purposes.

Pragmatics plays an important role in code-switching, as it helps to explain why speakers choose to switch between languages or dialects in different communicative contexts. One of the key factors that influences code-switching is the social meaning or identity that speakers wish to convey through their language choices. Speakers may use code-switching to signal their ethnic or cultural identity, to express solidarity or affiliation with a particular group, or to assert power or authority in a particular discourse.

For example, in a conversation between two bilingual speakers of Spanish and English, a speaker may switch from English to Spanish to express a sense of intimacy or familiarity with the other speaker, as in "Hey man, ¿qué tal? How's it going?". This use of code-switching reflects the pragmatic function of expressing solidarity or affiliation, as well as the cultural norms of bilingual speech in certain communities.

Another example of code-switching in English can be found in African American Vernacular English (AAVE), which is a dialect of English spoken by many African Americans. AAVE is characterized by unique grammatical and phonological features that reflect the cultural and historical identity of its speakers. In some cases, speakers of AAVE may use code-switching to switch between AAVE and Standard English in order to convey different social meanings or to navigate different communicative contexts.



For instance, in a professional setting where Standard English is the norm, a speaker of AAVE may use code-switching to switch to Standard English in order to signal competence and professionalism, as in "I was wondering if you could provide me with some information about the project". This use of code-switching reflects the pragmatic function of navigating different communicative contexts, as well as the social norms of professionalism and competence in certain settings

### **The influence of Pragmatic factors**

Pragmatic factors such as context, culture, and social norms play a crucial role in shaping language use. Speakers of a language must take into account various contextual and cultural factors in order to communicate effectively and appropriately in different situations. These factors can influence the choice of language forms, structures, and styles, as well as the use of pragmatic strategies such as politeness, indirectness, and mitigation.

One important factor that influences language use is context. The situational context of a communication event, such as the physical setting, the relationship between speakers, and the purpose of the communication, can significantly affect the language used. For example, a conversation between friends may involve more informal language and slang than a conversation between strangers or in a formal setting such as a business meeting. Similarly, the purpose of the communication, such as requesting information or making a request, may require different language forms and strategies.

Discourse belongs to a category of terms that are recurrently employed in all sorts of context. It may be used interchangeably with text to denote longer chunks of written or spoken language. Additionally, It may refer to the semantic representation of some connected sentences, or it could refer to various communication on a specific issue, e. g. human rights discourse (Fetzer, 2014: 35).

Culture is another important factor that influences language use. Different cultures have different norms and values regarding language use, which can affect the way speakers express themselves and interpret language. For example, in some cultures, directness and assertiveness may be valued over indirectness and hedging, while in others, the opposite may be true. Additionally, cultural differences in the use of politeness strategies, such as the use of honorifics or deferential language, can greatly affect communication.

Social norms are also a crucial factor in language use. Social norms refer to the unwritten rules of behavior and communication that govern social interactions. These norms can vary greatly depending on factors such as age, gender, social status, and community membership. For example, in some communities, the use of informal language or slang may be seen as inappropriate or disrespectful, while in others, it may be a sign of familiarity and closeness.

We can say that pragmatic factors such as context, culture, and social norms have a significant impact on language use. Speakers of a language must navigate these factors in order to communicate effectively and appropriately in different situations. Understanding the influence of these factors on language use can help us gain insights into the complex and dynamic nature of language and its role in social interactions



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## **The impact of language variation on communication and the potential for miscommunication**

Language variation, which can refer to differences in pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and usage, can have a significant impact on communication. People who speak the same language may still have difficulty understanding each other if they use different dialects, accents, or register. These variations can lead to miscommunications, misunderstandings, and even conflicts.

One major area of language variation is pragmatics, which refers to the social use of language in context. Pragmatics involves understanding how language is used to convey meaning beyond the literal interpretation of the words themselves. This can include understanding social cues, implied meaning, and context-specific norms.

For example, consider the phrase "Can you pass me that thing?" In some contexts, this might be a polite request for an object that is within reach. In other contexts, it might be interpreted as a demand, especially if the speaker is using a commanding tone of voice or if the object is far away and difficult to reach.

Another example is the use of idiomatic expressions or slang. These forms of language can be difficult for non-native speakers or people from different regions to understand. For example, the phrase "kick the bucket" means to die in English, but this might not be immediately apparent to someone who has not heard the expression before.

Differences in pragmatic understanding can also cause misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication. People from different cultures may have different expectations about how language should be used in social situations. For example, in some cultures, it is considered rude to be direct and straightforward in speech, while in other cultures, this is seen as a sign of respect.

Moreover, different cultures may have different nonverbal cues, such as gestures or facial expressions, that are used to convey meaning. For example, in some cultures, a smile may be used to indicate politeness, while in others, it may be used to indicate happiness or agreement. To avoid miscommunications due to differences in pragmatic understanding, it is important to be aware of these differences and to adapt one's language use to the context and audience. This can involve using clear and simple language, avoiding idiomatic expressions or slang, and being aware of nonverbal cues.

As we previously mentioned, language variation, particularly in the area of pragmatics, can have a significant impact on communication and can lead to miscommunications and misunderstandings. By being aware of these differences and adapting one's language use to the context and audience, it is possible to minimize the potential for miscommunication and facilitate effective communication.

### **The importance of Pragmatics**

Understanding the role of pragmatics in language variation is essential for language learners who want to communicate effectively in their target language. Pragmatics refers to the social use of language in context, and it involves understanding how language is used to convey meaning beyond the literal interpretation of the words themselves. In other words, pragmatics is about understanding the social and cultural context in which language is used.





Language learners who focus solely on learning vocabulary and grammar may struggle to communicate effectively in real-world situations because they may not be familiar with the pragmatic aspects of the language they are learning. For instance, they may not understand the appropriate way to greet someone or how to make a polite request.

Additionally, language learners who are not familiar with the pragmatic aspects of a language may unintentionally offend or confuse their conversation partner, which can lead to miscommunications and misunderstandings. We can mention the situations in which they may not understand the appropriate use of honorifics or how to use indirect speech.

Therefore, it is crucial for language learners to understand the role of pragmatics in language variation. This involves learning about the cultural norms and expectations that are associated with the target language, such as appropriate ways to address someone of higher social status, how to make a request, and how to express gratitude or apology.

One effective way to learn about pragmatics is through immersion in the target language and culture. By living in a country where the target language is spoken, language learners can observe how native speakers use language in context and learn to adjust their own language use accordingly.

Language learners can also benefit from studying examples of authentic language use, such as in movies, TV shows, or literature. This can help them to understand how language is used in real-life situations and to develop their own pragmatic skills.

Understanding the role of pragmatics in language variation is essential for language learners who want to communicate effectively in their target language. By learning about the cultural norms and expectations associated with the target language, language learners can avoid miscommunications and misunderstandings and communicate more effectively with native speakers.

### **Pragmatics and Education**

Every ESL teacher knows that language learning is a complex process that involves not only learning grammar rules and vocabulary, but also developing the ability to use language effectively in real-life situations. This is where pragmatic instruction comes in and it is the study of how people use language in context to achieve their communicative goals. Therefore, incorporating pragmatic instruction into language teaching programs can help students develop the ability to use language in a socially appropriate and effective manner.

For, de Saussure (2007: 152) a pragmatic account of meaning supplies all the components that discourse analysis portrays. On the one hand, if discourse is taken to represent verbal communication, then it can be elucidated merely with reference to the speaker's intended meaning. On the other hand, if it is considered as standing for organised spans of texts or utterances, then they have to be meaningful spans of texts or meaningful utterances.

Here are some ways educators can incorporate pragmatic instruction into language teaching programs:

1. **Teach pragmatics explicitly:** Educators should provide explicit instruction on pragmatic rules, including how to appropriately use and respond to greetings, requests, apologies, compliments, and other communicative acts. This should involve teaching



both the linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of communication, such as body language and intonation.

2. **Provide opportunities for interaction:** Language learners need plenty of opportunities to interact with native speakers and other learners to develop their pragmatic skills. Educators should create opportunities for learners to engage in meaningful conversations with peers and native speakers, both inside and outside the classroom.
3. **Use authentic materials:** Authentic materials such as videos, podcasts, and news articles can provide valuable input for learners to understand how language is used in real-life situations. These materials can also expose learners to different speech acts and communicative strategies used in different contexts.
4. **Incorporate cultural competence:** Language learners should also develop cultural competence to understand how culture influences communication. Educators should provide opportunities for learners to learn about cultural norms and values that affect communication in different cultures.
5. **Provide feedback:** Educators should provide regular feedback on learners' pragmatic performance to help them improve their skills. This feedback should focus on the effectiveness and appropriateness of learners' communication strategies, both linguistically and non-linguistically.

According to this, we can conclude that incorporating pragmatic instruction into language teaching programs is essential for learners to develop the ability to use language effectively in real-life situations. Educators should provide explicit instruction on pragmatic rules, create opportunities for interaction, use authentic materials, incorporate cultural competence, and provide regular feedback to learners to help them improve their pragmatic skills. By doing so, language learners can develop their communicative competence and effectively navigate different communicative situations.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, pragmatics and language variation are two important aspects of the English language that greatly influence communication. Pragmatics involves the study of how people use language in context to achieve their communicative goals, while language variation refers to the differences in the way people use language based on factors such as region, social class, and culture.

Understanding pragmatics is crucial for effective communication as it involves not only understanding the words used but also the social and cultural contexts in which they are used. Therefore, incorporating pragmatic instruction into language teaching programs is essential for learners to develop the ability to use language effectively in real-life situations.

Language variation, on the other hand, is an important aspect of language diversity and identity. It is important to recognize and respect different varieties of English, including regional dialects and non-standard forms. Educators can incorporate language variation into their teaching by providing exposure to different varieties of English and encouraging learners to appreciate linguistic diversity.

In conclusion, a better understanding of pragmatics and language variation can lead to more effective communication and greater appreciation of linguistic diversity. By incorporating



these concepts into language teaching programs, educators can help learners develop the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate different communicative situations and appreciate the richness and diversity of the English language.

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