

# Revisiting Pragmatic Competence: An Emotional Perspective

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## **Abstract**

This study revisits pragmatic competence from an emotional perspective, specifically, from the empathy. Based on the overview of the pragmatics and pragmatic competence, the current research finds that the traditional views on the pragmatic competence are mostly from the social-cultural dimensions. Language and emotions are richly intertwined: language can be used to convey emotions, and specific emotions are created from certain pragmatic behavior. This research proposes that pragmatic competence should take emotions into consideration, particularly pragmatic empathy—the ability to understanding the interlocutors’ emotional needs and willingness in sharing this understanding with the interlocutors in language use. It is suggested that pragmatic empathy run through the language in use. This research argues that the whole process of social interaction co-occurs with online pragmatic empathy: from the feelings of what to say to the actualization of it in a particular context.

**Keywords:** human emotions, pragmatic competence, pragmatic empathy

## **1. Introduction**

Since its appearance, pragmatic competence has been the focus of language teaching and learning. Traditional approaches to pragmatic tend to put the pragmatic studies within the social-cultural dimensions. In the literature, it is mostly considered from the perspective of social cultural ones. Theories and models of pragmatics often consider social language exchange as rational and logical process, e.g. speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). The emotional dimensions to language use ... so far are pretty much totally left aside (Wharton & de Saussure, p. 23). Recent research suggests deep ties between language and emotion (Barrett, 2017; van Berkum, 2018, 2019). The experience of empathy is a powerful interpersonal phenomenon necessary in everyday social interaction. Therefore, the paper revisits the pragmatic competence from the emotional perspective. Based on the literature review and the case analysis, this study proposes that the ability to empathize is an important element in social interaction. This paper follows the structure of an overview of pragmatics and pragmatic competence, reconstruction of the pragmatic competence from pragmatic empathy, and a conclusion.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Overview of Pragmatics: Definition and Properties*

Back to 1930s, pragmatics was still a rarely known linguistic discipline. Charles Morris (1938), an American philosopher, was the first one who identified pragmatics. In his analysis of semiotics, Morris considered pragmatics as one of its branches and defined it as the study of “the relation of signs to interpreters” (Morris, 1938, p.30). In his subsequent work, he described pragmatics “the aspect of semiotics concerned with the origin, uses and effects of signs” (Morris, 1964, p.30). Morris’s trichotomy of syntax, semantics and pragmatics provides an understanding of how pragmatics relates to other focal areas of linguistics, particularly by specifying pragmatics as linguistic discipline dealing with context.

In the mid of 1970s, the study of pragmatics developed into a fast-growing and popular new area of linguistic research. Different definitions have been formulated by focusing on different aspects such as speech acts, sciences of language in use, politeness etc. Leech (1983) included his previous research papers over the borderline between pragmatics and semantics and redefined the pragmatics as “the study of meaning in relation to speech situations” (p.6). At the same period, Levinson developed his linguistic theory of Pragmatics (1983). In the book, Levinson spent almost most of his first chapter defining pragmatics. According to Levinson (1983), it is not easy to provide an entirely satisfactory definition. He points out that the diversity of these definitions is by no means unusual, given that academic fields are generally the convergence of different methods, assumptions and focal problems (Levinson, 1983, p.5). While elaborating and arguing the deficiency over the existing possible variety of definitions, Levinson attempted at a set of possible definitions, one of which is a context-dependent definition: “pragmatics is the study of the relations between language and context that are basic to an account of language understanding” (1983, p.21). In Levinson’s view point, definition is more about delimiting possible scopes of the study.

Crystal (1985, 2008) delineates pragmatics from language users, constraints of using language, and the effects on the participants by using that language in social communication. Pragmatics is defined as “meaning in use, or meaning in context” (Thomas, 1995, p.3). Thomas analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of different definitions by looking into the underlying assumptions that these definitions presuppose, and proposes the definition of pragmatics as “meaning in interactions” (1995, p.22). Thomas’ (1983) definition takes into consideration of the contributions of both speakers and hearers, utterance and context into meaning making. He regards the meaning construction as a dynamic process which involves the negotiation of both the hearer and speaker’s parts based on the physical, social and linguistic context of the interaction, as well as the potential meaning embedded within the utterance.

Later, in formulating the theoretical framework, more linguists define the term in their literature. Kasper defines the term as “the study of people’s comprehension and production of linguistic action in context” (1993, p.3). Yule (1996, p.3) proposes “pragmatics is the study of speaker meaning, contextual meaning, how more gets communicated than is said, and the expression of relative distance”. In his later publication, Yule (2010, p.127) explains that “there are other aspects of meaning dependent more on content and the communicative intentions of speakers”, and he further defines pragmatics as “the study of what speakers mean”, or “speaker meaning”. Yule’s theoretical framework of pragmatics deals with the “invisible” meaning, in other words, how people recognize and interpret what is meant even if it is not articulated.

In literature, different definitions of pragmatics have been proposed, and this phenomenon has been explained in different research. Levinson points out that while it may be disconcerting, it is not unusual as researchers have attempted to propose their definitions based on their individual linguistic concern and perspectives (1983). Thomas (1995) attributes the conflicting definitions to the constant development of pragmatics. Crystal (2008) ascribes no coherent definition partly to the vast scope of topics that pragmatics attends to, remarking that it is probably because of its interdisciplinary nature concurring with the other disciplines, as cognition, psychology, and society.

In all these attempts, pragmatics is observed more than extending a contextual dimension to the science of language, but a “general cognitive, social, and cultural perspective in relation to their usages in forms of behaviors” (Verschueren, 1999, p.7). According to Verschueren, pragmatics is not only a branch of linguistics, but should be placed under a broader field of study of social, cultural and cognitive perspectives. This view looks at the linguistic phenomena in actual use and considers the study of linguistic phenomena should be on what people do in social context. In general, Verschueren’s (1999) broad view emphasizes the socio-cultural perspective of pragmatic study (Culpeper & Haugh, 2014).

Of all the definitions, Crystal (1985, appeared in his later edition in 1997) is among one of the commonly referred to, e.g. in Kasper and Rose (2002), Taguchi and Roever (2017), and Roever (2022). In the development of pragmatic theory, despite the disagreements among linguists regarding the specific context referred to in their individual theoretical model, there is a consensus on the necessity of considering the context of the utterance in order to ascertain its meaning. Taguchi and Roever (2017) reformulates pragmatics as a linguistic discipline linking the linguistic forms and the ways in which they are used in a social context to perform a communicative act. After considering various definitions proposed, they conclude that the elements of “language, meaning, context, and action” stand out as the common features. Pragmatics involves complex interplay among the linguistic forms, social actions and context of use. An overview on the definitional matter helps draw the conclusion that pragmatics is often posited into the scope of cognitive and social-cultural dimensions.

Along with the development of pragmatics, more inter-disciplinary studies also come under different disciplines, e.g. intercultural pragmatics (Kecskes, 2013), interpersonal pragmatics (Locher, 2010), clinical pragmatics (Cummings, 2009), cyberpragmatics (Yus, 2011), sociopragmatics (Haugh et al., 2021). Same conclusion could be drawn that the major theories and practices of pragmatics are embedded within the scope of cognition, and social-cultural dimensions.

## 2.2 Overview of Pragmatic Competence

Pragmatic competence is one of the major constituents in the construct of communicative competence proposed by Hymes (1972) and revised by the model of Bachman and Palmer (1996). It doesn't stand itself as an independent constituent of communicative competence until the Bachman (1990). Standing alone or being incorporated as subcategory in the major components of communicative models (Bachman 1990, Bachman & Palmer, 1996, 2000; Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980), pragmatic competence has long been established as one of the key components in determining interlocutors' linguistic communication.

Pragmatic competence is crucial to the development of language learners' communicative competence. Development in its component will help enhance the communicative competence for a language user or learner (Savignon, 1983, 2001; Usó-Juan & Martínez-Flor, 2006, 2008). In social communication, it is not only important to say things grammatically correct, but also important to say things social-conventionally acceptable and appropriate. The importance of pragmatic competence has been well recognized in literature of different linguacultural contexts, particularly highlighted in the bulk amount of literature investigating the development of second language (L2) pragmatic competence through different speech acts, from the early publications (e.g. Takahashi and Beebe, 1987; Kasper and Rose, 2002), to the more recently emerging studies, e.g. in L2 Chinese (Su and Ren, 2017), L2 Spanish (Félix-Brasdefer, 2007), L2 Greek (Bella, 2012), and L2 English (Taguchi, 2008).

The definition and properties of pragmatic competence have undergone certain changes over time. Corresponding to the early models of communicative competence (e.g. Bachman & Palmer, 1996, 2000; Canale & Swain, 1980), the pragmatic competence is described as to include functional and sociolinguistic knowledge. The former refers to the linguistic forms selected to convey a speaker's meaning, and the latter is referred to the social-cultural context that constrains the social communication. In this early model, pragmatic competence is postulated as the ability to form the function and form mapping under certain social-cultural context.

During this period, Levinson (1983), Leech (1983) and Thoms (1983) are among the work efforts on the pragmatic competence. Leech (1983) incorporated Thomas' (1981, 1983) view of pragmatics, formulating his theory of pragmatics by dividing the domain into pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics. Accordingly, the pragmatic competence consists of two aspects of pragmalinguistic competence and sociopragmatic competence. Pragmalinguistics captures the linguistic end toward the language use, and the sociopragmatics is about the sociological interface of pragmatics, or more specific local condition of language use (Leech, 1983, p. 10-11). (See the following Figure 3.1).

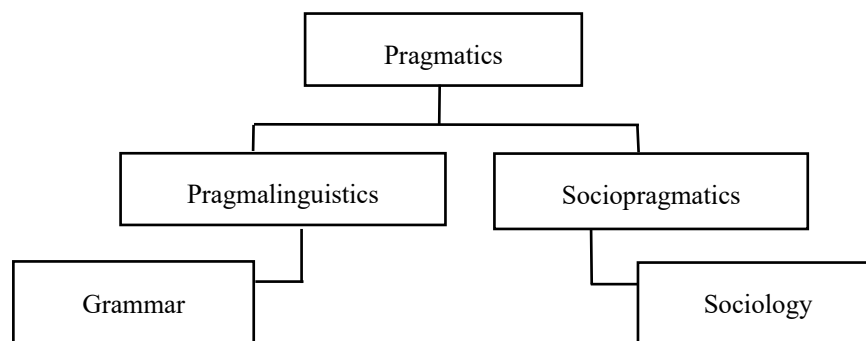


Figure 3.1 Dimensions of pragmatics by Leech (1983, 2014) cited from Culpeper et al. (2018)

Leech's (1983) distinction is not without the critiques. This is particularly obvious in the definition of the pragmalinguistics as the resources that the speaker uses to convey intentional meanings, as in pragmatics, working out the meaning generally involves the joint efforts of both the speaker and the hearer (Culpeper et al., 2018). Pragmalinguistics is more about the linguistic end of pragmatics concerning resources available for the language users to encode or decode illocutionary and interpersonal meanings in communicative acts.

Even though Leech (1983) incorporates the concept of distinction of pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics under the pragmatics, he didn't pursue the two domains further. Following the distinction by Leech (1983), more attempts work on the concepts and contents of these two terms (Barron, 2003; Kasper, 1997; Kasper and Roever, 2005; Kasper and Rose, 2001). As an approach to pragmatics, the distinction of pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics represents two different orientations, with the one orienting language or linguistic dimension and the other orienting social-cultural facet (Culpeper et al., 2018; Levinson, 1983; Marmaridou, 2011; Thomas, 1983). The two terms "do not reflect the distinction and complementariness they have been associated with in the work of other scholars" (Marmaridou, 2011, p. 80) and they are not subcategories of general linguistics, but "complementary with each other, standing alone as areas of study within pragmatics as a whole" (Culpeper et al., 2018, p.30). The two terms of pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics belong to two different areas of study. Following this paradigm, topics like speech acts, conversation implicatures, linguistic politeness, directness and indirectness, and social cultural constraints are the common themes in the scope of pragmatic competence. Being pragmatically competent means that language users develop the pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence, and increase the ability in using appropriate pragmalinguistic means in line with sociopragmatic norms in social communication.

To sum up, being recognized as a key constituent in the major communicative models, or as the desirable ability that second language practitioners and learners aspire to, pragmatic competence has triggered wide attention, particularly in L2 teaching and learning. But a tendency can be observed: pragmatics and pragmatic competence are often investigated within the scope of the linguacultural contexts.

### 3. Research Question and Method

Therefore, the current study aims to redefine the pragmatic competence from another perspective with the specific questions: what is pragmatic competence within the emotional consideration?

This study is mainly a speculative and theoretical one. Based on the existing literature from the fields of emotion and the pragmatics, and case analysis from daily interaction and descriptive content analysis, the paper proposes the pragmatic competence be considered within the emotional perspective, specifically, pragmatic empathy.

### 4. Reconstruction of the Pragmatic Competence: Pragmatic Empathy

#### 4.1 Emotions and Social Actions

An overview on the evolution of definition and scope will help draw the conclusion that pragmatic competence is often considered within the social cultural and cognitive dimensions. Tracing its philosophical origin in the speech acts theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), communicative acts are often considered as rational and logical. Language transmits emotions, which is referred to as "phatic" function. Under its influence, theories and models in pragmatics are often developed and interpreted by regarding the interactive social communications as being rational and logical, and speakers at communication as rational entities.

Emotion is a particular class of sensations or feelings (Scarantino and de Sousa, 2021). Evolutionary process has shaped the human beings to be responsive and sensitive to the emotional states and needs of others, e.g. family, members of communities and social groups (Decety, 2021). The investigation at the intersect of language and emotion has undergone a steady increase since the 70s or 80s in the last century. How is language use related to emotion? Some recent influential theories suggest deep ties between language and emotions (Barrett, 2017; Scarantino, 2017). Any observation into daily life will suffice to say that language is closely related to emotion. People may cry or laugh when a certain piece of news comes, indicating that language has huge impact on human emotions. An infant will laugh heartily when a caretaker makes certain amusing sound. Evidences from different research disciplines suggest that language and emotion are closely related. Studies from cognitive science suggest the critical relationship between language and emotion (e.g., Barrett et al., 2019; Fox et al., 2018; Kahneman, 2011). In the human sociality, language takes the pivotal role of human social interaction, and sociality itself is deeply emotional (van Berkum, 2022, p. 3). Emotion is richly intertwined in real-time language production and comprehension (e.g. 't Hart et al., 2018, 2019, 2021; van Berkum, 2018, 2019). Griffiths and Scarantino (2009) portray emotions in social contexts as possible forms of negotiations.

Language and emotion are correlated. For example, the traditional topic of linguistic politeness is closely related to the human feelings. Perhaps, research on linguistic politeness should consider emotions as "regulators of relationship between organism and environment" (Langlotz and Locher, 2017, p. 290). Interjections may express something entirely non-propositional (Wharton 2009, 2016). Language is interesting and complex, but the capabilities for ostensive-inferential interaction and communication are remarkable (Levinson, 2006; Sperber and Wilson, 1995; Tomasello, 2008).

#### 4.2 Pragmatic Competence and Pragmatic Empathy

Emotions are regarded as a construal to realize a social intention: short-term one and long-term one (Wilutzky, 2015). Scarantino (2017) proposes the affective pragmatics, arguing that emotional expressions and speech acts are similar enough that they may have evolved before some of our linguistic-pragmatic skills. It is also suggested that linguistic sign and emotions may co-occur the whole process of language production and comprehension (van Berkum, 2022). Against this background, this study proposes that the pragmatic competence embodies the competence of understanding, and willingness to show their emotional concern toward other interlocutors in social communication. This kind of ability is referred to as pragmatic empathy in communicative acts. Empathy can be broadly defined as the “ability to experience another’s emotions and perceptions” (Lipman, 2003, p. 268). The constructs in it include understanding and/or sharing another’s emotion (Chakrabarti & Baron-Cohen, 2006; Decety and Jackson, 2004). “Empathy is about emotions, which are fundamental to human survival in general” (Decety and Holvoet, 2021, p. 2).

Empirical data of the speech acts show that interlocutors empathize pragmatically in achieving certain communicative purpose (e.g. Babai Shishavan & Sharifian, 2013; Kwon, 2004; Liao & Bresnahan, 1996; Su, 2020). A close look at the speech acts will yield considerable amount of data evidencing that interlocutors empathize in social communicative actions, e.g. refusing, giving and receiving thanking. For example, pre/post-refusal supportive moves in the following expressions all see the interlocutors’ consideration toward refusees’ feelings: e.g. I understand your situation, but...; it is very kind of you but...; You know I have been very busy lately, and I am sorry to ....; How nice of you to offer me such a wonderful opportunity, but unfortunately, I ...; Interlocutors tend to preface the semantic formulas carrying the real communicative purpose with mitigators to soften the possible illocutionary force damaging speakers’ face.

In social interaction, emotions also convey what the expresser wants the perceiver to do, not only expressives but also directives (Ekman, 1997; Fridlund, 1994; Scarantino, 2017). Language can be used to convey interlocutors’ feelings, or certain emotion (e.g. sadness, anger, joy) are produced in response to linguistic behavior. Social communicative acts always accompany the flow of feelings/emotions. Language use is not only about knowing the linguistic meaning as well as communicative purpose, but about the competence to actualize this “knowing”. Interlocutors know what to say, willing to say; and factually say what (s)he ‘needs’ to say in social communication.

Pragmatic empathy is an important ingredient underpinning the whole process of social interaction. It is an online mechanism working along the whole process of social interaction. It may not be the whole starting point, but it could be the end or consequence (illocutionary force) of the locutionary speech act.

#### 4.3 Case Study of Empathy in Social Actions

But how do the interlocutors construct the emotions in language and how these emotions are interpreted by the interlocutors? To put it simply, how do interlocutors take the vehicle of language to convey their feelings, and how do they construe these feelings through the linguistic expressions?

Take the following from Terkourafi (2023, p. 245) as an example:

A friend invites you to a new apartment that your friend has spent long time renovating and decorating. Soon you enter the house, you find the decoration is very “abominable”. Instead of saying something like “It looks odd”, you say something like “That looks really nice”. So why do you tell such a white lie? How do you know you should say such a thing? Why do you show strong consideration toward another person? The most probable reason is that you don’t want to hurt other’s feelings. You show your consideration towards other’s emotional needs. You know that decoration of the house is generally tedious and tiring. It must have cost your friend a lot of time and efforts. By intuition, you know it would be inappropriate to disregard others’ hard work, and socially unacceptable. Underlying this verbal communication is your ability of showing understanding and recognition of others. The common practice of pragmatics would explain it as the interlocutor being polite, or being cooperative by showing the consideration towards other speaker’s face needs. The illocutionary effect of “That looks really nice” is to create a positive, probably cheerful mood, for both you and your friend. If we probe further, we will see that the speaker’s linguistic expression reflects the ongoing consideration of the other’s emotional needs. “White lies primarily with respect to their effect on the individual recipient’s emotional well-being, whereas in cultures prizing societal inter-dependence, they highlight the social implications for the recipient” (Heyman and Lee, 2012, p.169). Showing understanding towards others’ feelings is a kind of ability to empathize. Again, let’s turn back to the illocutionary effect of “That looks really nice”, and very probably it will result in both you and your friend being in a cheerful mood. So, one’s emotions have been shaped or changed in response to language practice. Except for the ability of “how-to-say-what-to-whom-when” (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013, p.68), the online

mechanism of understanding and sharing other's feelings runs through the interactive language use. Their social communication involves guest's consideration towards host's feelings. Instead of saying something like "Your decoration looks a bit odd", the guest opts linguistic choice expressing the decoration is nice. To carry out this social linguistic communication, the guest (you) should at least embody the ability of saying what need to say. To actualize this linguistic expression, the guest (you) must possess the ability of sensing and understanding the host's emotional needs and be willing to give the compliment. This showcases that during the interactive language use, empathy is an important ability online. This study proposes that pragmatic competence involves the understanding the interlocutors' emotional needs in saying something in social interaction. This kind of ability involves understanding what to say, when to say it, and to whom it should be said—this is pragmatic empathy: the ability to say what-when-why and the willingness in saying it. It is an emotional mentality running through the whole interactive language use.

Take another example in Chinese context (Gu, 1990, p.252; and the translation is by Su, 2020):

01A: míngtiān lái chī wǎnfàn a.

'Please come for dinner tomorrow.'

02 B: bù lái le, tài máfan.

'Probably not. It's too much trouble.'

03 A: máfan shénme ya, cài dōushì xiàchéng de.

'No trouble at all. Dishes are all ready-made.'

04 B: nà yě děi shāo a.

'But you still need to cook them.'

05 A: nǐ bù lái wǒmen yěděi chīfàn.

'Even if you don't come, we need to eat.'

yīdìng lái a, bù lái wǒ kě shēngqì le.

'You must come, or I'll feel offended.'

07 B: hǎo ba, jiù suíbiàn yīdiǎn.

'Ok. Just simple dishes.'

The pre-acceptance sequence (refusal before acceptance) in Chinese invitational conversations, characterized by the polite behavior of 'kèqǐ', demonstrates that emotional consideration runs through the whole language exchange between inviter and invitee. Both interlocutors take the emotional needs of the other into consideration showing understanding and appreciation of other's feelings. The inviter's interactive acts work towards reducing the emotional burden of putting the potential "debt" on the invitee when the invitation is accepted, and the invitee's communitive acts revolve around the appreciation for the inviting gesture (hospitality in doing so) and for the inviter's trouble and costs in preparing for the dinner. Pragmatic empathy is important for both the addresser and the addressee, and for the uttering and interpreting of human communicative acts. Emotion is so indispensable to language communication that "the expression and communication of emotions needs to be put right back at the center of research into pragmatics" (Wharton & de Saussure, p.12). "The fact that much of our talk reflects our emotion-rich sociality implies that there will be many occasions where linguistic signs and emotions co-occur—this provides ample opportunity for emotions to influence the various processes and representations involved in language production, comprehension and acquisition" (van Berkum, 2022, p. 3-4).

#### 4.4 Redefining Pragmatic Competence

Given the previous review and rationale, this study argues for the inclusion of emotional element in the pragmatic competence, specifically, pragmatic empathy. It is an ability that co-occurs the whole social interaction—an online working mechanism of showing understanding toward other interlocutor's emotional needs. Pragmatic competence is here redefined encompassing "how-to-say-what-to-whom-when" (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013, p.68), which prerequisites understanding and feeling the emotional needs of interlocutors under communication, for example, recognizing the communicative purpose of another interlocutor, but also emotions that guide "how-to-say-what-to-whom-when". Such feelings run through the whole language behavior—speech acts in interaction. Sometimes the interlocutor may not be able to consciously realize it, but constantly it is underlying the language in use.

## 5. Conclusion

This study revisits the pragmatic competence from the emotional perspective. Based on the literature and case study, it argues for importance of pragmatic empathy in social communication, and proposes the definition encompassing the emotional consideration. The study defines pragmatic empathy as an online working mechanism underlying the speech acts in interaction. It suggests that pragmatic empathy is the fundamental emotion running through the interactional process, from understanding the pragmatic meaning and purposes of interlocutor under communication, to the actualization of such understanding in saying something. However, the ample amount of literature from the relevant fields, particularly from interdisciplinary studies, makes this tentative initiative both difficult and insufficient. As a theoretical hypothesis, it still needs empirical data to validate. Besides, this study only focusses on the necessity and the definition of pragmatic empathy without building corresponding theory and model. The limitations in this study urge for the future and further investigations on the interface of pragmatics and emotions.

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