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PRAGMATIC CHALLENGES IN MILITARY TRANSLATION

The article investigates different types of pragmatic challenges that arise specifically in military translation. In particular, the most widely used concepts such as speech acts, implicature, and politeness strategies are thoroughly analyzed to reveal how they function in high-stakes communication.

Moreover, the peculiarities of indirect directives, pragmatic gaps, strategic communication, and contextual reconstruction are extensively researched to understand their impact on accurate translation. Military and diplomatic texts widely exploit indirect speech acts and vague or coded expressions, which therefore require careful contextual reconstruction and cultural filtering by the translator to preserve intended meaning.

Specifically, indirect directives such as threats, refusals, or warnings are often cloaked under polite or ambiguous phrasing and must be interpreted based on the speaker's intention, cultural norms, and the operational context. This subtype of speech acts usually expresses strategic positioning, command tone, or conflict de-escalation, making their precise translation vital.

Consequently, translators must skillfully identify the functional intent behind utterances and apply cultural filtering to ensure the target audience perceives the message as intended without unintended offense or escalation. Additionally, the pragmatic gap – the difference between what is literally said and what is pragmatically meant – is particularly dangerous in crisis and strategic situations and must be carefully bridged through pragmatic competence to avoid costly misinterpretations. Failure to accurately render these pragmatic nuances can ultimately lead to serious operational errors, damaged diplomatic relations, lost trust between allies, or even escalation of conflict.

Overall, the article highlights the indispensable need for translators working in military and diplomatic fields to possess advanced pragmatic awareness and cultural sensitivity. It stresses that pragmatic challenges are not just linguistic issues but strategic vulnerabilities that can have profound real-world consequences. Thus, specialized training emphasizing pragmatic competence, contextual understanding, and strategic communication is essential to enhance translation accuracy and effectiveness in these critical domains.

Keywords: pragmatics, speech act, implicature, politeness strategies, contextual reconstruction, strategic communication, pragmatic gap, functional intent, cultural filtering.

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ПРАГМАТИЧНІ ВИКЛИКИ У ВІЙСЬКОВОМУ ПЕРЕКЛАДІ

У статті досліджуються різні типи прагматичних викликів, що виникають саме у військовому перекладі. Зокрема, ретельно аналізуються найпоширеніші концепції, такі як мовленнєві акти, імплікатура та стратегії ввічливості, щоб виявити, як вони масштабно функціонують у комунікації.

Більше того, ретельно досліджуються особливості непрямих директив, прагматичних прогатин, стратегічної комунікації та контекстуальної реконструкції, щоб зрозуміти їхній вплив на точність перекладу. У військових та дипломатичних текстах широко використовуються непрямі мовні акти та розплівчасті або закодовані вирази, які відповідно вимагають ретельної контекстуальної реконструкції та культурної фільтрації перекладачем для збереження задуманого значення.

Зокрема, непрямі директиви, такі як погрози, відмови чи попередження, часто маскуються під ввічливими або неоднозначними формулюваннями та повинні інтерпретуватися на основі намірів мовця, культурних норм та операційного контексту. Цей підтип мовленнєвих актів зазвичай виражає стратегічне позиціонування, командний тон або дескалацію конфлікту, що робить їх точний переклад життєво важливим.

Однакоже, перекладачі повинні вміло визначати функціональний намір висловлювань і застосовувати культурну фільтрацію, щоб забезпечити сприйняття цільовою аудиторією повідомлення належним чином, без ненавмисної образи чи ескалації. Крім того, прагматичний розрив – різниця між тим, що буквально сказано, і тим, що прагматично мається на увазі, – є особливо небезпечною у кризових та стратегічних ситуаціях і має бути ретельно подоланий за допомогою прагматичної компетентності, щоб уникнути дорогоцінних неправильних тлумачень. Нездатність точно передати ці прагматичні нюанси може зрештою привести до серйозних оперативних помилок, пошкодження дипломатичних відносин, втрати довіри між союзниками або навіть ескалації конфлікту.

Загалом, стаття підкреслює невід'ємну необхідність для перекладачів, які працюють у військовій та дипломатичній сферах, щоб мати розвинену прагматичну обізнаність та культурну чутливість. У ній наголошується, що прагматичні виклики – це не лише лінгвістичні питання, а й стратегічні вразливості, які можуть мати серйозні наслідки для реального світу. Таким чином, спеціалізована підготовка, що зосереджується на прагматичній компетентності, контекстуальному розумінні та стратегічній комунікації, є важливою для підвищення точності та ефективності перекладу в цих критичних сферах.

Ключові слова: прагматика, мовленнєвий акт, імплікатура, стратегії ввічливості, контекстуальна реконструкція, стратегічна комунікація, прагматичний розрив, функціональний намір, культурна фільтрація.

1. Introduction: Exploring the Intersection of Pragmatics and Specialized Translation

1.1 Reframing Pragmatics: Interpreting Language Within Context

As one of principal fields within linguistics, pragmatics focuses on how meaning is created and understood within the framework of real-world communication. In contrast to semantics, which envisions meaning as a fixed property of words or syntactic structures, pragmatics examines how meaning is constructed by context, scrutinizing variables such as the speaker's intention, the social dynamics between participants, cultural assumptions, and prevalent norms of interaction. With this particularly significant distinction translation not only involves replacing words from one language with their equivalents in another but also interprets context-sensitive meaning and places it within a different linguistic and cultural framework. Pragmatic understanding facilitates translators to identify what is being said, why, how, and under what conditions it is being communicated. A key belief of pragmatics is that the meaning of linguistic expressions is not self-contained. Moreover, meaning is disclosed through interaction with the immediate circumstantial, cultural, and institutional context, which is not one-directional. Language use builds and transforms the communicative environment, and in turn, environment influences how language is used and interpreted. For translators, this means they are not neutral transmitters of linguistic information. In practice, they serve as active participants in interpreting and reconstructing meaning across languages, giving insights into how messages will be received, interpreted, and potentially perceived in the target language and culture. Particularly in military settings, where clarity, authority, and sensitivity to hierarchy are essential, navigating this interaction becomes a highly skilled task. The translator's work thus requires a nuanced understanding of both the source and target environments – socially, culturally, and institutionally.

1.2 The High Stakes of Pragmatic Competence in Interpretation.

In oral translation – especially simultaneous and consecutive interpretation – linguistic accuracy alone is insufficient. The interpreter must accurately communicate the speaker's intended meaning, which is often implied rather than directly stated, and is tightly related to the social, cultural, and operational context of the original message. Misinterpreting pragmatic meaning can lead to serious consequences, such as miscommunication, offence, or loss of key meaning may harm goals and relationships. In fields like diplomacy, law and especially the military, where communication shapes strategy, translation errors can cause real-world disruptions, legal issues or military crises.

A single misinterpreted phrase can alter the tone of negotiations, endanger missions, or escalate tensions. While pragmatic errors in casual talk may be minor, in legal or military settings, they can have disastrous effects, making clarity crucial. Translators in such fields must be trained to maintain pragmatic precision and minimize ambiguity. Their development should focus not only on language skills but also on interpreting intent under pressure. Sometimes, conveying pragmatic meaning is more important than literal accuracy. This highlights the need to prioritize pragmatic competence in translator training, as understanding context and cultural shifts is essential for success in high-stakes communication.

2. Theoretical Approaches to Context in Translation Studies

2.1 Evolving Notions of Context Across Linguistic Traditions

The concept of context is the heart of pragmatics and has been approached from different perspectives across linguistic, philosophical, psychological, and sociocultural traditions. Each field demonstrates a unique vision of how context shapes language use and how it influences the domain of translation.

Philosophical Foundations: Language as Action

In philosophy of language, scholars such as Ludwig Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein, L. 1997) saw the language not simply as a system describing the world but also embedded it in social practices, or “language games,” within a broader “form of life.” From this perspective, meaning is not isolated – it arises from the way language is used in specific social contexts. Developing these ideas, J.L. Austin (Austin J. L., 1962) introduced speech act theory, emphasizing that utterances do not merely communicate information but perform actions. These speech acts are based on socio-cultural norms, or what Austin called “felicity conditions,” to function properly. Hans-Georg Gadamer (Gadamer H.-G., 2004) further accentuated the significance of shared interpretive conventions for understanding texts, asserting that contextual dependency is a constant feature of human interpretation essential for the “fusion of horizons” between speakers, cultures, and texts.

Cognitive Perspectives: Meaning as a Mental Construct

The psychological perspective on pragmatics interprets context through the framework of cognition. H.P. Grice (Grice H. P., 1975) developed the theory of implicature, proposing that communication is guided by conversational maxims grounded in a cooperative principle. According to this view, meaning goes beyond linguistic structure and relies heavily on the speaker's intentions and the listener's ability to infer them. Building on this idea, Sperber and Wilson (Sperber D., Wilson, D., 1986) introduced Relevance Theory, which defines context as a “cognitive environment”—a constantly evolving collection of assumptions and background knowledge accessible to the listener. Interpretation, in this framework, hinges more on how readily this contextual knowledge can be mentally retrieved than on what is explicitly stated. In a similar vein, social psychologists such as Forgas (Forgas J. P., 1985) highlighted the significant role of social context in shaping both the use and interpretation of language. An even more comprehensive model was offered by Clark (Clark H.H., 1996), who introduced the concept of “common ground,” referring to the shared beliefs and assumptions that interlocutors develop and depend on throughout communication. This idea effectively connects the cognitive and social aspects of context, illustrating how meaning is jointly constructed during interaction.

The Pragmatic Core: Context as Defining the Discipline

Within pragmatics itself, the notion of context is not just important – it is definitional. Stalnaker (Stalnaker, 1972) famously asserted that “Pragmatics is the study of linguistic acts and the contexts in which they are performed.” This highlights a mutual dependency: context informs how meaning is interpreted, while language use simultaneously shapes and updates that context. Elinor Ochs (Ochs E., 1979) underscored the context-sensitivity of the language, while Geoffrey N. Leech (Leech G. N., 1983) distinguished between general pragmatics and more fine-grained branches like sociopragmatics and pragmalinguistics. Leech advocated for understanding context as the shared background knowledge between sender and receiver—including aspects such as time, place, social relationships, formality, communication medium, and subject matter. These elements are particularly vital in translation, where the source and target settings can differ dramatically.

Interactional Models: Context in Conversation and Culture

Other traditions – especially sociolinguistics, anthropology, and conversation analysis – approach context as intrinsic to how language functions in face-to-face interaction. Scholars like J. Heritage (Heritage J., 1984: 242) describe spoken language as “doubly contextual,” meaning that each utterance depends on prior context for its interpretation and simultaneously creates new context for what follows. Bateson (Bateson G., 1987) and Goffman (Goffman E., 1974) introduced the influential concept of “framing,” which shows how speakers signal and interpret shifts in situational expectations through linguistic cues. These models help explain how communicative intent and meaning are fluid and socially negotiated. However, as Juliane House has observed, these traditions often privilege spoken discourse, which can make them less applicable to written translation, where immediate interaction is absent.

Functional-Pragmatic and Systemic Models: Suitable for Written Translation

More applicable to written translation are the frameworks developed within the functional-pragmatic and systemic-functional traditions. German linguists such as Ehlich and Rehbein (Ehlich K., Rehbein J., 1979) proposed the concept of constellation to capture the way written language functions across spatial and temporal distances between writer and reader. Their model integrates cognitive insights with institutional and social roles, accounting for the fixed nature of written texts. This aligns closely with Halliday’s systemic-functional grammar, which examines how language realizes social functions through structured choices (Halliday M. A. K., 1994). Halliday’s model emphasizes roles such as speaker/writer and listener/reader, as well as communicative purposes – key aspects for analyzing and producing effective translations. These theories support the translator’s task by offering a functional map of how meaning operates in static, structured text.

2.2 Translation and the Fixed Nature of Textual Context

Juliane House argues that certain widely accepted views of context – especially those emphasizing fluidity and live negotiation in discourse – are not easily transferable to translation. Translators, unlike conversational participants, work with “finished” texts. The source material is static, and there is no opportunity to clarify meaning through real-time interaction with the author or audience. In this context, the translator’s responsibility is to reconstruct meaning by engaging in a post-hoc, individual cognitive process. The challenge lies in bringing the original text to life within a new cultural and linguistic system while maintaining its communicative intent. The context in the target language does not emerge spontaneously – it is deliberately imagined and shaped by the translator. The translator must mentally construct both the original and the new communicative situations, drawing on internalized knowledge of two cultures, two languages, and two sets of expectations. This act of contextual reconstruction is not a limitation of translation but one of its defining characteristics. Therefore, while the source text may be fixed, the translator’s interpretive process is highly dynamic. It involves pre-emptive contextual analysis, careful re-creation of intent, and precise alignment with the expectations of the target audience. The goal is to transform a static “inert text” into a “living discourse” – a communicative act that functions effectively in its new environment.

Speaker Intention and Politeness in Military and Diplomatic Communication

In military and diplomatic contexts, conveying the precise intention behind a statement is of paramount importance. Communication in these high-stakes environments often involves delicate power dynamics and strategic messaging. A seemingly vague statement of intent, such as “We will respond appropriately,” can pragmatically function as a clear warning or even a veiled threat, depending on the context, tone, and relationship between the parties. Misinterpreting such a statement can either downplay its seriousness, leading to an underestimation of a threat, or unnecessarily escalate tensions if interpreted too harshly. The level of politeness and formality in military and diplomatic discourse is also significantly different across cultures. An indirect suggestion in English, like “You might want to reconsider,” if translated too directly into a language with different politeness norms, could sound rude, confrontational, or even disrespectful. Such a misstep can jeopardize sensitive negotiations, undermine trust, and create unnecessary friction between parties. Diplomatic nuances are particularly challenging. Phrases such as “We note your concerns” often serve as a polite dismissal or a refusal to act, rather than a genuine acknowledgment of intent to address the concern. A literal translation that fails to capture this pragmatic function could falsely reassure the listener, leading to critical strategic miscalculations. This indirectness, prevalent in military and diplomatic language, is not only a matter of politeness; it also often functions as a hidden directive or a covert performative act. These utterances, while appearing vague or polite on the surface, are meticulously crafted to provoke specific actions or convey clear, albeit unstated, warnings or demands. The pragmatic challenge lies in recognizing these “hidden directives” and accurately translating their intended illocutionary force rather than their literal locutionary meaning. Failure to do so can lead to a critical misreading of strategic intent, potentially resulting in delayed responses, missed opportunities, or unintended escalations in conflict situations. This underscores the need for military translators to be trained not just in linguistics but also in geopolitical communication strategies and conflict resolution dynamics.

Interpreting Implicature and Speech Acts in Strategic and Crisis Communication

Strategic communication, particularly in military and crisis scenarios, heavily relies on implicature to convey messages without explicit commitment, thereby allowing for plausible deniability. Interpreters must be adept at discerning these implied meanings. For example, a statement like “I have a lot on my plate right now” in a military context might implicitly convey a refusal to take on additional tasks or responsibilities, even if not explicitly stated. Failing to capture this implicature can lead to misallocation of resources or missed deadlines. Speech acts are equally critical in high-stakes scenarios. The functional meaning of an utterance often diverges from its literal form.

Threats and Warnings: A statement such as “I might have to reconsider our cooperation” can function as a direct threat, despite its outwardly tentative phrasing.

Stalling and Evasion: Phrases like “We are exploring all available options” might pragmatically serve as a stalling tactic or non-committal evasion, rather than indicating active planning.

Indirect Refusal: “Let’s revisit the terms next quarter” can be an indirect refusal to engage further with a proposal, even if it sounds like a deferral of discussion. The consequences of misinterpreting these pragmatic elements are profound.

Strategic miscalculation is a primary risk; mistranslating a warning as a vague statement, or a polite rejection as serious consideration, can lead to incorrect strategic decisions with severe operational implications. In conflict situations, accurately conveying the force of a warning or threat is crucial for de-escalation or appropriate response. Misinterpretation can lead to

unintended escalation of hostilities or a failure to recognize a genuine threat. Furthermore, inaccurate rendering of intent can erode trust between parties, which is vital for effective intelligence sharing or alliance building. The reliance on implicature and indirect speech acts creates a "pragmatic gap" between what is literally said and what is truly meant. This gap, while strategically useful for the speaker (e.g., for plausible deniability), becomes a significant point of vulnerability for the listener if the interpreter fails to bridge it accurately.

In military intelligence or crisis negotiation, misinterpreting this gap can lead to critical failures in threat assessment, alliance coordination, or de-escalation efforts. This "pragmatic gap" is not merely a linguistic challenge but a strategic vulnerability that can be exploited or mismanaged. Military translators and interpreters must, therefore, be trained to recognize and accurately render these subtle, high-stakes pragmatic maneuvers. This requires not only linguistic proficiency but also a deep understanding of military doctrine, geopolitical dynamics, and the psychological aspects of negotiation and conflict. The implication is a need for specialized training that integrates linguistic pragmatics with strategic studies, enabling translators to function as critical intelligence assets who can accurately decode the implicit layers of enemy or ally communication.

Cultural Context and its Impact on Military Communication

Cultural context plays a pervasive and critical role in military communication, influencing everything from directness in commands to the interpretation of non-verbal cues. Military communication, like any other form of human interaction, relies heavily on culture-specific expressions, metaphors, or References: that cannot be translated literally and require careful localization or clarification to be understood in the target culture. For example, a cultural idiom used to convey urgency, or a specific military concept might have no direct equivalent, requiring the translator to find a functionally equivalent expression that resonates with the target audience's cultural understanding.

Furthermore, cultural norms of directness and indirectness significantly impact military communication. Different cultures have varying preferences: for how commands, warnings, or feedback are conveyed. In some cultures, direct commands are expected and convey authority, while in others, a more indirect or deferential approach might be preferred to maintain harmony or respect. An interpreter must be acutely aware of these differing norms and adjust their language accordingly to avoid giving offense or causing misinterpretation that could lead to operational delays or friction.

A growing concern is the impact of English as a global lingua franca. The trend towards "cultural universalism" or "cultural neutralism," driven by the widespread adoption of English, can inadvertently lead to homogenized translations. If applied uncritically in military contexts, this homogenization could strip away culturally specific nuances that are vital for effective military operations. Such a loss of cultural specificity could lead to misjudgments of intent, misinterpretations of underlying cultural values, or a failure to anticipate culturally-driven responses from allies or adversaries. In military operations, cultural context is not just a background factor but can act as a "threat multiplier" or "friction amplifier." Misunderstanding culturally-specific communication patterns (e.g., indirect requests being perceived as weak, or direct commands as overly aggressive) can lead to operational delays, inter-force friction, or even unintended hostile engagements. The homogenization effect of global English, if applied uncritically, could mask these critical cultural differences, leading to a false sense of understanding and increasing operational risks. This implies that military translators need to be cultural navigators, not just language converters, understanding how cultural norms shape communication and how deviations from these norms can signal intent or risk.

Consequences of Pragmatic Misinterpretation in Military and Security Scenarios

The ramifications of pragmatic misinterpretation in military and security scenarios are exceptionally severe, often leading to tangible, immediate, and irreversible consequences.

Firstly, operational failures are a direct and critical outcome. Misinterpreting commands, warnings, or vital intelligence due to pragmatic errors can lead to failed missions, incorrect troop deployments, compromised security protocols, or the loss of strategic advantage. For example, a mistranslated warning about an improvised explosive device (IED) could lead to a unit proceeding into a dangerous area.

Secondly, and most tragically, pragmatic miscommunication can directly result in loss of life. In high-stress, rapidly evolving combat or security situations, the accurate and immediate conveyance of critical information or intent is paramount. An error in translating a call for retreat, a warning of friendly fire, or a surrender request can have immediate and fatal consequences for personnel on the ground.

Thirdly, the escalation of conflict is a significant risk. Misinterpreting a diplomatic statement as a threat, or conversely, failing to perceive a genuine threat disguised as a benign statement, can lead to unintended escalation of hostilities or a missed opportunity for de-escalation. This can transform a tense situation into an active conflict or exacerbate existing ones.

Fourthly, the erosion of alliances can occur. In multinational military operations, effective cooperation relies heavily on clear communication and mutual understanding. Failure to accurately convey politeness, respect, or strategic intent can damage trust and cooperation between allied forces, hindering joint operations and long-term diplomatic relations.

Finally, misallocation of resources is another serious consequence. Misunderstanding the true nature of a request, a threat, or an intelligence report due to pragmatic errors can lead to inefficient or inappropriate allocation of military assets, personnel, or funding, diverting critical resources from where they are most needed. Unlike legal contexts where consequences are often financial or judicial, in military and security scenarios, the ultimate consequence of pragmatic failure is often a human cost—loss of life, injury, or the exacerbation of human suffering in conflict zones. This elevates pragmatic accuracy from a professional best practice to an ethical imperative with direct life-or-death implications. The "human cost" dimension implies that military translation and interpreting is not merely a linguistic service but a critical component of humanitarian aid, conflict prevention, and force protection. Training for military translators must therefore incorporate not only linguistic and pragmatic skills but also a profound awareness of the ethical responsibilities and the potential for grave human consequences stemming from their work. This moves the discussion beyond academic theory into the realm of moral accountability and the direct impact on human lives.

Enhancing Accuracy and Effectiveness in Specialized Translation

The preceding analysis underscores the indispensable role of pragmatics in specialized translation, particularly within the high-stakes domains of legal and military communication. Beyond the literal transfer of words, the accurate conveyance of contextual

meaning, including speaker intention, implied messages, and culturally nuanced expressions, is paramount for ensuring effective and responsible cross-cultural communication. The shared challenges across legal and military translation are evident: the critical need to accurately convey speaker intention, to meticulously manage politeness and formality levels, to correctly interpret subtle implicatures, to discern the true function of speech acts, and to navigate complex, culture-specific expressions, including archaic deictics. In both fields, the consequences of pragmatic misinterpretation are amplified, ranging from legal repercussions and strategic blunders to the tragic loss of human life and the exacerbation of conflict. Furthermore, the increasing influence of English as a global lingua franca presents a growing tension, potentially leading to a homogenization of communicative norms that could inadvertently strip away vital cultural specificities, impacting the fidelity and effectiveness of translations. To enhance accuracy and effectiveness in these specialized translation domains, several recommendations for translators and interpreters emerge:

Specialized Training: Training programs must evolve beyond traditional linguistic competence to include deep cultural understanding, comprehensive domain-specific knowledge (e.g., intricacies of legal systems, military protocols, geopolitical dynamics), and advanced pragmatic analysis skills. This interdisciplinary approach is crucial for navigating the complex communicative landscapes of these fields.

On textual Awareness: Translators and interpreters must foster a heightened awareness of the full communicative context. This involves meticulously assessing the speaker's background, their relationship with the audience, the tone of voice, non-verbal cues, and the specific setting of the communication (e.g., courtroom, negotiation table, battlefield).

Strategic Pragmatics: It is imperative to train translators not merely to translate surface meaning but to recognize and accurately render the *strategic intent* behind indirect communication. Understanding how language is used tactically by parties in legal disputes or military operations is vital for anticipating outcomes and advising on appropriate responses.

Ethical Considerations: Given the profound impact of their work, translators bear a significant ethical responsibility to accurately convey pragmatic meaning. This is particularly critical when their interpretations directly influence legal outcomes, human lives, or international relations. An awareness of the implications of choosing between overt and covert translation strategies, and the extent of cultural filtering, is essential for maintaining integrity and accountability.

Continuous Professional Development: The landscape of language and communication is constantly evolving, particularly under the pervasive influence of global English. Therefore, ongoing research into pragmatic shifts and the continuous adaptation of translation practices are crucial to maintain high standards of accuracy and effectiveness.

In conclusion, pragmatics is not merely an academic subfield of linguistics but a practical and ethical imperative for legal and military translation. By prioritizing pragmatic competence, specialized translators and interpreters can ensure that communication in these high-stakes environments is not only linguistically accurate but also contextually appropriate, functionally effective, and ultimately, conducive to justice, security, and peace.

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