# *TEACHING PRAGMATICS WITH TRANSLATION*

**Irina-Ana DROBOT**[*]

***Abstract****: The purpose of this paper is to show that Pragmatics could benefit from being taught with examples from the field of translation. The intention of the speaker is, for the domain of Pragmatics, above the semantic meaning of an utterance. Speech acts theory, the cooperation principle, the way meaning is implied and not expressed directly are significant aspects to be taken into account by translators. Context is vital for any situation of communication in real life and when it comes to translation. The paper will take into account the way Pragmatics could be taught to students of a Translation and Interpretation Section at the Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest where the author teaches a course in Pragmatics and Semantics.*

***Keywords:*** *communication, cooperation principles, implicature, speech acts.*

## 1. Introduction

Teaching a course in Pragmatics to the students of the Translation and Interpreting Specialization at the Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest includes adding a practical part in tune with the interests related to their future career. These students are being taught translations with a technical profile, meaning that they need to be aware of the features of technical and scientific texts, from domains such as engineering, medicine, psychiatry, psychology and others. Although they may study and practice translation of literary texts as well during their practical course seminars, the focus is on scientific and technical terms and on their translation procedures. Pragmatics should come as a means of helping these students in their practical translation work, offering them the necessary information regarding the context of any utterance. Whether they are doing translation or interpreting, they need to pay attention to speech acts and the way the speaker relates to his or her audience in order to adequately transmit the message further. Sometimes the intention of the speaker needs to be deciphered from the voice tone, as in the case of a mild joke, and the translation needs to be accordingly, in order not to transmit the wrong message and upset or even offend the audience. The interpreter especially needs to pay attention to lots of other aspects in the communication situation, not just language: he or she will need to adequately interpret the body language of the speaker, the voice tone, and, in case the speaker is not a native of the language he or she uses, to guess what he or she intends to say even though there are some mistakes. In the latter case, the interpreters and translators will also need to be familiar with the way a foreign language is learned and what typical mistakes non-natives make. Also, interpreters need to be a simple member in the audience on the one hand, taking a very keen interest in what is communicated, and on the other

[*] Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest, anadrobot@yahoo.com



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hand, an interpreter, who will understand how the respective speaker communicates in order to adequately transmit to the audience the intention. The purpose of a course in Pragmatics for the students of the Translation and Interpreting Specialization at the Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest is to make them sensitive to getting the meaning intended by the speaker judging the situation from several points of view: the difference between literal and intended meaning, the need of cooperation in a communication situation between speaker and hearer, and the effort the hearer makes to decode the speaker's intention in less obvious situations, where background knowledge is needed, such as details concerning their relationship, their hobbies, their way of speaking and body language in various situations such as lying, joking and being ironic.

Students should be made familiar right from the start with the fact that the difference between Pragmatics and Semantics lies at the level of context versus literal meaning, and broad versus narrow context, respectively. Pragmatics draws our attention to the fact that people can mean something more or something else than what they apparently say at the level of the literal meaning. For instance, when someone says, "What a nice car!" he can mean it literally as a compliment or even as a sarcastic remark, implying that he finds your car really ugly. He could also try to suggest a request to give him a lift or he could mean that your car is directly in his way and he cannot leave. Pragmatics thus focuses on the context of the dialogue and on the intention of the speaker, which are significant prompts in everyday communication as well as in the translator's and interpreter's job.

For pragmatics, we need to draw a difference from what is strictly said (the level of Semantics) and what we can infer on the basis of what is said. When someone tells us, "It's cold in here", we infer that that person is requesting us to shut the window. A translator of a novel should first of all understand the entire context of any situation of communication among the characters in order to know precisely what each and every character means and what he or she expects from other characters. If we think of Jane Austen's novels, the characters do a lot of indirect communication, of allusions based on the expected norms of politeness of the respective age. They can do play-upon-words or imply something that other characters may or may not understand or they could even act in a rude way, if they do not like certain characters. Different cultures have different politeness rules and norms when it comes to socializing during different periods of time. The same process is valid for interpreting in various contexts. Speakers could address the audience or other dialogue partners by implying more than what is said strictly at linguistic level, and a translator should also look for body language, tone of voice and other cues that are noticeable during any conversation.

## 2. Pragmatics: A Means of Context Analysis

The presentation of the domain of Pragmatics to the students begins with drawing an opposition with semantics, that is literal vs figurative meaning, focus on context not on language, and another opposition, that of narrow vs broad context.

*The Blackwell Companion to Philosophy* **underlines the importance Pragmatics gives to contextual knowledge, not just to words alone:** "The distinction between semantics and pragmatics is, roughly, the distinction between the significance



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conventionally or literally attached to words, and thence to whole sentences, and the further significance that can be worked out, by more general principles, using contextual information." **(Davies 1995)**

**The importance of context also draws attention away from literal and towards figurative meaning:** "Pragmatists focus on what is not *explicitly* stated and on how we interpret utterances in situational contexts. They are concerned not so much with the sense of what is said as with its *force*, that is, with what is communicated by the manner and style of an utterance." (**Finch** 2000)

The semantic meaning is associated, according to Bach (1999), with a narrow context, as is normal when we talk about literal meaning. When we talk about pragmatic meaning, we go beyond semantic, literal and narrow context. We take everything we know into account from our background knowledge and we also interpret body language and voice tone of the speaker. According to Bach (1999), "Wide context concerns any contextual information relevant to determining the speaker's intention and to the successful and felicitous performance of the speech act… Narrow context concerns information specifically relevant to determining the semantic values of [indexicals]".

An extreme example, from the site http://all-about-linguistics.group.shef.ac.uk/branches-of-linguistics/pragmatics/what-is-pragmatics/, meant to capture the attention of the students in order for them to efficiently remember the role of Pragmatics is an exercise of imagination related to a word where there would be no Pragmatics, meaning no pragmatic competence, with just relying on the semantic, literal meaning:

'Can you pass the salt?'
Literal Meaning: Are you physically able to do this task?
Literal Response: 'Yes'
(Pragmatic Meaning: Will you pass me the salt?

Pragmatic Response: pass the salt to the speaker.)

'What time do you call this?'
Literal Meaning: What time is it?
Literal Response: A time (e.g. 'twenty to one.')
(Pragmatic Meaning: a different question entirely, e.g. Why are you so late?
Pragmatic Response: Explain the reason for being so late.)

The above examples can be used to illustrate, in a humoristic way, the difference between pragmatics and semantics, narrow vs broad context, as well as pragmatic competence. The effort of the hearer should be there in order to make sense correctly of what the speaker intends to say. This information having been given as an introduction, the students are then presented with the theory of speech acts, and they are told that language is also used to perform certain actions, not just to describe states of affairs. Their further knowledge can be fixed by illustrating the pragmatic theories with examples of translations.



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In this way, they will understand further why pragmatics is necessary in their lives, not just to communicate but also to translate and interpret.

### 2.1 Cooperative Principle

In Pragmatics, a significant theory, by Paul Grice, explains how speakers should collaborate in order to give and receive information. In various cases, however, speakers flout the maxims and offer replies which could be, at surface level, unhelpful, ambiguous or trying to avoid the question. Certain situations are normal, however, as speakers can easily decode and understand from the context what the other speaker means with very little effort, showing that they have pragmatic competence. For example, if someone asks: "What time is it?" and the other speaker replies, "Well, the school bus just went by," the second speaker could imply, based on common knowledge, that it should be noon, as that is the time when the school bus normally goes by, or it could be a reproach that the speaker asking the question is late again. Answers to questions are not necessarily unhelpful, but they can contain much more than the answer required, as they are often accompanied by an attitude of the speaker answering the question. Such aspects should be understood in the original language and then transposed in translation in a different language without losing all the attitude and allusions contained.

### 2.2. Speech Acts

Conventional speech acts (Austin) should be studied as part of various formal situations in various cultures. For example, if someone says "I name this ship Alexandra", then by this verbal act an action is performed, and it is a part of a ritual. Also, when you say "Objection, your Honour!" translations should be aware of the context and circumstances where this is said, in this case in a lawsuit, and adapt the formal language in their translation as well, as there should be standard formulations. In such circumstances, the translator needs to choose the equivalent expression, and he should not focus just on words out of context.

"I apologize" is a performative statement, while "I believe you are wrong" is constative. In the first case, when you say something, you also do or perform something, and words are not just simple words to describe a reality.

### 2.3. Social Acts

#### 2.3.1. Apologies

Apologies have a specific use of language in every culture and language, as well as in any situation, friendly or formal. They are defined as "social acts conveying affective meaning" (Holmes 1990: 155). Students could practice by using listening activities for foreign language learning which include short dialogues where they are asked about what the speaker implies. This type of activity could be used for all social acts in a language. Students could also be asked to practice role play, by being given a certain situation with a



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question and where they could formulate the answer to it in such a way that it could sound like a polite apology in a formal situation or to a friend. Teaching with video could also be used, and students could comment on the way hints coming from the attitude of the speakers, the way they are dressed, the tone of their voice which show that they are genuinely sorry and wish to apologize in a polite way. Then they could also make an analogy with their native language Romanian, where "Nu trebuia" is roughly an equivalent for "You needn't have gone through so much trouble" but which cannot be translated literally to achieve the same effect. If you say in English "That's ok" it is valid only for very informal situations.

### 2.3.2. Invitations

Invitations could be simply suggested by two persons looking at each other and then at a café they usually go to, and invitations could be accepted simply by dropping by a hint such as "Orange juice would be lovely." A translator, or interpreter, from this point of view, is required to decode the intention of the interlocutor just like a normal person the respective interlocutor addresses to. The translator or interpreter is like a usual hearer to whom a speaker addresses; he or she needs to do a similar work of decoding the message, which is not just linguistic. Various languages have specific phrases for invitations, for making them and accepting them. These are standard expressions which translators and interpreters cannot modify.

### 2.3.3. Suggestions

Suggestions are other situations where standard phrases are used in different languages and different contexts. Learners' books have special sections for such situations of social acts, and exercises asking for pair work are not left out. This shows that Pragmatics is a dimension of language learning that is never ignored. It is just that students come to be aware of it in a theoretical way only if they study linguistics at university level.

### 2.3.4. Advice

Advice is given not only in written form in popular psychology magazines. It is also offered by friends in a relaxed, informal environment. You could also ask for advice and receive it in a shop. Situations like this are not absent from language learners' handbooks either. The focus should be on language in use, handbooks claim, and learners always have in mind the practical aspect of using the language they learn for communicating with foreigners in a wide variety of situations, from asking for information and advice on how to get to a certain monument at the hotel to how to get to the airport, as to whether it is cheaper and more convenient by taxi or by bus or train.

### 2.3.5. Other Recommendations

If you are a foreigner and cannot use the language appropriately, you could still be polite by using tone of voice and body language so as not to be misunderstood and



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considered ruse when you have no such intentions. This could be considered to be the part that is external to the field of Semantics, of literal meaning of language.

Extra-linguistic knowledge is used at all times, regardless of whether you use the appropriate words or not. This means that language can have a different meaning from speaker to speaker, not just from culture to culture or from language to language. Opinions are also expressed by making use of Pragmatics. For instance, you could say, "Well, the speaker was using English" to imply that the talk was not very intelligible. When translating, you may need to add a certain word or gesture in order to suggest irony or other attitude so that the message remains clear.

## 3. Cultural aspects of communication

### 3.1. Indirectness

The English language speakers have a specific way of communicating politely by means of being indirect. The British especially have a lot of polite requests that fit in this category. For instance, when asking someone to be quiet, they ask, "Could you please be quiet?" implying that those asked to do so are not behaving in a very polite way. When translating such a statement, Romanian students should think about a Romanian equivalent. By chance, the Romanian language also has a similar phrase for translation, very polite, "Ati putea, va rog, sa faceti liniste?" However, what is very common in English culture is seen as more reserved and unusual in Romanian culture, where, in a classroom, students could interpret the phrase as a word for word translation from English and not as a genuine polite request in their native language. The British are a high-power distance culture, due to their monarchical past, and this is reflected in the language they use. The North Americans are an egalitarian culture, while the Southerners are a high-power distance culture and this is also reflected in their requests when it comes to pragmatics. While Romania is also a high-power distance culture, it is less indirect than the British culture when it comes to choice of certain words.

#### 3.1.1. Politeness: How to Translate Requests Efficiently

A visible example of difference between Romanian and English is when it comes to indirect speech acts in polite requests: "As opposed to the English whose pervasive indirectness is well-known, for the Romanian a high degree of indirectness could be considered a waste of the hearer's time" (Drăguşin 2014: 109). What is more, when we make such requests in Romanian, although they sound direct, they are not impolite, as they would be in the case of the English language and culture: "A Romanian hearer does not automatically view a request as an imposition on his or her personal liberty, and a prospective negative response entails less face-loss for a Romanian than it does for someone with an Anglo-Saxon cultural background." (Drăguşin 2014: 109). The English, thus, value privacy more than the Romanian (Drăguşin 2014: 110-111) and this is reflected in the way indirect vs direct requests are perceived:



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| | |
|---|---|
| (1E) Can I have your Syntax lecture notes please? | (1R) Dă-mi şi mie cursul de Sintaxă. *(Give me the Syntax lecture notes.)* |
| (2E) Could I have your Syntax lecture notes please? | (2R) Dă-mi şi mie cursul de Sintaxă, te rog. (*Give me the Syntax lecture notes, please*) |
| (3E) Would you mind if you lend me your Syntax lecture notes? | (3R) Să-mi dai şi mie cursul de Sintaxă. (*You should give me the Syntax lecture notes*) |
| (4E) Sorry, can I have your Syntax lecture notes? | (4R) Să-mi dai şi mie cursul de Sintaxă, te rog. (*You should give me the Syntax lecture notes, please*) |
| (5E) Do you mind lending me your Syntax lecture notes? | (5R) Poţi să-mi dai şi mie cursul de Sintaxă? (*Can you give me your Syntax lecture notes?*) |
| (6E) Would it be OK if I borrowed your Syntax lecture notes?<br>(7E) May I have your Syntax lecture notes please? | (6R) Ai putea (te rog) să-mi dai şi mie cursul de Sintaxă? (*Could you (please) give me your Syntax lecture notes?*) |

The table above from Dragusin can be used to show students how in different cultures a polite request is formulated and how they need to keep into account the intention of the speaker so that the translation or interpretation does not alter the intention, by changing it into an opposite intention. English social etiquette is based on indirectness, while the Romanians are more relaxed in similar social situations. If students mix the two cultures, and translate the speech acts literally, then the intention is wrongly interpreted by those who belong to a different culture. This knowledge related to culture is part of the background knowledge a translator and interpreter needs to rely on as belonging to the context of communication.

### 3.1.2. Politeness Issues in Translation

Ahmed-Sokarno Abdel-Hafiz (2004) identifies problems related to the translation of the novel *The Thief and the Dogs* by Naguib Mahfouz: "the translators failed to appreciate the importance of context in determining the meaning of the Source Language Text. […] the translators sometimes ignored such pragmatic concepts and principles as speech acts, the maxims of the Politeness Principle, conventional implicature, and presupposition. Moreover, some problems rise at the word level and phrase/clause level." By presenting to the students the findings of this paper, they can be made aware of an example of how not to translate various situations of communications, not just when it comes to fiction works but also in their real-life interpretation work. By reading about these situations, they can be made aware of the use of understanding the differences between cultures when it comes to the way communication works, and the way requests are



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formulated. They can also become more strongly aware of the pragmatics concepts and the way they work. In this way, they will understand practically the relevance of the science of Pragmatics in their everyday lives as well as in their future career.

### 3.2. Irony

Irony is more specific when it comes to American culture. Students can be familiar with situations of communication in American movies where characters frequently use irony. For instance, if they say "Oh, lovely weather!" they mean that the weather is very bad. Or, if they say "he's a genius" they mean he is stupid. In Romanian, literal meaning can be used for translation in the same way to signal irony by combining it with tone of voice or with the images in the film. When we use irony in translation, we need first of all to understand the situation of communication and the intentions of the speakers.

### 3.3. Language meaning more than what is strictly said

Words could mean something else than their literal meaning in various situations, and we need to consider body language or the features of the respective profession in order to correctly interpret the meaning. The example about the language of the diplomat could be relevant for students of the Translation and Interpretation Section who will have to deal with various situations in their interpreting depending on the culture the talk or conversation takes place in:

> When a diplomat says *yes*, he means 'perhaps';
> When he says *perhaps*, he means 'no';
> When he says *no*, he is not a diplomat. —*Voltaire* (Quoted, in Spanish, in Escandell 1993.)

While the above example is intended as a joke, there are situations they could draw attention to. These examples could be used to increase awareness in the students of translating and interpreting so that they research cultural aspects when it is the case. While in native language conversation, such aspects are natural, in translation and interpreting they may sound awkward or the translator/ interpreter should simply explain briefly what certain remarks are about.

## 4. Some Further Directions of Research

Interdisciplinarity is a given in today's research. Thus, Pragmatics should make no exception. The study of language in context could benefit from making parallels with the field of translation, and, of course, it can benefit from methods of learning from the field of Foreign Language Studies. Just as students can decode meaning of certain words in vocabulary exercises from context, so they could detect the intention of the speaker in video clips or in listening exercises or even in pair work with colleagues and understand the pragmatic meaning of various utterances. They could also be asked to imagine a context and



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various speaker intentions.

There have been studied regarding the relationship between translation and pragmatics, by Ho (1971), Bariki (2015), Kittis (2009), and Newmark (1988). The latter claims that even readers decode, in a pragmatic type of way, the meaning achieved by the translators (1988: 133). The authors focus on the contextual knowledge and on the relationship of communication being established among readers, writers and translators.

Language awareness could be increased by introducing, for class activities, examples of situation of communication from novels, by comparing translations by different translators of the same novel, by showing students a video in class and by commenting the way the characters behaved in a business setting or among friends, as well as in various social situations. The professor could also mention the fact that in language learning handbooks they always had various situations of communication, such as at school, at work, at home, asking for directions, visiting a friend, going to a restaurant, visiting a museum, at the hotel, etc. They should be reminded that they were always required to develop "the ability to use language appropriately in a social context" (Taguchi 2009) during their foreign language classes so that Pragmatics would not seem such a distant, formal domain in linguistics to them. They should get a sense of the fact that Pragmatics is a very down-to-earth and practical domain in linguistics full of practical application in their everyday lives. Anyone should have, as an adult, pragmatic competence. We need to understand properly the social situations and use the proper language and attitude.

Rueda (2006) writes about developing pragmatic competence in a foreign language. Indeed, no student can learn a foreign language by ignoring the social situations. Handbooks plan lessons which make learners talk about their families, about their friends, their jobs, their hobbies, their school, their travels, and so on. They teach you to use language in a restaurant, during a meeting, while talking to a teacher, while asking a person you've never met for directions, etc. For talking with friends, the colloquial language is mentioned as being appropriate, while for formal situations, business meetings, conferences, etc. where there are persons you barely know you are taught to use formal language. In English, you are taught about modal verbs and their uses to express certainty, uncertainty, possibility, probability, obligation, as well as polite requests. If you use a modal verb in a wrong way, but if you use the proper, polite attitude, you could be excused as the native speakers who listen to you also interpret the situation and understand the fact that you are not speaking your native language and that mistakes can happen. The way speakers interpret other speakers' intention in a wrong way can be the subject of comedies, which are based on pragmatic competence gone wrong.

## 5. Assignments

In order to show that they understood the concepts in Pragmatics, students can be given as an assignment to choose a fragment from a novel with a dialogue and a situation where they could comment using concepts from Pragmatics and analyse the way speakers decode intentions in a correct, or even wrong way, resulting in humour.

Another example of assignment is the study of a research paper on translation issues regarding the Pragmatics of self-help discourse. Researchers have also underlined



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issues related to the translation of tourist literature (Errasti, Sanz and Ornat 2004), with respect to English, Spanish, German and French: "Relevance theory, systemic-functional linguistics and discourse analysis are some of the theoretical standpoints taken as a background. The book covers phenomena as varied as translation quality assessment, audience design and perlocutionary effects, dealing also with more specific features like thematic structure, inference and propositional meaning, discourse markers and grammatical metaphor in order to provide a wide range of analyses for the specialised reader." This research can be used by students as an example of the usefulness of knowing pragmatics when it comes to their practical work as translators. It can be consulted by them personally or it can be used for them as a practical application during class. The differences in languages need not be at cultural level; the linguistic level is enough. The work *Pragmatics of Fiction* (Locher and Jucker, eds.) analyses the issues a good translator of fiction needs to take into account from the point of view of sociolinguistics, and concepts such as "genre, style, voice, stance, dialogue, participation structure or features of orality and literariness." The students will be reminded of exercises during their practical course seminars where they were asked to identify the genre a certain text they were asked to translate belonged to and apply this identification skill to the domain of pragmatics and then to any text they consider for translation.

*Pragmatics and the Translation of Self-Help Discourse* by Shandouri (2016) can be used as a detailed example for students to understand the characteristic features of such a type of text from the point of view of pragmatics: "Self-help books rely on pragmatics and their texts demonstrate pragmatic features such as the co-operative principle, the politeness principle, presupposition, and speech acts." Such features are rhetorical questions, as "the author does not require immediate answers from the reader, for instance to collect information, instead they are raised rather for motivational purposes", and pragmatic markers: "The appearance of pragmatic markers is a result of the informality of oral discourse and the grammatical 'fragmentation' caused by the lack of planning time, which makes the use in pragmatic markers expedient" (Brinton, 1996: 33). An example given by Shandouri (2016) is the following:

> Son: 'Education is really important'
> Father: 'Oh, yeah! I mean, if you don't have a diploma, if you can't get jobs or go to college, what are you going to do? You've just got to get an education. It's important to your future.'
> Son: 'It is. And … you know what? I'm really worried. Listen, you won't tell Mom, will you?'
> Father: 'You don't want your mother to find out.'
> Son: 'Well, not really. Oh I guess you can tell her. She'll find out anyway…'

The students can be asked to find similar examples in other books or to provide a list of specific features of another type of discourse judging from their own observations.



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## 6. Conclusions

During this course, students should develop certain practical abilities, leaving the theoretical knowledge they gain aside, such as:

1) A better understanding of the way social situations can vary from culture to culture and even from social groups to social groups.
2) Using their cultural, psychological, and other extra-linguistic knowledge to correctly interpret and translate what is said based on the intention of the speaker, in written as well as in spoken activities.
3) Abilities of writing an academic paper by analysing a situation of communication using the appropriate concepts studied during their Pragmatics course.
4) The ability to select for teaching other students at other levels a foreign language based on the practical aspects of language in social situations.

Pragmatics could be regarded as an integral part of the teaching language by communication technique, due to its focus on various ways of understanding speaker's intention and various ways of using language for requests.

Foreign language teaching, Pragmatics and Translation are three fields which can work very well together in order to achieve the complex activity of foreign language learning. The students in the translators and interpreters' section can also choose to become teachers, so teaching Pragmatics should be tailored according to the perspectives of their possible future jobs. Any translation needs to take the context into account, and students need to learn that in order to choose a certain language register they should do proper research and also rely on their extralinguistic knowledge. Studying Pragmatics is an occasion to remind this to them.

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