

THE ROLE OF PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE IN TRANSLATION

Khasanova Dilnoza

Teacher of translation theory department

Uzbekistan State World Languages University

hdilnoza45@gmail.com

Abstract. Translation is not a mere transference of linguistic elements from one language to another; it is a complex cognitive and communicative activity that requires an in-depth understanding of both linguistic and extralinguistic factors. Among these, pragmatic competence — the ability to comprehend and convey intended meanings within specific contexts — plays a fundamental role. This article explores the concept of pragmatic competence, its components, and how it influences translation accuracy, adequacy, and naturalness. The discussion includes examples from intercultural communication, speech act theory, and real-world translation errors, and emphasizes the importance of pragmatic awareness in both literary and non-literary translation.

Keywords: Pragmatic competence, translation studies, speech acts, context, implicature, intercultural communication.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the field of translation studies has increasingly acknowledged that linguistic competence alone is insufficient for successful translation. While lexical, grammatical, and syntactic accuracy remain essential, they do not guarantee communicative effectiveness — the true goal of translation. Pragmatic competence, defined as the translator’s ability to interpret and produce meaning within the socio-cultural and situational context of both the source and target languages, emerges as a critical skill. As translation often involves culturally bound expressions, speech acts, implicatures, and politeness strategies, translators must understand not only what is said, but also what is meant. The aim of this article is to elucidate how pragmatic competence operates in translation, and to underscore its central role in achieving equivalence beyond the surface level.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Pragmatic competence involves the ability to use language appropriately according to context. This includes understanding deixis, presupposition, implicature, speech acts, politeness norms, and cultural references. Unlike grammatical competence, which focuses on form and structure, pragmatic competence is concerned with meaning-in-use. In translation, this means accurately transferring not just the words, but the function and intention behind those words.

For example, consider the English utterance “Can you open the window?” which, in many contexts, is a polite request, not a question about ability. A literal translation into a language where such indirectness is uncommon could lead to confusion or misinterpretation. This highlights the importance of recognizing the illocutionary force of utterances — a key aspect of pragmatic competence.

Moreover, pragmatic competence requires sensitivity to discourse markers, tone, register, and non-verbal cues that are often implicit in written and spoken language. The translator must navigate these subtleties to ensure that the target text fulfills the same communicative purpose as the original [1].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In literary translation, pragmatic competence enables the translator to capture not only what characters say, but how and why they say it. Dialogues, for instance, often involve irony, understatement, sarcasm, and culturally specific humor — all of which require a deep understanding of pragmatics. Translating these elements without altering their function or stylistic effect is among the most challenging tasks a translator faces.

In non-literary translation — such as legal, medical, or technical texts — pragmatic competence is equally important. Legal translation, for instance, demands precision and an awareness of how directives and obligations are formulated in different legal cultures [2]. A misinterpreted modal verb (must, shall, may) could result in significant practical consequences. Similarly, in healthcare settings, polite hedging or euphemistic language in one culture must be rendered appropriately in the target language to ensure patient comprehension and comfort.

The theory of speech acts, proposed by Austin and developed further by Searle, categorizes utterances according to their communicative function: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. Translators must identify the speech act intended in the source language and find a culturally and linguistically equivalent way to express it in the target language.

For instance, a statement like “I’m afraid I can’t attend the meeting” functions as both a refusal and an apology. In cultures where directness is valued, this could be translated as a blunt “I will not come,” potentially omitting the expressive component of politeness and regret. The translator’s task is not to reproduce the exact words, but to recreate the act being performed — a process that relies heavily on pragmatic insight.

Pragmatic norms vary widely across languages and cultures. In some cultures, indirectness is a sign of politeness; in others, it is perceived as evasiveness. Honorifics, speech-level shifting, taboos, and rhetorical conventions must all be considered during translation. Without intercultural pragmatic awareness, translators risk producing texts that are grammatically correct but pragmatically inappropriate — leading to communication breakdown or even offense.

A classic example is the translation of thank you in English. In Uzbek or Japanese, depending on the situation, such expressions may be omitted or replaced with culturally appropriate gestures or expressions that serve the same function. A translator with pragmatic competence recognizes that literal equivalence does not always produce functional equivalence, and adjusts accordingly [3].

A lack of pragmatic competence can result in what is known as “pragmatic failure” — when the translated message is technically accurate but contextually inappropriate. Such errors are common in automatic or machine translation systems that rely solely on syntactic analysis.

For instance, an automated translation of a diplomatic statement that ignores hedging language or euphemisms might render a statement overly direct or aggressive. Similarly, marketing slogans that contain wordplay or cultural assumptions often lose their impact or become nonsensical when translated without pragmatic adaptation [4].

CONCLUSION

Pragmatic competence is not a supplementary skill but a central pillar of successful translation. It enables translators to move beyond surface-level accuracy and achieve communicative equivalence — ensuring that the translated message functions appropriately within its target context. As global communication becomes increasingly complex and multilingual, the need for translators with strong pragmatic awareness has never been greater. Whether in literature, diplomacy, business, or medicine, translation that fails to account for pragmatic meaning risks misunderstanding, misrepresentation, and mistrust. Therefore, investing in the development of pragmatic competence is essential for both the theory and practice of translation in the 21st century.

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