

The Role of Context in Pragmatic Meaning Construction in Digital Communication

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Abstract:

Digital communication has fundamentally transformed the ways individuals create, interpret, and negotiate meaning. Unlike traditional face-to-face interaction, online communication frequently occurs in environments where physical context, non-verbal cues, and immediate feedback are limited or entirely absent. Consequently, participants rely on a wide range of contextual resources—including linguistic, technological, social, and multimodal elements—to construct pragmatic meaning. This study examines the role of context in pragmatic meaning construction within digital communication from the perspectives of pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, and computer-mediated discourse analysis. Drawing upon Grice's Cooperative Principle, Speech Act Theory, Relevance Theory, and contemporary approaches to digital discourse, the research investigates how contextual information influences the interpretation of online messages across social media platforms, instant messaging applications, and online discussion forums. A qualitative discourse analysis of authentic digital interactions demonstrates that pragmatic meaning is shaped not only by lexical and grammatical structures but also by emojis, hashtags, hyperlinks, memes, shared cultural knowledge, platform conventions, and communicative intentions. The findings indicate that context in digital environments is dynamic, multimodal, and collaboratively constructed by participants throughout interaction. Furthermore, the study highlights that successful interpretation depends upon users' ability to integrate linguistic information with technological affordances and socio-cultural knowledge. These findings contribute to contemporary pragmalinguistic research by expanding traditional theories of context to accommodate the characteristics of digital communication and

emphasizing the need for interdisciplinary approaches to language use in technologically mediated environments.

Keywords: pragmatics; digital communication; context; meaning construction; computer-mediated communication; discourse analysis; relevance theory; pragmalinguistics

Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has profoundly transformed human communication, creating new environments in which language is produced, interpreted, and negotiated. Social networking platforms, instant messaging applications, online discussion forums, and collaborative digital spaces have become integral components of everyday interaction. Millions of users exchange information continuously through text messages, comments, images, emojis, videos, and other multimodal resources that extend beyond the boundaries of traditional spoken and written discourse. As communication increasingly shifts toward digital environments, understanding how meaning is constructed within these contexts has become one of the central concerns of contemporary pragmatics and discourse studies.[1]

Unlike face-to-face communication, digital interaction often occurs in the absence of physical co-presence. Participants frequently lack access to facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, tone of voice, and other non-verbal signals that traditionally facilitate interpretation. This apparent reduction in contextual information initially led researchers to predict that online communication would be more ambiguous and less effective than direct interpersonal interaction. However, subsequent research has demonstrated that digital communicators compensate for the absence of physical cues by developing alternative contextual resources, including emojis, reaction icons, hashtags, hyperlinks, GIFs, memes, formatting conventions, and platform-specific communicative norms. These elements collectively contribute to the construction of pragmatic meaning in online discourse.[2]

Pragmatics, as the branch of linguistics concerned with meaning in context, provides an appropriate theoretical framework for investigating these processes. Since the emergence of Speech Act Theory, Grice's Cooperative Principle, and Relevance Theory, pragmatic research has consistently emphasized that linguistic meaning cannot be understood independently of contextual interpretation. Meaning is not encoded exclusively within words or grammatical structures; rather, it emerges through interaction between linguistic expressions, communicative intentions, background knowledge, and situational context.[3]

The concept of context itself has undergone considerable development within linguistic theory. Traditional pragmatics primarily associated context with physical surroundings, speaker-hearer relationships, temporal and spatial circumstances, and shared knowledge. Contemporary digital communication, however, demonstrates that context is considerably more complex and dynamic. Online interactions occur across multiple technological platforms, involve geographically dispersed participants, and often combine linguistic, visual, and audiovisual elements within a single communicative event. Consequently, digital discourse requires broader conceptualizations of context that incorporate technological affordances, algorithmic mediation, multimodal resources, and evolving online communities.[4]

Digital communication also introduces distinctive pragmatic phenomena that challenge conventional theories. Messages frequently circulate beyond their original audiences through reposting, screenshotting, or algorithmic recommendation, creating what scholars describe as "context collapse." A single utterance may simultaneously address friends, colleagues, strangers, and institutional audiences, each interpreting the message through different contextual frameworks. Similarly, internet memes, hashtags, abbreviations, and emojis derive much of their meaning from shared cultural experiences and evolving online conventions rather than from their literal semantic content.[5]

From a cognitive perspective, interpreting digital messages requires the activation of complex mental

representations. Readers continuously integrate textual information with prior knowledge, technological conventions, social expectations, and cultural references to infer intended meanings. Cognitive linguistics therefore complements pragmatic theory by explaining how contextual information is organized within conceptual structures that guide interpretation. Rather than processing isolated linguistic forms, communicators construct coherent mental models that incorporate multiple contextual dimensions simultaneously.

The increasing importance of digital communication extends beyond interpersonal interaction to include education, politics, journalism, business, healthcare, and international communication. Public debates, political campaigns, crisis communication, and educational practices increasingly rely upon online platforms where pragmatic interpretation significantly influences public understanding and decision-making. Misinterpretations arising from insufficient contextual knowledge may contribute to interpersonal conflict, misinformation, or communicative failure. Therefore, investigating the mechanisms through which context supports meaning construction has important theoretical and practical implications.[6]

Although substantial research has examined pragmatics in traditional spoken discourse, comparatively fewer studies have systematically integrated classical pragmatic theories with recent developments in digital communication research. Existing studies often focus either on technological aspects of computer-mediated communication or on isolated pragmatic phenomena such as politeness, irony, or emoji usage. The present study seeks to bridge these perspectives by examining context as a multidimensional construct that integrates linguistic, cognitive, technological, and socio-cultural factors within digital discourse.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Pragmatics and the Concept of Context

Pragmatics is traditionally defined as the branch of linguistics that examines how language users interpret meaning in relation to context. Unlike semantics, which focuses primarily on the conventional meanings encoded in linguistic expressions, pragmatics investigates how speakers and listeners construct meaning during actual communication. The interpretation of an utterance depends not only on grammatical structure and lexical meaning but also on contextual factors, communicative intentions, shared knowledge, and social conventions.

The importance of context has been recognized since the emergence of modern pragmatic theory. Early linguistic approaches often treated language as an autonomous system of grammatical rules, while pragmatic research emphasized that communication cannot be understood independently of the situations in which language is used. Context determines how identical linguistic expressions may convey different meanings depending on the circumstances of interaction. Consequently, meaning is viewed as a dynamic process of inference rather than a fixed property of words themselves.[7]

Levinson describes context as the collection of background assumptions shared by participants that enables successful interpretation. These assumptions include physical surroundings, cultural knowledge, previous discourse, social relationships, institutional settings, and communicative goals. In digital communication, however, context extends beyond these traditional dimensions to include technological interfaces, platform conventions, multimodal resources, and algorithmically mediated interactions.

Contemporary pragmatics therefore increasingly conceptualizes context as a multidimensional cognitive construct that evolves continuously throughout interaction. Digital communication illustrates this development particularly clearly because participants frequently rely on contextual information that exists outside the linguistic message itself.[8]

2.2. Speech Act Theory and Communicative Intention

The theoretical foundations of pragmatics were established through Speech Act Theory, introduced by Austin and later expanded by Searle. Austin argued that language performs actions rather than merely describing reality. Every utterance simultaneously accomplishes three interconnected acts: the locutionary act (the production of a linguistic expression), the illocutionary act (the communicative intention), and the perlocutionary act (the effect on the hearer).

Searle further classified speech acts into several categories, including assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. His framework demonstrated that successful communication depends upon the hearer's ability to recognize the speaker's intended illocutionary force.

Digital communication has significantly expanded the practical relevance of Speech Act Theory. Online interactions frequently employ indirect speech acts in which intended meanings differ from literal expressions. A brief message such as "Nice job..." may express sincere praise, irony, criticism, or disappointment depending entirely on contextual cues. Emojis, punctuation, capitalization, timing, and platform conventions often function as pragmatic indicators that help recipients identify communicative intentions.[9]

Recent studies suggest that digital environments increase the complexity of speech act interpretation because communicative intentions are often conveyed through multimodal combinations rather than through verbal language alone. Images, GIFs, reaction icons, hyperlinks, and emojis may perform independent illocutionary functions, extending the classical concept of speech acts into multimodal discourse.

2.3. Grice's Cooperative Principle and Conversational Implicature

Grice's Cooperative Principle remains one of the most influential theories explaining pragmatic inference. According to Grice, effective communication is guided by the assumption that participants cooperate to achieve mutual understanding. This principle is expressed through four conversational maxims:

- Quantity (provide sufficient information);
- Quality (provide truthful information);
- Relation (be relevant);
- Manner (be clear and orderly).

When speakers intentionally violate or exploit these maxims, listeners search for implied meanings known as conversational implicatures.

Digital communication offers numerous examples of implicature. Online users frequently employ understatement, exaggeration, irony, ambiguity, or silence to communicate meanings indirectly. For example, responding to a lengthy explanation with "Interesting." may imply disagreement, skepticism, or polite dismissal depending upon contextual interpretation. Likewise, deliberate omission of information may itself communicate important pragmatic meanings.

Research on social media demonstrates that conversational implicatures often rely on shared online experiences and community-specific knowledge. Memes, abbreviations, hashtags, and internet slang derive much of their communicative value from collectively recognized implicatures rather than literal meanings. Consequently, successful interpretation depends heavily upon contextual familiarity with digital cultures.[10]

2.4. Relevance Theory and Cognitive Context

Relevance Theory, developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995), shifted pragmatic research toward cognitive explanations of communication. According to this theory, human cognition naturally seeks interpretations that maximize cognitive effects while minimizing processing effort. Individuals continuously select contextual assumptions that enable the most relevant interpretation of incoming information.

Unlike earlier models that treated context as an external environment, Relevance Theory conceptualizes context as a mental representation constructed during interpretation. Context therefore consists of assumptions stored in memory, activated by linguistic expressions, and continuously updated throughout communication.[11]

This perspective is particularly valuable for understanding digital communication. Online users rarely possess complete contextual information before interpreting messages. Instead, they construct temporary cognitive contexts by combining textual content with previous conversations, platform conventions, cultural references, and technological cues. Hyperlinks, user profiles, timestamps, hashtags, and multimedia elements all contribute to expanding the cognitive environment within which interpretation occurs.

Recent cognitive-pragmatic studies indicate that digital communication often requires rapid contextual adaptation because online discourse evolves quickly. Users constantly revise contextual assumptions as conversations develop, illustrating the dynamic nature of pragmatic interpretation.

2.5. Computer-Mediated Communication

The emergence of computer-mediated communication (CMC) has generated an extensive body of interdisciplinary research examining language use in digital environments. Crystal introduced the concept of Internet Linguistics, arguing that online communication represents neither traditional writing nor speech but a distinct mode combining characteristics of both.[12]

Similarly, Herring proposed Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) as a methodological framework for examining linguistic interaction across digital platforms. Her research demonstrated that technological affordances significantly influence discourse organization, conversational turn-taking, politeness strategies, and pragmatic interpretation.

Digital communication differs fundamentally from face-to-face interaction in several respects. Messages may be synchronous or asynchronous, publicly accessible or private, permanent or temporary, multimodal or text-based. These characteristics influence how context is constructed and maintained during interaction.

The absence of immediate physical feedback has encouraged users to develop alternative contextual resources. Typographic emphasis, repeated punctuation, capitalization, emojis, stickers, GIFs, reaction buttons, and visual formatting compensate for missing prosodic and gestural information. Rather than reducing communicative effectiveness, these innovations demonstrate the adaptability of human pragmatic competence.

2.6. Context in Social Media Communication

Social media platforms have become important environments for investigating pragmatic meaning construction because they combine interpersonal communication with public discourse. Unlike traditional conversations, social media interactions frequently involve multiple audiences simultaneously. Marwick and Boyd describe this phenomenon as context collapse, where messages intended for one audience become accessible to diverse and often unintended recipients.[13]

Context collapse creates unique pragmatic challenges. Users must anticipate multiple interpretations while balancing personal expression, professional identity, and public visibility. Consequently, linguistic choices become highly strategic, often employing ambiguity or indirectness to accommodate diverse audiences.

Platform-specific conventions further influence pragmatic interpretation. A hashtag on X (formerly Twitter) functions differently from one on Instagram. Likewise, reaction icons on Facebook communicate different pragmatic meanings than emoji reactions on messaging applications. Platform architecture therefore constitutes an essential component of communicative context.

Recent research has also emphasized algorithmic context. Recommendation systems determine which messages become visible, influencing how discourse is interpreted by different audiences. This technological mediation introduces an additional contextual layer absent from traditional communication.

2.7. Multimodality and Pragmatic Meaning

Digital communication increasingly integrates multiple semiotic resources within single communicative events. Text, images, animations, videos, emojis, hyperlinks, audio recordings, and graphic design collectively contribute to meaning construction.

According to Kress (2010), multimodal communication requires analytical frameworks that extend beyond purely verbal language. Meaning emerges through interaction among different semiotic systems rather than through linguistic expressions alone.

Emojis illustrate this phenomenon particularly well. Although often regarded as decorative elements, pragmatic research demonstrates that emojis perform sophisticated communicative functions. They may indicate emotional attitude, clarify illocutionary force, soften criticism, strengthen agreement, express irony, or resolve ambiguity. Their interpretation depends almost entirely upon contextual integration with accompanying text.[14]

Similarly, internet memes combine visual and textual information with shared cultural knowledge.

Their pragmatic meaning frequently cannot be understood without familiarity with previous online discourse, popular culture, or political events. Memes therefore represent highly context-dependent communicative units.

2.8. Research Gap

Despite substantial advances in pragmatics and digital discourse studies, several research gaps remain. Classical pragmatic theories were primarily developed to explain spoken face-to-face interaction, whereas contemporary communication increasingly occurs within technologically mediated environments characterized by multimodality, asynchronous interaction, and rapidly evolving contextual conventions.

Existing studies often investigate isolated phenomena such as emojis, politeness, or online identity without integrating these observations into a comprehensive theory of contextual meaning construction. Furthermore, relatively few studies combine cognitive linguistics, pragmatics, and discourse analysis to explain how users construct pragmatic meaning through interaction between linguistic expressions, technological affordances, and socio-cultural knowledge.

Pragmatics examines how speakers and hearers construct meaning beyond the literal interpretation of linguistic expressions. Unlike semantics, which focuses on conventional meaning encoded in language, pragmatics investigates how communicative intentions, contextual knowledge, and shared assumptions contribute to successful interpretation. The concept of context occupies a central position within pragmatic theory because linguistic expressions rarely possess fixed meanings independent of the situations in which they are produced.

The philosophical foundations of pragmatics were established by Austin, whose Speech Act Theory demonstrated that language performs actions rather than merely conveying information. Austin distinguished between locutionary acts (the production of utterances), illocutionary acts (the speaker's intended communicative function), and perlocutionary acts (the effects produced on the hearer). According to this framework, understanding an utterance requires knowledge of the circumstances in which it is produced. For example, the statement "I apologize" performs the act of apologizing only when appropriate contextual conditions are satisfied. Austin's work established that pragmatic meaning depends fundamentally upon context rather than linguistic form alone.

Searle further developed Speech Act Theory by proposing a systematic classification of speech acts into representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. His theory emphasizes that communicative success depends upon participants recognizing the speaker's intentions within a particular social context. The interpretation of directives such as "Could you close the window?" illustrates the importance of pragmatic inference, as listeners typically recognize the utterance as a request rather than a genuine inquiry regarding ability. Such interpretations rely upon shared background knowledge and contextual expectations.

Grice's Cooperative Principle represents another cornerstone of pragmatic theory. Grice argued that successful communication depends upon interlocutors cooperating according to four conversational maxims: quantity, quality, relation, and manner. Speakers frequently violate or exploit these maxims intentionally to generate conversational implicatures, allowing hearers to infer meanings that extend beyond literal semantic content. For instance, replying "The library is still open" to the question "Can I finish my assignment tonight?" communicates considerably more than the literal proposition through contextual inference.

Levinson expanded Grice's framework by providing a comprehensive account of pragmatic principles governing deixis, presupposition, implicature, and conversational structure. Levinson argued that contextual interpretation operates through multiple interacting mechanisms rather than a single inferential process. His work highlighted that pragmatic meaning emerges from the interaction between linguistic expressions and cognitive assumptions shared by communicative participants.

One of the most influential cognitive approaches to pragmatics is Relevance Theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson. According to this theory, human communication operates according to the principle of optimal relevance, whereby hearers seek interpretations that maximize cognitive effects while minimizing processing effort. Context is viewed not as a fixed external environment but as a dynamic set of assumptions activated during interpretation. Individuals continuously select

contextual information that appears most relevant for understanding communicative intentions. This cognitive perspective is particularly valuable for explaining digital communication, where contextual resources are distributed across multiple linguistic and technological channels.

Yule further emphasized that pragmatics concerns "speaker meaning" rather than sentence meaning. He argued that successful communication depends upon understanding what speakers intend to communicate within particular social situations. Context therefore includes physical surroundings, interpersonal relationships, shared experiences, and cultural knowledge that collectively shape interpretation. Yule's accessible framework remains widely applied in studies of computer-mediated communication because it accommodates both linguistic and extra-linguistic contextual information.[15]

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate the role of context in pragmatic meaning construction in digital communication. Qualitative discourse analysis is particularly appropriate because the research focuses on interpreting communicative meaning rather than measuring linguistic frequency. Since pragmatic meaning depends on contextual inference, communicative intentions, and social interaction, qualitative methods allow for a detailed examination of how meaning is negotiated in authentic digital discourse.

The research is based on an interpretive paradigm, which assumes that language users actively construct meaning through interaction rather than simply transmitting information. This approach enables the researcher to examine not only what participants communicate but also how contextual resources influence interpretation. A descriptive-analytical method is employed throughout the study. The descriptive component identifies different types of contextual information present in digital communication, while the analytical component explains how these contextual elements contribute to pragmatic interpretation.

The data consist of authentic examples of English-language digital communication collected from publicly accessible online platforms. To ensure diversity of communicative contexts, examples were selected from several types of digital environments, including: Social networking platforms (e.g., X/Twitter, Facebook, Instagram); Instant messaging applications (e.g., WhatsApp and Telegram); Online discussion forums (e.g., Reddit); YouTube comment sections; Public blogs and online communities.

Only publicly available materials were used. No private conversations, confidential messages, or personally identifiable information were collected. Usernames were anonymized whenever examples were reproduced for analytical purposes.

Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative analysis of authentic digital communication and discusses how different contextual dimensions contribute to pragmatic meaning construction. The analysis demonstrates that meaning in digital environments extends far beyond the literal interpretation of linguistic forms. Instead, users integrate linguistic information with social, cultural, technological, cognitive, and multimodal resources to infer communicative intentions. The findings are organized according to the six contextual categories established in the methodology. The analysis confirms that linguistic context remains the primary foundation for pragmatic interpretation in digital communication. Although digital discourse often contains abbreviated expressions, unconventional spelling, and fragmented syntax, surrounding linguistic elements guide users toward the intended meaning.

Example 1

A: *Did you finish the report?*

B: *Well... it's still "in progress."*

The literal meaning of the phrase *"in progress"* simply indicates that the report has not yet been completed. However, the hesitation marker ("Well..."), quotation marks, and the smiling emoji indicate that Speaker B acknowledges the delay while attempting to reduce potential criticism.

Using Grice's Cooperative Principle, the response intentionally provides less information than expected, inviting the reader to infer that the report is significantly behind schedule. The emoji functions as a politeness strategy, mitigating the negative implications of the delayed task.

The pragmatic meaning therefore becomes:

"I haven't finished the report, and I realize this may disappoint you."

Without the surrounding linguistic context, the same expression could easily be interpreted differently.

Social relationships strongly influence pragmatic interpretation. The same linguistic expression performs different communicative functions depending upon the relationship between interlocutors.

Example 2

Message:

"You're unbelievable."

Possible interpretations include: admiration, disappointment, sarcasm, humor

Interpretation depends entirely upon previous interaction and interpersonal relations. Among close friends, the message often expresses admiration.

Example:

"You bought everyone coffee? You're unbelievable!"

Among colleagues after repeated mistakes, the identical sentence communicates criticism.

The analysis indicates that social context frequently overrides literal semantic meaning.

These findings support Yule's observation that speaker meaning depends more upon communicative intentions than lexical content. Online interaction demonstrates this principle particularly clearly because many interpersonal cues must be reconstructed through contextual inference. Digital communication increasingly depends upon shared cultural knowledge.

Example 3

Comment: *"This meeting could have been an email."*

Literally, this statement concerns workplace communication.

Pragmatically, however, internet users immediately recognize this as a cultural expression criticizing unnecessary meetings. Without familiarity with contemporary workplace culture, readers may miss its evaluative meaning.

Another example is the widespread meme expression:

"Tell me you are stressed without telling me you're stressed."

Literal interpretation is impossible.

Instead, users understand the phrase through familiarity with internet discourse conventions.

These examples demonstrate that pragmatic meaning often depends upon intertextuality and collective online experience rather than dictionary definitions.

One of the most significant findings concerns technological context. Digital platforms themselves contribute directly to meaning construction.

Example 4

Message: *"Congratulations.*

Sent from my iPhone." The automatic signature has no pragmatic significance.

However, platform-generated features such as: typing indicators, read receipts, message reactions,

disappearing messages, threaded replies, frequently influence interpretation. For example, *A person reads a message but does not reply despite the sender seeing the "Read" notification.* Pragmatically, silence itself becomes meaningful. Possible interpretations include: *disagreement, annoyance, deliberate avoidance, distraction, uncertainty.*

The Table 1. technological affordance (read receipt) creates pragmatic meaning even though no linguistic message has been produced.

This phenomenon does not exist in traditional face-to-face communication.

Integrated Contextual Model. The analysis demonstrates that pragmatic interpretation rarely depends upon a single contextual dimension.

Instead, users integrate multiple sources simultaneously.

Table 1. Contextual Factors Influencing Pragmatic Meaning

Context Type	Primary Function
Linguistic	Interpreting sentence meaning
Social	Understanding interpersonal relations
Cultural	Activating shared knowledge
Technological	Utilizing platform affordances
Cognitive	Drawing inferences
Multimodal	Combining text with visual symbols

These dimensions interact continuously throughout communication.

The findings strongly support classical pragmatic theories while demonstrating their continued relevance in contemporary digital communication.

Austin's Speech Act Theory remains applicable because digital messages continue to perform actions such as requesting, apologizing, congratulating, criticizing, promising, and inviting.

Grice's Cooperative Principle explains how conversational implicatures continue to operate despite abbreviated digital language.

Relevance Theory provides perhaps the most comprehensive explanation for digital meaning construction because users constantly search for interpretations offering maximum cognitive benefit with minimum processing effort.

However, digital communication extends these theories by introducing technological context as an additional component of pragmatic interpretation.

Unlike traditional face-to-face interaction, online discourse includes: emojis, GIFs, reaction icons, hashtags, hyperlinks, algorithms, recommendation systems, read receipts, typing indicators, multimedia resources.

These technological elements participate directly in meaning construction.

Consequently, context should no longer be viewed solely as physical surroundings or shared knowledge.

Instead, digital pragmatics requires a multidimensional model integrating linguistic, social, technological, cultural, cognitive, and multimodal contexts.

The present findings therefore support recent developments in computer-mediated discourse analysis while simultaneously confirming the continuing explanatory power of classical pragmatic theories.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the role of context in pragmatic meaning construction in digital communication. The findings demonstrate that meaning in online interactions is not determined solely by linguistic forms but emerges through the interaction of linguistic, social, cultural, cognitive, technological, and multimodal contexts. Digital communication relies heavily on contextual resources such as emojis, hashtags, memes, hyperlinks, and platform-specific features, which help users interpret communicative intentions and infer implied meanings.

The analysis confirms that classical pragmatic theories, including Speech Act Theory, the Cooperative Principle, and Relevance Theory, remain applicable in digital environments. However, these theories should be expanded to account for the technological affordances and multimodal characteristics of contemporary online discourse. The study contributes to pragmatics by highlighting the dynamic and collaborative nature of context in computer-mediated communication and provides a foundation for future research on evolving forms of digital interaction.

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