A Comprehensive Review of Interpersonal Pragmatics: Theoretical Developments and Applications in the Chinese Context

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Abstract

This paper provides a comprehensive review of interpersonal pragmatics, focusing on theoretical developments and applications in the Chinese context. The review synthesizes literature from databases including SSCI and CSSCI (2010–2025), with inclusion criteria centered on theoretical innovations and empirical studies in Chinese social interactions, to clarify key trends and challenges. Over the past decade, Chinese research has emphasized interpersonal relationships, identity construction, and diverse applications of the field. The paper clarifies the concept, traces its development, and highlights the importance of localized context. Studies on interpersonal relationships have integrated multi-perspective analyses through the "relationship turn," while identity research has explored linguistic strategies and theoretical advancements. Discourse-level analyses have examined pragmatic effects across contexts, from everyday conversations to specialized domains like business and legal discourse. Despite progress, challenges remain, including unclear distinctions between interpersonal pragmatics and relationships, an overreliance on qualitative methods, and limited theoretical and localized research. Future research should adopt interdisciplinary approaches and diverse methodologies to strengthen theoretical foundations and enhance cultural specificity. The goal is to advance both the theoretical framework and practical application of interpersonal pragmatics within the Chinese context.

Keywords: Interpersonal pragmatics, interpersonal relationships, trends and challenges, future prospects

Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed a pivotal paradigm shift within the field of pragmatics, as it has embraced a more expansive conceptualization of

politeness within the context of relationships (Kádár & Haugh, 2013). This evolution in theoretical perspectives gave rise to a novel domain of inquiry: interpersonal pragmatics. Initially defined by Locher and Graham (2010), interpersonal pragmatics is concerned with "the ways in which social actors use language to shape and form relationships in situ". The field aims to investigate the reciprocal influence between language and interpersonal relationships, examining how linguistic expressions shape these relationships and, conversely, how these relationships influence the language choices made by interlocutors.

Early Influences

Interpersonal pragmatics is an emerging academic field that has arisen from the synthesis of pragmatics and interpersonal communication studies. The foundational work of scholars such as Leech (1983) and Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) laid the groundwork by examining the interpersonal dimensions of communication, particularly in areas like politeness and face. The field has since undergone significant evolution, broadening its scope to incorporate a wider spectrum of themes and theoretical perspectives.

Leech's Interpersonal Rhetoric

Leech's work on interpersonal rhetoric has been central to understanding how language manages relationships, emphasizing politeness, power dynamics, and identity construction. Drawing on Halliday's model of language metafunctions, Leech (1983) highlights the interpersonal function as key to social interaction. He identifies the cooperative and politeness principles as foundational, while irony, humor, and banter serve as secondary strategies. Other concepts, like the interest principle and Pollyanna principle, are seen as tertiary. These layers illustrate how communicative choices reflect and shape relational dynamics, positioning interpersonal rhetoric as a core component of interpersonal pragmatics.

Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory

The seminal theory of politeness by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson centers on the pivotal construct of 'face', delineating the intricate dynamics through which individuals manage social encounters to preserve and enhance their own and others' social esteem.

Brown and Levinson's theoretical contributions (1978, 1987) suggest that the essence of politeness is an omnipresent intention embedded within communicative acts, transcending cultural boundaries, as observed by Davis (1998). Their model stands in contrast to the universal principles put forth by Grice (1975) and Leech (1977) by emphasizing the participatory aspects of communication that are observed universally, including the mitigation of

conflict and the maintenance of face (Eelen, 2001; Gagne, 2010). Locher and Watts (2005) subsequently regard Brown and Levinson's theoretical framework as a reflection of the intrinsic attributes of polite interactions within the realm of human socio-communicative verbal exchanges.

The theoretical framework of Brown and Levinson (1987) identifies three determinants that dictate the degree and strategy of politeness utilized by a speaker: firstly, the speaker's assessment of social distance from the hearer; secondly, the estimation of the disparity in social power between the interlocutors; and thirdly, the perceived burden of the request or action being communicated. In essence, an augmentation in the perceived social distance and the relative power of the hearer intensifies the speaker's sense of the gravity of politeness required. This perception escalates concurrently with the perceived severity of the imposition. The underlying premise of this perspective is that these three factors, irrespective of cultural context, influence the speaker's calculus of the requisite level of politeness in their speech acts. Brown and Levinson (1987) denote this collective perception as the calculus of politeness weightiness.

Shifting Focus

Gradually, scholarly inquiry has progressively transitioned from an emphasis on individual identity and face to a more encompassing apprehension of relationships as fluid, collaboratively shaped entities. This evolution has been influenced by several influential concepts, such as relational work, rapport management, and face constituting theory, with each concept contributing to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the interactive and co-creative aspects of interpersonal dynamics.

The concept of relational work, introduced by Locher and Watts (2005, 2008), underscores the continuous and intentional endeavors individuals undertake to cultivate and sustain their relationships. This framework highlights the dynamic, communicative processes that are fundamental to the well-being and evolution of interpersonal connections. Conversely, rapport management, proposed by Spencer-Oatey (2000, 2008), redirects attention to the emotional quality of relationships. It delves into the strategies individuals employ to establish and maintain a positive rapport, a pivotal factor in fostering a sense of closeness and mutual comprehension within social interactions. Additionally, face constituting theory (FCT), formulated by Arundale (2006, 2010), offers a fresh perspective on 'face' as a relational phenomenon, rather than a mere individual trait. This theory underscores the interactive construction of face, demonstrating how social identity and relational worth are collaboratively formed within the intricate fabric of communication.

Emergence of Interpersonal Pragmatics

The domain of traditional pragmatics investigates the relational elements that interplay between interlocutors, potentially shaping their linguistic expressions, with a foundation in universal theories of face and politeness (Locher & Graham, 2010). Yet, this research has been persistently subject to critique for its alleged focus on anglo-centric perspectives. The prevailing theories of face and politeness have been found wanting in their capacity to explain linguistic phenomena characteristic of Eastern cultures. A case in point is the Chinese conception of face, where the experience of face loss is inextricably tied to the diminution of social prestige and community endorsement (Zhou & Zhang, 2017), contrasting with the Western emphasis on individual autonomy and freedom.

In response to the research conundrum at hand, linguists have increasingly acknowledged the pivotal role of sociocultural elements in the establishment of interpersonal associations. This epiphany has led to a broadened horizon for the exploration of language's relational facets. A suite of methodological frameworks has been introduced that systematically assimilate societal considerations into the discourse on relational linguistics, such as the concepts of relational work (Locher & Watts, 2008), rapport management (Spencer-Oatey, 2008), and the dynamics of face constitution (Arundale, 2006). These frameworks have offered comprehensive interpretations of cultural discrepancies, including the norms of contextual assessment, the conventions of socio-pragmatic interaction, the bedrock cultural values, the pragmalinguistic protocols, and the spectrum of rapport-management strategies (Spencer-Oatey, 2000). These scholarly forays have shed novel insights into the dynamics of relationships, yet they are not devoid of limitations. The most formidable challenge stems from the lack of a distinct boundary between individual elements and sociocultural factors, as they are typically interwoven, rendering their separation in the majority of scenarios a complex endeavor.

The convergence of these diverse research streams culminated in the emergence of interpersonal pragmatics as a distinct and specialized subfield. Encompassing a more expansive vista on relational dynamics, interpersonal pragmatics ventures beyond the realms of politeness and face. It delves into the spectrum of embodied language use, incorporating an analysis of attitudes, emotions, and evaluations, thereby offering a nuanced lens through which to scrutinize the intricate tapestry of human interaction.

Methodology

This paper adopts a systematic review approach to synthesize the theoretical developments and applications of interpersonal pragmatics, with a specific focus on the Chinese context. The methodology is designed to ensure

comprehensiveness, transparency, and rigor in selecting and analyzing relevant literature, as detailed below.

Literature Retrieval and Selection

The literature search was conducted across two major academic databases to cover both international and Chinese scholarship:

1. International sources: Web of Science (SSCI), using key words such as including "interpersonal pragmatics", "relational work", "Chinese context", etc.
2. Chinese sources: CSSCI (Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index), using key words such as "人际语用学 (interpersonal pragmatics)", "关系工作 (relational work)", "面子 (face)", "人情 (*renqing*)", etc.

The inclusion criteria were: (1) published between 2010 and 2025 to reflect recent developments; (2) focusing on theoretical advancements or empirical studies of interpersonal pragmatics; (3) explicitly discussing applications in the Chinese cultural context (e.g., guanxi, renqing, or face dynamics). Exclusion criteria included studies focusing solely on Western contexts without cross-cultural comparisons, and works unrelated to relational language use.

The initial search yielded 87 records meeting the above inclusion criteria. After further screening for direct relevance to theoretical developments and Chinese context applications, 50 core studies were selected for in-depth coding and analysis, forming the basis of this review.

Analytical Framework

The 50 core studies were coded using a two-dimensional framework:

1. Theoretical dimension: Categorizing studies into core theoretical strands, such as politeness/impoliteness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Culpeper, 1996), relational work (Locher & Watts, 2008), and face constituting theory (Arundale, 2010).
2. Contextual dimension: Classifying applications into domains like everyday conversation, online discourse, business interactions, and institutional communication (e.g., government-citizen interactions in crises, Qian, 2023).

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns, contradictions, and gaps in the literature, particularly regarding the localization of Western theories in Chinese settings (e.g., Yuan, 2022 on guanxi management).

Current Research Trends

Current research in interpersonal pragmatics encompasses a diverse spectrum of topics and perspectives, underscoring the field's dynamic and interdisciplinary scope. This section presents an overview of significant trends and contributions.

(Im)politeness and face concern

The exploration of politeness and face concerns is central to the study of interpersonal relationships, highlighting their significance in shaping and understanding the nuances of social interactions.

Researchers are actively exploring the use of politeness strategies in different cultures. This includes the study of honorifics, which show respect; indirect speech acts, which convey requests or opinions subtly; and self-deprecating expressions, which can be a way to build rapport or show humility. Haugh (2013) offers a comparative analysis of indirectness between English and Japanese communicative patterns, underscoring how deeply rooted cultural values can shape the style of interaction. Concurrently, there is a burgeoning body of research dedicated to exploring the distinct ways in which different cultures perceive and handle the construct of face, which represents an individual's positive social standing. Arundale's (2010) investigation into the indigenous understanding of face within Japanese culture and its repercussions for communicative behaviors exemplifies this line of inquiry. These studies collectively contribute to a richer comprehension of the complex interplay between politeness, face, and cultural relativity in human communication.

Politeness research within interpersonal pragmatics has shifted from traditional face-centered theories to broader approaches that include conflictual and face-aggravating interactions. Locher (2015) emphasizes this evolution, noting the growing recognition of politeness and impoliteness as socially constructed and context-dependent, shaped by personal, cultural, and situational norms. This shift questions the universality of early models and highlights the need for flexible frameworks. Locher proposes two research paths: one that analyzes specific interactional practices using diverse theories and methods, and another that focuses on relational phenomena like politeness or impoliteness across contexts. Together, these paths promote a deeper, more nuanced understanding of how language functions in interpersonal dynamics, offering valuable insights across disciplines such as linguistics, communication, psychology, and sociology.

In addition to politeness and impoliteness, the concept of 'excessive politeness' has also become a key area of investigation, examining how overly courteous behaviors can impact social interactions and potentially alter the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. Lv and Zhan (2020) explored

"excessive politeness" in interpersonal pragmatics, combining systemic functional linguistics (SFL) with postmodern conversation analysis (CA) to study overly polite thanking discourse. They identified four transitivity types: mental, material, relational, and existential, finding a positive correlation between their frequency and interpersonal functions. This indicates strategic discourse choices to achieve interpersonal goals. The study emphasizes the dynamic nature of relationship construction, which can shift based on communicative intentions, challenging the idea of static relationships. It highlights the importance of context and interactional dynamics in understanding interpersonal pragmatics.

The concept of interpersonal pragmatics offers a particularly insightful framework for the study of politeness, impoliteness, and relational work. It encompasses critical aspects such as identity construction, emotions, and cognition, providing a comprehensive context for analysis. The adoption of an interpersonal perspective allows researchers to delve deeper into the multifaceted nature of human interaction. Furthermore, the convergence of interpersonal pragmatics with research on (im)politeness is a promising avenue for enhancing our understanding of human sociality and the nuanced ways language influences our social interactions.

Relational work

Locher (2013) provided a comprehensive overview of "relational work", a pivotal concept in interpersonal pragmatics that sheds light on the intricate ways language is used in social interactions. The study positions relational work within the wider scope of interpersonal pragmatics, underscoring the dynamic and context-specific nature of relationships and the impact of linguistic choices on their formation. This contrasts with earlier approaches to politeness that often adopted a more static view of relationships and language forms. The review highlights the key contributions of relational work theory, particularly its emphasis on the interactional and context-dependent nature of relationships and the ways in which individuals actively manage and negotiate their interpersonal connections through language. One of the main strengths of relational work theory is its recognition of the interconnectedness of various concepts such as face, politeness, and identity construction.

Comparative analyses explore the diverse ways cultures navigate and sustain interpersonal relationships, emphasizing the strategic use of rituals, gestures, and linguistic expressions. A pertinent example is provided by the research of Kádár and Bax (2013), which investigates the critical role of in-group rituals in defining collective identity and fostering group cohesion.

Personality traits are increasingly recognized as pivotal in the study of interpersonal trust from an interpersonal pragmatics perspective. This research

stream uncovers a dynamic and interactive process, where the traits of both communicators are crucial in the construction of trust. It highlights the strategic deployment of these traits, which can either strengthen or erode trust. Furthermore, the study illuminates how different personality types influence risk-taking behaviors and the mechanisms of trust repair, thereby enhancing our grasp of the complexities inherent in trust relationships.

Yao and Xu (2023) examine how personality traits impact interpersonal trust, expanding on the trust model (Mayer et al., 1995). They show that trust is bidirectional, influenced by both the trustor's and trustee's personality traits. The trustor's traits affect their evaluation of the trustee's trustworthiness, while the trustee uses this understanding to build or undermine trust. Personality traits also play a key role in trust repair after a breach. This study highlights the dynamic, interactive nature of trust construction, emphasizing the importance of considering both the "who" and the "what" in trust relationships.

Yuan (2022) highlights the uniqueness of guanxi management in Chinese verbal interactions, which is deeply rooted in "*lunli* (ethical principles)" and "*qingli* (principles of human relationships)". A typical example can illustrate this: in a Chinese business negotiation, when a supplier declines a client's request for a price reduction, they rarely use direct refusal. Instead, they might say, "您看，咱们合作这么久，这份*情分 (qingfen)*比价钱重要 - - 这次实在是成本卡得紧，但下次一定给您留*余地 (yudi)*" （"You see, our long-term partnership means more than the price - this time costs are too tight, but I'll make sure to offer flexibility next time"）. This response embodies renqing (favor exchange) by invoking "long-term relationship" as a moral obligation, avoids damaging mianzi (face) through indirectness, and maintains guanxi through the promise of future concessions. Such linguistic strategies reflect how Chinese relational work transcends Western binary frameworks, integrating ethics and emotions in communication.

The Renqing Principle, deeply rooted in Chinese culture, is emerging as a central concept in research on interpersonal relationships from an interpersonal pragmatics perspective. Ran (2018) delves into the crucial role of the Renqing Principle in managing interpersonal relationships within the context of Chinese culture. It highlights the limitations of Western interpersonal pragmatics, which often overlooks the influence of emotion and "qing" (affection) in favor of factors like face, politeness, and power. In contrast, the Chinese cultural context embraces the interconnectedness of renqing (favor), qingmian (affection-based face), and mianzi (face), recognizing them as essential components of relationship building and maintenance. The Renqing Principle, characterized by its reciprocity,

emphasizes the mutual exchange of favors, emotional support, and respect. Violations of this principle can lead to conflict and relational breakdown, while its utilization can foster harmony and resolve disputes. The study indicates the limitations of Western approaches to interpersonal pragmatics and proposes an enriched framework that incorporates Chinese cultural concepts such as renqing, qingmian, and mianzi for a deeper understanding of Chinese social interactions.

Discourse and utterance

From the perspective of interpersonal pragmatics, discourse or utterance research mainly focuses on how people use language to establish, maintain, or change interpersonal relationships across diverse social and cultural contexts, as well as how to achieve their own goals and intentions through discourse.

Wang and He (2022) examine relational metadiscourse in conflict conversations, addressing the limits of traditional frameworks. Using Chen's (2018) rapport management model - comprising five relational dimensions and three orientations - they analyze leaderless group discussions to identify four metadiscourse types: face, emotion, rights and obligations, and communicative objectives. These forms help manage conflict by signaling negative cues, shaping interpretation, prompting self-correction, and offering feedback. The study reveals the dynamic nature of relational management and underscores the need to consider both speaker intent and listener interpretation, offering valuable insights into interpersonal pragmatics in conflict communication.

Studies in competitive discourse are increasingly focusing on the strategic use of impoliteness and rapport management to influence perceptions and achieve specific goals within high-stakes communication settings. Wu (2023) explores the use of impolite strategies in competitive discourse, specifically focusing on the 2016 U.S. presidential election debates between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Employing both qualitative and quantitative methods, the research draws on the Impoliteness Theory (Culpeper, 1996) and Rapport Management Theory (Spencer-Oatey, 2002) to analyze the linguistic choices made by the candidates. This research expands the scope of interpersonal pragmatics, validating the explanatory power of impoliteness theory and rapport management in competitive discourse, and offering a nuanced understanding of the strategic use of impolite language in high-stakes political communication.

Online discourse research is broadening the scope of interpersonal pragmatics by examining the unique challenges of identity construction, impoliteness, and emotional expression in digital environments. Lei (2022) explores the latest trends in online discourse research from the perspective of

interpersonal pragmatics, focusing on the growing social relevance and interdisciplinary nature of the field. It identifies key issues emerging in the context of globalization and crisis, such as identity construction, impoliteness, and emotional expression in online interactions. The paper also highlights the extension and evolution of traditional interpersonal pragmatics topics, such as impoliteness, identity construction, and relationship management, within the online environment. The study concludes that the field is increasingly concerned with social problems and demonstrates a strong tendency towards integration, incorporating diverse theoretical perspectives and research methods to better understand the complex dynamics of online communication. This research not only expands our understanding of interpersonal pragmatics but also offers valuable insights for crisis management, social governance, and the mitigation of online language aggression.

Interpersonal pragmatics research in mediation discourse is uncovering the significant role of personality traits in shaping the dynamics between mediators and parties involved. Wu and Zhou (2023) investigate the role of personality traits in mediation discourse, analyzing how different personality types influence mediation outcomes and interpersonal relationships. Drawing on the Transactional Analysis framework (Berne, 1964), the study examines the linguistic expressions and interpersonal functions of various personality traits in a sample of 30 mediation cases from the TV program Golden Mediation. Rational personality plays a crucial role in guiding the transition from non-rational to rational personality states among the parties, facilitating the shift of interpersonal relationships from separation to connection. The study highlights the dynamic and interactive nature of personality and interpersonal relationships in the mediation context, demonstrating that effective mediation hinges on fostering rationality and promoting interpersonal harmony.

Interpersonal pragmatics plays a pivotal role in understanding the multifaceted nature of human interaction across various discourse scenarios. Inquiries into diverse discourse scenarios - from conflict conversations and competitive debates to online exchanges and mediated settings - underscore the complexity and significance of interpersonal pragmatics. This field illuminates how the strategic use of language shapes and reflects the subtleties of interpersonal dynamics, which is essential for gauging the effectiveness and outcomes of communication. Whether navigating the heat of a debate, the nuances of online interaction, or the delicate balance of a mediation, adaptive and responsive linguistic practices are paramount for effectively maneuvering the intricate social landscape of contemporary life. These insights collectively highlight the indispensable value of interpersonal pragmatics in decoding and navigating the social complexities inherent in our daily communicative encounters.

Identity construction

The study of identity construction from the perspective of interpersonal pragmatics focuses on how individuals use language to create, negotiate, and express their social identities, as well as how this process is influenced by socio-cultural factors. In this field, researchers typically focus on several aspects, including multiplicity of Identities, power social status, role of context, and so on.

Identity construction in academic prefaces serves as a microcosm of the broader communicative endeavors within interpersonal pragmatics, reflecting the strategic interplay of relationships, emotions, and evaluations. Yuan (2023) explores the identity construction of authors in "other-prefaces" of Chinese academic monographs from the perspective of interpersonal pragmatics. It investigates the types and strategies of identity construction, focusing on the interplay between interpersonal relationships, emotional expressions, and evaluations. The study finds that authors adopt various identities such as experts, teachers, promoters, ordinary readers, peers, and friends, utilizing pragmatic rhetorical strategies like discourse deixis, generic elements, role positioning, and identity superposition. These identities aim to establish and maintain harmonious relationships with the author and readers, foster positive evaluations of the monograph, and ultimately promote its value. The findings shed light on the multifaceted nature of identity construction in academic discourse and offer insights into the pragmatic motivations behind authorial identity choices.

The dynamic construction of government identity on social media during crises is a critical area of study that sheds light on the complex interplay between institutional communication strategies and public sentiment. Qian (2023) investigates the interactive construction of government identity on social media platforms, specifically during natural disasters. By utilizing Python programming, the paper reveals that four types of identities of the government: information transparency, responsibility, dedicated service, and positive guidance. These identities are dynamically adjusted across different stages of the disaster, reflecting the government's responsiveness to the evolving situation and public expectations. The study also identifies an asynchronous mutually-driven interactive pattern and a positive/negative resonant interpersonal pragmatic mechanism between government identity construction and public sentiment. Overall, the research highlights the importance of transparent communication, proactive action, and emotional resonance in fostering a harmonious relationship between the government and the public during crises, thereby contributing to effective disaster response and e-governance.

The intersection of new media and aging is redefining the ways in which the elderly construct and express their identities, with WeChat

emerging as a vibrant space for active engagement and social participation. Jing (2022) explores how elderly individuals construct their identities in the context of new media, particularly through WeChat interactions. The research reveals that the elderly actively engage in identity construction by sharing their works, learning experiences, and participating in discussions, which results in the formation of diverse identities such as learners/creators, providers, and group members. These identities dynamically evolve throughout interactions, influenced by various speech acts including compliments, requests, expressions of agreement or disagreement. The study highlights that, new media interactions, particularly on WeChat, provide a platform for the elderly to express themselves, build connections, and participate in society, thereby contributing to their active aging.

Teasing in business interactions is a complex tool for identity construction and interpersonal harmony. Ran and Fan (2023) note that teasing in Chinese business interactions serves as a tool for identity negotiation. For instance, in a team meeting at a Chinese tech company, a senior employee might tease a new colleague: "*小王 (Xiao Wang)* 最近提案写得越来越有'*老人儿' (laoren'er, old-timer)* 样了，是不是偷偷跟*张姐 (Sister Zhang)* 取经了?" ("Xiao Wang's proposals are getting more 'veteran-style' lately - did you secretly learn from Sister Zhang?"). This "bonding teasing" constructs the new employee as a "quick learner" and integrates them into the team identity, while reinforcing the senior's role as a friendly mentor. The use of kinship terms ("Sister Zhang") and colloquial "laoren'er" further anchors the interaction in Chinese cultural norms of hierarchical harmony, showing how teasing in Chinese contexts prioritizes relational cohesion over individual assertiveness.

Interpersonal pragmatics offers a rich framework for examining identity construction, highlighting how language use strategically navigates social interactions and reflects socio-cultural influences. Studies in this domain emphasize the complexity of identity as multifaceted, context-dependent, and deeply intertwined with power dynamics and social status. Whether in academic prefaces, government communication during crises, the elderly's engagement with new media, or the nuanced use of teasing in business, identity construction emerges as a pivotal process that shapes and is shaped by our communicative endeavors. The research underscores the importance of understanding identity not as a static concept, but as a dynamic and ever-evolving construct that is central to our interpersonal relationships and societal participation.

Issues and Challenges

Interpersonal pragmatics, a burgeoning interdisciplinary field, seeks to understand the use of language in shaping and maintaining social relationships. However, several key issues challenge this endeavor.

Defining of "relationship"

Defining "relationship" poses a dilemma in interpersonal pragmatics. Should it be seen as an exogenous context influencing language use, or as an endogenous process co-constituted through interaction? This debate reflects broader questions about sociality, agency, and structure.

Viewing relationships as exogenous contexts simplifies analysis by treating them as stable backdrops for language use. This aligns with social psychological approaches, such as Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, which relies on fixed power and distance. However, it risks oversimplifying the dynamic nature of relationships and neglecting individual agency. Conversely, seeing relationships as endogenous processes acknowledges their dynamic and emergent nature. This perspective emphasizes the role of interaction in constructing relationships, as seen in relational dialectics and face constituting theory. It offers a nuanced understanding but complicates analysis, requiring long-term interactional data or ethnographic methods.

The debate also extends to epistemological questions. If relationships are exogenous, data might come from self-reports or surveys. If endogenous, analysis must prioritize interactional data, such as transcripts or recordings. This shift requires different analytical tools and a more nuanced approach to studying interpersonal relationships.

The lack of a metatheoretical framework

The field of interpersonal pragmatics lacks a metatheoretical framework, leading to fragmentation and incoherence among diverse theoretical approaches. Researchers operate in isolated silos, focusing on specific aspects like politeness, face, or relational work. While these approaches offer valuable insights, they often fail to engage with each other, resulting in a fragmented understanding. For example, politeness theorists may focus on face management, while relational work theorists emphasize social roles and identities. Without a common framework, the bigger picture of how language shapes social relationships is obscured.

A metatheoretical framework would provide a shared language and concepts, facilitating cross-fertilization and more comprehensive theories. It could highlight interconnections between politeness, face, and relational work, showing how these concepts interact to shape social relationships. Developing such a framework is complex, requiring deep understanding of various

approaches and assumptions. However, it is essential for advancing the field and fostering a holistic understanding of interpersonal communication.

The temporal dimension of relationships

The temporal dimension of relationships complicates the analysis of interpersonal pragmatics. Traditional approaches often view relationships as static or as punctuated events with distinct phases, which is useful for studying initial formation but fails to capture ongoing development and renegotiation over time. A more dynamic perspective sees relationships as continuously shaped through interaction, emphasizing fluidity and the role of agency and context. This requires analyzing interactional data over extended periods.

Additionally, the concept of "historicity" recognizes that relationships are interconnected with broader social and historical contexts. Past interactions and social networks influence current meanings and behaviors. Researchers must therefore consider these broader contexts and use appropriate methods like ethnography, longitudinal studies, and interactional sequence analysis. Theoretical frameworks that address temporality, such as social constructionism or narrative analysis, can also provide valuable insights into the evolving nature of relationships.

Future directions

Future research in interpersonal pragmatics will expand its scope. It may integrate metapragmatics to explore communicative self-awareness and adopt a multimodal perspective to examine how gestures, gaze, and language convey meaning. It will also focus on pragmatic ability development and cross-cultural comparisons, deepening our understanding of language, identity, and social structure.

The convergence with the domain of metapragmatics

In charting the evolving landscape of interpersonal pragmatics, a discernible trend is the growing convergence with the domain of metapragmatics. Previous scholarship in interpersonal pragmatics has largely failed to rigorously distinguish between pragmatic choices in monolayer and bilayer utterances, both conceptually and in terms of their essence. Nevertheless, academics have initiated inquiries into the establishment and preservation of interpersonal connections, as well as the articulation and interpretation of interpersonal stances, by examining discourse markers, metadiscourse, and metapragmatic expressions. Despite these efforts, a comprehensive taxonomy of issues relating to interpersonal metapragmatics has yet to be fully developed.

The traditional examination of politeness has often been limited to the etic viewpoint of the investigator or analyst, characterized by a top-down

approach that can be overly subjective. This approach has been less inclusive of bottom-up methodologies, such as the emic perspective, which could provide a complementary understanding of face and linguistic politeness (Chen & Liu, 2023). Adopting a metapragmatic viewpoint in the analysis of politeness has the potential to substantially reduce this subjectivity.

To elaborate further, future scholarship in interpersonal pragmatics must attend more closely to metapragmatic phenomena. Researchers will need to develop a keen awareness of the strategic deployment of metapragmatic tools in communication, such as the use of discourse markers and the nuanced adjustments in metadiscourse. By doing so, the field can aspire to a more nuanced understanding of how individuals navigate the intricate dynamics of interpersonal communication, ultimately enhancing our collective ability to engage more effectively in social discourse.

Integration of multimodal perspective

The advancement of interpersonal pragmatics is increasingly characterized by a holistic recognition of the multimodal nature of communication, acknowledging the pivotal role of non-verbal elements alongside spoken language. Scholars have come to realize that overlooking these non-verbal aspects can result in a substantial gap in our understanding of the subtle cues that govern interpersonal relationships.

As the field progresses, there is a mounting tendency to examine interpersonal pragmatic issues through a comprehensive lens that incorporates the full spectrum of communication modes - both verbal and non-verbal. This methodological shift acknowledges the combined influence of various communicative channels on the shaping of interpersonal pragmatic phenomena. For instance, research into identity construction within a multimodal paradigm explores how the synergy of linguistic and non-linguistic components collaborates to forge and communicate individual and group identities. Scholars such as Sindoni (2020) have dissected specific texts to uncover the multimodal tactics employed in the articulation of certain identities.

The examination of face and politeness through a multimodal lens has also risen in importance. Works like The Palgrave Handbook of Linguistic (Im)politeness (Culpeper et al., 2017) have probed the complex interrelationship between (im)politeness, emotion, prosody, and gesture.

The integration of a multimodal perspective is crucial for several reasons. It offers a more comprehensive portrayal of the inherent complexity of interpersonal communication, recognizing that meaning is transmitted not solely through language but also through the medium of gestures, facial expressions, and additional non-verbal channels. Multimodal analysis provides a rich tapestry of empirical evidence that enriches our comprehension

of interpersonal relationships, presenting a more sophisticated and nuanced perspective on how these relationships are established and sustained. By accounting for the emotional dimensions of communication, a multimodal approach can elucidate how emotions are conveyed and perceived within interpersonal pragmatics, a key component of understanding social interaction dynamics. Moreover, a multimodal perspective enhances the cultural astuteness of pragmatic analysis, as non-verbal cues can carry diverse meanings and connotations across different cultures.

Focusing on interpersonal pragmatic ability

Interpersonal pragmatics highlights pragmatic ability as key to effective communication. Ran (2017) defines it as the strategic use of language forms, strategies, and speech acts across contexts. This includes interpersonal pragmatic ability - crucial for managing social and intergroup dynamics in complex interactions.

This focus has revitalized academic discourse, underscoring the significance of interpersonal pragmatics in understanding and navigating relationships. As the field evolves, interpersonal pragmatic ability is becoming a cornerstone of communicative competence, emphasizing the need to teach these skills in language education to prepare learners for diverse social settings. This shift reflects the dynamic, context-driven nature of human communication and calls for scholars, educators, and practitioners to deepen their understanding of the skills vital for successful social interaction. By doing so, the field advances our collective ability to navigate the intricate dynamics of relationship-building across cultures.

Interdisciplinary collaborations and cross-cultural comparisons

The field of interpersonal pragmatics is increasingly embracing a cross-cultural perspective, recognizing the significant impact of cultural diversity on the nuances of politeness and interpersonal dynamics. Politeness is not a one-size-fits-all notion but rather a complex tapestry of cultural practices, social hierarchies, and personal identities. For example, interpersonal relationships that are colored by traditional Chinese philosophy and the modern linguistic landscape present a distinct spectrum of pragmatic complexities and prospects (Ning, 2024; Zhu, 2016). These elements are skillfully interwoven into the language we use to facilitate social interactions.

Beyond cultural comparisons, strengthening interdisciplinary collaborations - particularly with psychology and sociology - can enrich theoretical frameworks and expand the practical relevance of interpersonal pragmatics. From a psychological lens, integrating research on personality traits and cognitive processes can illuminate the micro-level mechanisms of relational work. This would bridge interpersonal pragmatics with social

psychology, clarifying how individual differences interact with cultural norms to shape communication. Sociological insights, on the other hand, can contextualize interpersonal practices within broader social structures.

By integrating psychological and sociological perspectives, interpersonal pragmatics can move beyond linguistic analysis to develop a more holistic understanding of relational communication - one that accounts for both individual agency and social context. This interdisciplinary approach is particularly valuable for unpacking the complexity of Chinese interpersonal dynamics, where cultural values, individual traits, and social structures intersect in unique ways.

Conclusion

Interpersonal pragmatics, a field examining language and non-verbal phenomena in social interactions, has evolved over the past decade. This paper clarifies its conceptual framework, reviews its research scope, applications, and challenges, and identifies key focus areas: interpersonal relationships, identity construction, and pragmatic applications across contexts. Studies on interpersonal relationships have emphasized the "relationship" turn, localized explorations, and multi-perspective analyses. Identity research has centered on language strategies, communicative contexts, and theoretical development. Discourse-level analyses have investigated interpersonal pragmatic effects and functions in both general and specialized contexts.

However, challenges persist, including an unclear distinction between interpersonal pragmatics and interpersonal relationships, an overreliance on qualitative methods, and limited theoretical and localized research. To address these issues, future research should adopt interdisciplinary approaches and diverse methodologies, fostering the innovation and development of interpersonal pragmatic theory within the Chinese context. This will advance both theoretical localization and practical applications, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of social interactions.

Declarations

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