

# Pragmatic Competence and Relevance

Elly Ifantidou



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## Pragmatic Competence and Relevance

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### **Volume 245**

Pragmatic Competence and Relevance  
by Elly Ifantidou

*For Deirdre Wilson*

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## Introduction

Titles of books can be misleading, and this one may be too. A book which has “Pragmatic Competence and Relevance” as its title could suggest a paradox ensuing from conflating two dissimilar systems: a system of knowledge (as in the Chomsky-an sense of “linguistic competence”) and a model of performance with its own principles, concepts, and procedures (as in the relevance theory account of pragmatics). So, what the book is about should first be made clear by preventing a possible misreading of its topic. I will then outline the central issues to be addressed.

This book is about utterance interpretation. More precisely, it is about the cognitive ability of the addressee to process a linguistic stimulus by drawing on his overall experience with the use of natural language (L1, L2), which includes linguistic competence, the ability to attribute mental states, and general world knowledge (e.g. encyclopedic knowledge, background assumptions and social norms). I am assuming, then, that pragmatic competence is a type of cognitive performance which interfaces with other human cognitive systems such as knowledge of logical rules, mind-reading of others’ intentions or beliefs, interpreting of each other’s behaviour, and other kinds of background knowledge, including knowledge of social conditions. Pragmatic competence can become manifest in instances of linguistic performance, namely the production and interpretation of verbal utterances. For the purposes of this work, data obtained from linguistic performance of communicators or addressees in the form of natural language output is used for assessing the development of pragmatic competence in L2.

It follows from the above that linguistic competence/performance and pragmatic competence are studied in this work as inter-related abilities. Pragmatic competence relies on linguistic competence for being the instrument of thought and public communication. For example, linguistic competence is required for pragmatic competence to become manifest in verbal communication. But linguistic performance relies not only on linguistic competence, but also on pragmatic competence for invoking humans’ inferential ability to process information, and utterances in particular. In view of the long-standing tradition in defining the competence/performance distinction, and in order to avoid misleading parallelisms with key concepts discussed in this work, I will consider Chomsky’s view, and next the relevance-theoretic position expressed by Robyn Carston, as closer to the position adopted in this book.

Chomsky's *competence/performance* distinction draws a line between knowledge of language as a property of the human mind, on the one hand, and "the actual use of language in concrete situations" (Chomsky 1965, 4, 1967/2006, 102), on the other. In other words, it distinguishes between a partly innate property of humans (linguistic competence), and acts of putting that competence/knowledge to use in producing/interpreting utterances in specific situations (linguistic performance). In *Rules and Representations*, Chomsky also discusses "pragmatic competence", which he characterizes as knowledge of the conditions, appropriate manner and purposes of language use, due to which communicators can relate "intentions and purposes to the linguistic means at hand" (Chomsky 1980, 59, 93, 224). In Chomsky's words,

... the person who knows the language knows the conditions under which it is appropriate to use a sentence, knows what purposes can be furthered by appropriate use of a sentence under given social conditions. For purposes of inquiry and exposition, we may proceed to distinguish "grammatical competence" from "pragmatic competence", restricting the ... second to knowledge of conditions and manner of appropriate use, in conformity with various purposes. Thus we may think of language as an instrument that can be put to use. ...We might say that pragmatic competence places language in the institutional setting of its use, relating intentions and purposes to the linguistic means at hand.

(Chomsky 1980, 224–225)

The above statement raises the pressing question of whether pragmatic competence is a system of (partly innate) knowledge, or an ability acquired by immersion in appropriate conditions of language use. An answer may be more safely obtained by examining the relation Chomsky envisaged between pragmatic competence and *performance*. If pragmatic competence is disassociated from performance, then its construal as a system of knowledge similar to grammatical knowledge (competence) would be reinforced. According to Chomsky "Performance provides data for the study of linguistic competence" (Chomsky 1967/2006, 104). This tells us nothing about pragmatic competence; but if performance, i.e. the actual observed use of language, provides data for the study of linguistic competence, it may be useful to know how, in Chomsky's terms, linguistic competence relates to pragmatic competence. According to Chomsky,

It makes sense, ... , to analyze the mental state of knowing a language into further components, in particular to distinguish what is sometimes called "grammatical competence" from "pragmatic competence."

(1980, 59; see also Chomsky 1980, 92, 224–225)

If pragmatic competence is a component of linguistic competence, as suggested by Chomsky above (see also Carston 2002, 10), linguistic performance should provide

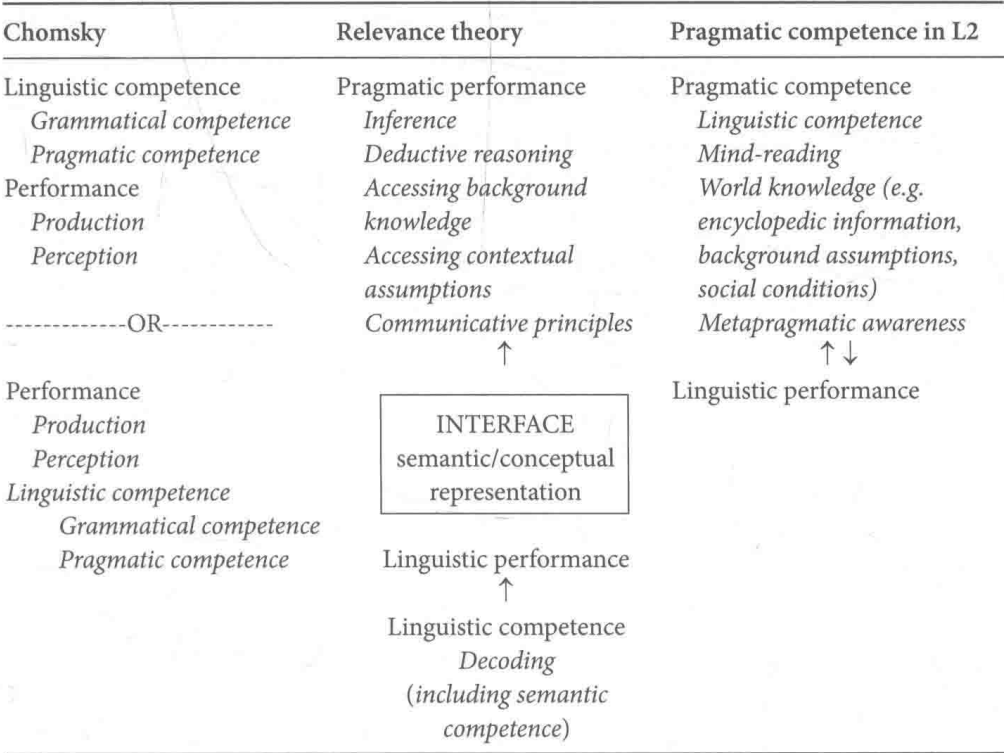
data for the study of pragmatic competence, too. So, according to Chomsky, pragmatic competence is part of linguistic competence, hence knowledge underpinned by innately specified principles, and can be studied by data obtained from linguistic performance.

The above assumptions leave several loopholes which would undermine a theoretical account of pragmatic competence, let alone its empirical assessment. Given that linguistic competence is an innate property of the human mind, can it really include pragmatic competence which is, according to Chomsky, knowledge acquired by (or from) users of language with specific intentions and purposes, under specific social conditions? Similarly to various details of the syntactic order in our grammatical systems, the knowledge of how language is used appropriately, for example, what counts as a warning or a threat or when a situation calls for an apology or a complaint, is not innate but acquired within-culture specific L1 settings, and then modified and developed in culture-specific L2 settings. If pragmatic competence enables humans to perform in concrete situations, how does pragmatic competence differ from linguistic performance? Are pragmatic competence and linguistic performance studied as distinct systems informing language acquisition, i.e. knowledge of the structure of our languages (grammatical and lexical knowledge) and of how to use language, on the one hand, and a system of production-perception which would actually do the interpretive work, on the other? This seems to raise a fundamental question: is Chomsky's "performance" an instance of language production where emphasis lies on the *product*, i.e. the utterance and the communicator, or an instance of language interpretation, where emphasis lies on the *process* of interpretation and the addressee? It seems that for Chomsky, performance covered quite indiscriminately "the actual ... use of language" observed in "how speech is produced, identified and understood" (Chomsky 1967/2006, 102). If so, it is not clear where pragmatic competence actually belongs: under linguistic competence – as one of the factors determining performance – or under performance – as behaviour manifested in speaking and perception (Chomsky 1979a, 49)? To further complicate matters, Chomsky advocated that a theory of performance (production or perception) which studies the manner in which competence is acquired or used (Chomsky 1979a, 49) should involve a theory of competence as an essential part (1967/2006, 139; Chomsky 1979b, 189). If competence is part of a model of performance, then may be pragmatic competence is, too.

Turning to relevance theory, a central question raised by Carston concerns whether *comprehension* is to be viewed as competence, performance or as an ability which requires both types of system (Carston 2002, 10). Within relevance theory, utterance interpretation is a performance system geared towards comprehension in real time, online processing of ostensive stimuli, such as utterances. To

engage in utterance interpretation, the addressee relies on two types of cognitive process, or cognitive performance: decoding and inference (see Carston 2002, 11). In the light of the relevance-driven comprehension mechanism which is a “doer” and applies its own concepts and procedures to the task of understanding utterances, relevance theory postulates a *pragmatic performance* which relates to *linguistic competence*, but indirectly so. The language faculty interfaces with the pragmatics module: the decoding processes of the language module deliver a “semantic” representation (or logical form) to the pragmatic inferential mechanisms which derive the speaker’s meaning. This interface representation surfaces at the point of contact between linguistic competence (which includes semantic competence) and pragmatic performance (see Carston 2002, 11). Clearly, there is a linguistic “performance” system that is responsible for deriving the logical form (or the semantic representation) which is the input to the pragmatic system. This is usually called the “parser” or the language module. On this construal, pragmatic performance is *sub-personal* in that it is unconscious and automatic, and processes interpretations which are, presumably, equivalent to psychological theories involving personal-level explanations of human actions (Carston 2002, 8). The theorist’s conscious, normative rationalizations of unconscious inferential processes make them, at a psychological level, accessible to awareness and verbally reportable by L2 learners.

For the purposes of this work, linguistic competence is studied as a tool for delivering pragmatic competence in real-time, online processing. On this assumption, pragmatic competence surfaces in linguistic performance (i.e. it becomes manifest in verbal communication) and provides insights into the inferential abilities of the L2 learner/addressee. Together with further cognitive processes, such as meta-representing others’ beliefs and activating epistemic vigilance, linguistic performance can provide data for the empirical study of pragmatic competence in L2 in the same way that non-linguistic performance of 3–4 year-old children in psycholinguistic experiments can provide insights into their developing pragmatic competence (for example, see work on non-linguistic evidential reasoning by Papafragou et al. 2007). In the view developed and endorsed in this work, linguistic and pragmatic competences are related, with linguistic performance providing data for the study of pragmatic and linguistic competence (for empirical evidence, see Ifantidou 2011, 2013a). As shown in the table below (where italics indicate postulates *subservient to* postulates in standard block notation), pragmatic competence is, for the purposes of this work, a type of performance which involves processing of information via mind-reading and *linguistic competence*, can be exhibited via *performance* in verbal communication and for L2 purposes, it can be assessed via metapragmatic representation of information.



From the discussion above, pragmatic competence emerges as a process of utterance interpretation which is clearly a quite different matter from other accounts within interlanguage pragmatics (for example, see Kasper and Blum-Kulka 1993; Trosborg 1995; Barron 2003; Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford 2005; Schauer 2009) and the broader field of second language acquisition. Situated within the assumptions and methodologies of current cognitive science, relevance theory postulates a collaborative and unified network of performance sub-systems, such as the decoding system, the inferential system, the deductive device, accessibility systems of background knowledge and contextual assumptions or accessibility to the understanding system of the addressee (or the communicator). As emphasized in Carston (2002, 6–8), pragmatic interpretation rests on mechanistic interacting of the above sub-personal systems, and on *sub-personal* activities which are performed blindly and automatically by the comprehension mechanism. For example, inferential processes interact with other sub-personal systems such as background knowledge, in a complex sub-personal system which performs its computations on the input it is given – an utterance, or other ostensive stimulus (Carston 2002, 7).

In this work, the input is an editorial or a news report. As pointed out earlier, utterance interpretation is viewed as an inferential process whose workings are

inaccessible to consciousness, albeit not its interpretive output. If unconscious inferential processes mediating input and output representations are indeed distinct from the conscious rationalizations of the personal-level theorist (Carston 2002, 8), raising pragmatic competence-as-spontaneous-inference in learning environments should be a feasible, albeit challenging, task. Recall that the relevance-driven comprehension mechanism is *sub-personal*: it is fast, automatic and domain-specific, i.e. specialized for the task of discourse comprehension and inferences drawn about the speaker's communicative intentions (see Sperber 2000). As a result, it computes an input representation such as "he said that land reform is more about access to the countryside than anything else",<sup>1</sup> and yields an output representation such as "he intends me to believe that (he wants me to believe that) land reform is an utter flop." A *personal-level* explanation developed by the theorist might have the form "his reason for saying that land reform is more about access to the countryside than anything else is that he wants me to believe that the land reform is an utter flop." The data in Chapter 6 of this book provides support for the assumption that, while the workings of the sub-personal machinery and its internal online processes are inaccessible to consciousness, the results of their interpretive activities in the form of outputs such as "he means that land reform is of little use" are accessible to consciousness, and can be put to use towards raising pragmatic competence.

In the light of the redefined distinction between pragmatic competence and linguistic competence/performance I have sketched above, the book sets out to explore a unified approach to pragmatic competence that has hardly been explored on experimental grounds or in teaching practices. In the chapters that follow, I shall propose a pragmatic account that can be put to use and bear effects which are empirically attested. In doing so, I will often consider theoretical approaches as well as practical repercussions of what seems to be a single pragmatic phenomenon, but given the different distinctions appropriate to different approaches, whether within socially-oriented or cognitive-oriented accounts, comparisons and assessments should be approached with caution. For example, assessing the validity of a particular theoretical account on its own terms, say Construction Grammar, is one thing; considering its utility towards an empirical account of online utterance processing is quite another, and it is, in fact, the approach adopted in this book. Similarly, within the broad field of linguistic theory and analysis, two accounts are more likely to be complementary rather than in competition, and this is the line of enquiry I would like to pursue.

In Chapter 1, I start by defining language, the semantics/pragmatics divide, and pragmatic competence against the backdrop of relevance theory, as internalist

1. From "Land Reform Won't Create a Scottish Paradise", by Michael Fry, *The Scotsman*, 2 August 2013.



cognitive performance systems. In Chapter 2, I survey L2 accounts of pragmatic competence by making a fairly uncontroversial, albeit often misplaced, distinction between pragmatic awareness and metapragmatic awareness. In Chapter 3, I examine genre theories and their relation to pragmatic meaning within the L2 perspective set out in Chapter 2, ending with a pragmatic-cognitive account of genre which draws on central relevance-theoretic assumptions introduced in previous chapters. Chapter 4 introduces the relevance-theoretic tools of analysis, namely, optimal relevance and epistemic vigilance, and puts them to use in applications designed to raise pragmatic competence by using editorials and news reports as prompt texts. In Chapter 5, I redefine pragmatic competence and show how it figures in genre-driven applications whose rationale is explained by the relevance-theoretic tools of analysis. The empirical evidence for positive effects of the proposed theoretical and practical apparatus in real learning environments is presented in Chapter 6. Chapter 7 offers a summary of highlights, and conclusions.