

# Pragmatic Intuition as Internalized Pragmatic Competence

Yunfeng Shi<sup>1</sup>, Yuhong Xie<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Country Research College, Honghe University, Mengzi, China

<sup>2</sup>Ethnic Culture Research College, Honghe University, Mengzi, China

Email: shiyf@swu.edu.cn, 1731708723@qq.com

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## Abstract

Pragmatic intuition is a keen sense of language, especially the use of language. Pragmatic competence is the ability to use language to express and comprehend in a specific context. This paper aims to demonstrate that the core part of language intuition is pragmatic intuition, which is essentially a kind of pragmatic competence and an internalized expression of pragmatic competence. Pragmatic intuition can be reflected in a language user's intuitive interpretation of conversational implicature, understanding of preconceptions, control of speech acts, and conscious adherence to or deliberate violation of many pragmatic principles. It can also enable communicators to detect and correct deviations and errors in speech almost instinctively and instantaneously. When contextual involvement is necessary, it seems to be able to automatically select the most relevant context, helping communicators express and understand language correctly and appropriately, and ultimately to achieve communicative success.

## Keywords

Pragmatic Intuition, Language Intuition, Internalized Pragmatic Competence, Context

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## 1. Introduction

The linguistic knowledge and pragmatic knowledge of many ordinary people are latent or even unconscious. These people are able to use and understand language well by language intuition. However, the task of linguistic researchers is to summarize this latent knowledge into a conscious body of knowledge and use it to explain linguistic phenomena and their usage patterns. Pragmatic intuition is the language intuition concerned by pragmatics, the study of language use in

context. The pragmatic intuition is implicitly or explicitly involved in expressing of appropriate words and understanding of appropriate meanings in a given context.

Many scholars have studied language intuition. Among them, [Chomsky \(1957\)](#) first introduced the concept of language intuition from a psychological perspective. [Sinclair \(1981\)](#) argued that language intuition is the ability to reflect on the structure, function and usage of language. [Devitt \(2006\)](#) pointed out that the intuition of speech content is influenced by semantic and pragmatic information and language structure, and that the intuition adopted by grammarians and pragmatics is not significantly discontinuous. [Newmeyer \(2020\)](#) attempts to use corpus data to verify the evidential use of language intuition. However, relatively few scholars have directly studied pragmatic intuition. [Fischer & Engelhardt's \(2016\)](#) interpretation of pragmatic intuition builds on the fact that propagation activation in semantic memory repeats subtle pragmatic reasoning, that reasoning about these typical properties requires consideration of contextual cues, and that this repetition is achieved through the interplay of automatic and attentive processes.

This study begins with an analysis of the relationship between language intuition and pragmatic intuition and aims to demonstrate that pragmatic intuition is the core part of language intuition. Pragmatic intuition is essentially a kind of internalized expression of pragmatic competence that enables communicators to detect and correct deviations or errors in speech almost instinctively and instantaneously. When contextual involvement is necessary, it seems to be able to automatically select the most relevant context, helping communicators express and understand language correctly and appropriately. As a kind of internalized pragmatic competence, pragmatic intuition plays a significant and favorable role in choosing context and interpreting implicature and ultimately helping achieve communicative success.

## 2. Language Intuition and Pragmatic Intuition

Language intuition can be regarded as an intuitive judgment of language by language users. [Chomsky \(1957\)](#) referred to intuitive judgments about whether sentences are grammatical or not as language intuition, which he considered as an innate language competence, part of the language production mechanism, and empirical data used by linguists to analyze language. [Newmeyer \(2020\)](#) found that if a sufficiently large corpus is used, the findings based on the data of language intuition are the same as the corpus data of conversations, grammars built on language intuition are not significantly different from grammars built on corpus data of conversations, and language intuition are no less relevant as evidence for grammars than the data of conversational interaction.

As a constantly changing ability, language intuition is both acquirable and dynamically evolving. Language input contributes to its production and development, while language output contributes to its performance and shaping.

[Santana \(2020\)](#) argues that language intuition arises from a process involving competence: the speaker considers a sentence, which is an input to language competence, which then processes the sentence and decides whether the sentence is grammatical or not in a rapid, unconscious operation, and this decision sends a signal to the conscious cognitive system, which signals an intuitive judgment about the sentence. Therefore, the close causal relationship between language intuition and language competence dictates that language intuition must carry information about language competence. It can be argued that factors such as an individual's innate quality of language learning, the acquisition of appropriate theoretical knowledge of language, and adequate language practice all contribute to the generation and development of language intuition.

Language intuition is related to linguistic knowledge and can be divided into semantic intuition, grammatical intuition and phonological intuition. Language intuition can be understood as a personal intuitive judgment of how good or bad a certain language expression is, including whether it is appropriate, relevant, concise, correct or not, and even how to modify a poor or even wrong expression. In addition to semantic intuition, grammatical intuition and phonological intuition, pragmatic intuition should also be included in the language intuition. Many studies concerning language intuition involve pragmatic knowledge and typical research fields of pragmatics such as deixis, speech acts and context. Function and usage are important aspects of linguistic phenomena and belong to the pragmatic level. This means that pragmatic intuition is a core component of language intuition. Language intuition is firstly, the learner's grammatical knowledge, linguistic knowledge, perception and understanding of the form and meaning of language, and the organic integration of emotional aspects conveyed by language itself, beauty and wisdom, for example; secondly, it is the learner's ability to perceive, understand and judge speech acts, and the ability to use language appropriately to perform different speech acts such as apologies and invitations; finally, language intuition is a subconscious and dynamic continuum, and its acquisition, strength and weakness are not innate or inherent, but are influenced by external factors such as contextual and individual differences. All of these ideas are related to the pragmatic aspect of language intuition.

Pragmatic intuition is included in language intuition, and is the core part of language intuition. Pragmatic intuition includes the pragmatic intuition of expressing and the pragmatic intuition of understanding. The former refers to the ability to intuitively express oneself appropriately without deliberate preparation in certain communicative contexts, while the latter refers to the ability to intuitively understand the implied meaning of the other person's words in certain contexts. This is a common phenomenon in linguistic communication. The purpose of linguistic activity is to use linguistic elements and structural rules to form, express, and understand the meaning of language. [Mori & thi Nguyen \(2019\)](#) argue that the foundation of pragmatics is formed through the theoretical constructs provided by intuition and introspection. When language activity

reaches a high state of proficiency, our attention is focused on linguistic meaning, the use of linguistic devices becomes a subconscious activity, and knowledge of linguistic knowledge such as linguistic elements and structural rules becomes intuitive awareness. Thus, pragmatic intuition can be summarized as the subconsciousization of linguistic activity and the intuition of linguistic knowledge, which is an internal, cognitive and intuitive ability to use language.

Just as there are high and low levels of pragmatic competence, there are also strong and weak linguistic intuitions. It is based on the knowledge of language and culture and the practice of language application, and is enhanced with the enrichment of knowledge of language and culture and the strengthening of the practice of language application, and eventually becomes an ability to perceive and judge language keenly, that is, an internalized pragmatic competence. People who have a strong pragmatic intuition are more sensitive to language, and can grasp and use language more effectively and have a higher level of pragmatic competence. The core of pragmatic competence is pragmatic intuition, which is the ability to perceive implicature or meaning between the lines, as well as the ability to intuitively understand the full range of speech.

### **3. Functions of Pragmatic Intuition**

#### **3.1. Pragmatic Intuition and the Choice of Context**

Pragmatic intuition plays a key role in the choice of context. Pragmatic intuition determines the way people interpret implicature, i.e. meaning beyond the mere words or between the lines, because a sentence may be interpreted in multiple ways depending on the specific context, and the choice of context determines whether the meaning can be interpreted appropriately and correctly or not. As a language competence, pragmatic intuition selects the appropriate context when the context is needed for communication. If we divide contexts into pragmatic context and cognitive context and compare them to the left hand and the right hand of a person, sometimes the left hand is more appropriate and sometimes the right hand is more efficient, and the right hand knows when to help deftly when the left hand does something and vice versa; some things can be done with either the left hand or the right hand, and some things can be done with both hands for the best results. If we look at what makes people “do what they need to do”, it is their cognitive and pragmatic competence, which is commonly referred to as the experience of using words and the senses and intuition gained from that experience. By the same token, both cognitive and pragmatic contexts can help in interpreting some meanings, while for others, a combination of both can be more effective and perfect.

If pragmatic and cognitive contexts do not automatically jump into action, what activates and appropriately selects contexts at the right time? There are many studies on contexts, but few answers to this question. Let us assume that it is the pragmatic intuition, which selects the context. The pragmatic intuition comes from the application of language and the acquisition of relevant cultural

knowledge, and is sublimated in it, thus becoming a language-specific cognitive and pragmatic competence that is distinct from and above language. The listener's pragmatic competence is expressed in finding and actually choosing a context for a given discourse that allows her to interpret it appropriately. Context is not an ability; it is a stock of language-related information, a material or immaterial environment that can be either concrete or abstract. The choice and use of context is within the control of the speaker, and to some extent represents the speaker's pragmatic competence. This pragmatic competence includes pragmatic intuition, a perception or feeling based on the experience of language use and knowledge of language and culture. This intuition is extremely acute, from intervening and completing contextual selection to successfully interpreting the meaning beyond the actual words in a very short period of time.

Language intuition at the cognitive level includes intuition at the pragmatic level, i.e., pragmatic intuition. [Sperber & Wilson \(1995\)](#) argue that the contexts used to process discourse are not pre-given but are generated by selection during the communicative process, and that the principle governing this selection is the principle of relevance, and that the selection and generation of contexts must be based on relevance. Their principle of relevance consists of the cognitive principle of maximal relevance and the communicative principle of optimal relevance. Clearly, in their view it is the relevance that selects the context. It is worth noting that they ([Sperber & Wilson, 1995: pp. 119-123](#)) use the word "intuition" and its derivatives "intuitive" and "intuitively" several times in their explanation of relevance and degree of relevance, and conclude that "the intuition of relevance that needs to be stated is not the intuition of the presence or absence of a relevance, but the intuition of the degree of relevance". As we can see, it is the pragmatic intuition that helps determine the degree of relevance and thus the choice of context.

### 3.2. Pragmatic Intuition and the Interpretation of Implicature

The pragmatic intuition not only selects the context, but also helps to decipher the implicature. [Qian Guanlian \(2002: p. 132\)](#), when discussing intellectual interference, says: "If there is a model of pragmatic inference, then perhaps this model is the process by which the listener constantly seeks and grasps the appropriate language intuition." He argues that this process draws on four basic factors: 1) starting from a minimal matter logic; 2) by virtue of a pre-existing knowledge structure or schema; 3) with reference to the context; and 4) with reference to the symbolic bundle attached to the speaker. These four factors act in the process of pragmatic inference in a mobile, natural, and rapid manner, without prioritization, based only on the speaker's intuition of appropriateness, which one is appropriate to intervene, and if it fails, the intuition of appropriateness will select another one to join in the pragmatic inference until the appropriate implication is found. The "intuition of appropriateness" here is the pragmatic intuition, while the four factors involved in the process of pragmatic inference can be attributed to the pragmatic and cognitive contexts.

Pragmatic intuition is involved in the acquisition of pragmatic information without context. Maldei et al. (2020) argue that pragmatic intuition not only assists people in accurately perceiving semantic coherence in major life decisions concerning linguistic communication, but it further drives people to use tacit knowledge to determine meaning in context. Context can be understood as an information resource stored in the human cognitive world, a vast repository of information. The relevant specific contexts are brought to life by pragmatic intuition in the inferring process of interpreting implicature and are appropriately selected, extracted and used in the process of pragmatic inference. The process of selecting the context and interpreting the extra-verbal meaning by the language subject with the help of pragmatic intuition can be illustrated as follows.

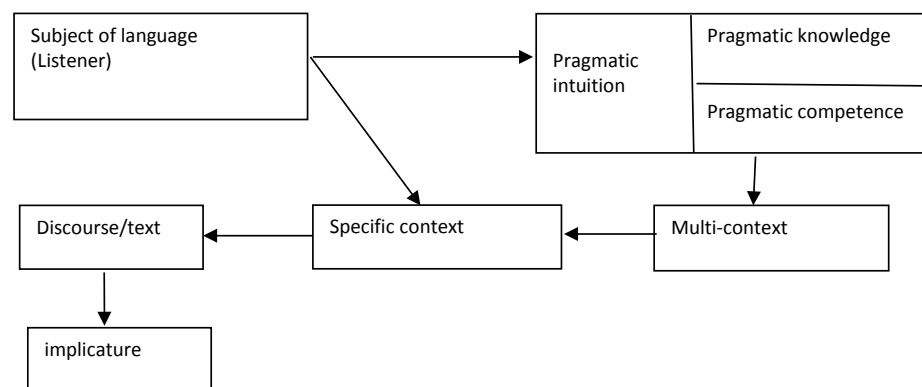
According to Figure 1, there are two possible paths for the language subject (the listener) to interpret the meaning: 1) the direct path, in which the meaning is derived from the discourse with the help of a given specific context (this context does not need to be selected); 2) the indirect path, in which the meaning is obtained by selecting a specific context from many contexts with the help of the pragmatic intuition and the pragmatic knowledge and ability that are the components of the pragmatic intuition. The following is a conversation between a father and his daughter in elementary school.

Daughter: Dad, I'm done with my homework.

Dad: Let's go "herding calves".

Daughter: Yeah!

The daughter's words in the dialogue are obviously not just a statement of fact, and the father's response is not away from a bull's-eye, otherwise the daughter would not be happy to "yeah". With the help of their pragmatic intuition the father and daughter choose the specific context needed to interpret each other's words: the daughter is playful, but she is asked to finish her homework before going out to play; whenever she finishes doing her assignment and is released, she jumps like a calf and happily heads for playing, and since the daughter was born in the Year of Ox (in Chinese zodiac), playing is jokingly referred to as "herding calves" by the father.



**Figure 1.** The process of the language subject's selecting the context and interpreting the implicature with the help of the pragmatic intuition.

## 4. Pragmatic Intuition as Internalized Pragmatic Competence

### 4.1. Pragmatic Competence and Pragmatic Intuition

Pragmatic competence is the ability to use language to communicate in specific contexts, and its definition varies but is similar. Pragmatic competence is the ability of a communicator to use various types of knowledge to implement and understand socially appropriate behavior in the specific context of speech. Pragmatic competence is not an external or additional competence, nor is it subordinate to grammatical knowledge or discourse organization, but rather it is a language competence that coexists with knowledge of language form, texts and discourse, and interacts with language organization. Language users' pragmatic competence is associated with context, and it includes subcompetencies such as the ability to negotiate communicative goals and contextual meaning, the ability to co-construct politeness and identity, cross-cultural competence and meta-pragmatic competence. All these are expressed in two aspects of verbal interaction and paralinguistic interaction. The former refers to topic control, turn-taking, discourse organization, discourse adjustment, remedial strategies, etc.; and the latter includes knowledge of rhyme, nonverbal communicative knowledge and subordination. From the perspective of pragmatics, pragmatic competence is the ability to choose the right context and use language to express meaning correctly on the speaker's side, and to interpret the meaning, especially the implied meaning of the other party's speech appropriately, logically and completely and contribute to a successful communication in the end.

Pragmatic intuition can determine the acceptability and appropriateness of language, which in turn affects the expression and understanding of language. People judge the acceptability and appropriateness of language based on their pragmatic intuition. Differences in age, gender, education, and social background can lead to differences in perceptions of language, which in turn can lead to differences in language use and acceptability. A more acceptable language is one that is more standardized, natural, and easy to understand and speak or write. Normative language is acceptable to the speakers' pragmatic intuition and is therefore acceptable; conversely, non-normative language is rejected by the speakers' pragmatic intuition and is less acceptable. In Japanese, some sentence patterns are exclusively for women, so if a man uses such patterns, it will give the impression that he is "effeminate". Therefore, the choice of language, the degree of acceptance, and the effect of comprehension are different for both speakers and listeners due to different pragmatic intuition.

The pragmatic intuition monitors language, as if it were an overriding ability. Gardner's (1993) multiple intelligences theory suggests that linguistic competence includes the ability to reflect, that is, the ability to use language to reflect on or monitor language activity. When a person asks, "Do you mean X as in Y?" it means that the person is using language to reflect on the language that the other person has used before. This is the ability to use and interpret language.

This is similar to asking “What do you mean by a fool?” when one knows the literal meaning of “You’re a fool”.

In the course of speech, communicative partners often revise or repair what they have just said based on their pragmatic intuition. Conversational revision is a common phenomenon that occurs in verbal communication when both parties take turns in speaking, and correction of deviation is a part of the analysis of conversational structure that requires pragmatic intuition. According to [Schegloff et al. \(1977\)](#), in addition to true correction, almost anything that needs to be said and processed again, such as eliminating misunderstandings, clarifying mishearings, searching for words, self-editing, etc., can be counted as a deviation. [Markee \(2000\)](#) refers to such corrections as “comprehension checks”, which can check for pronunciation, grammatical errors, or semantic inappropriateness, and can rely heavily on pragmatic intuition for correction of semantic inappropriateness. Corrections can be made by the communicator for more effective expression or for better comprehension.

In terms of the interactivity of verbal communication, the Conversation modification is a form of conversational regulation. Deviations in language are mainly relative to the speaker. Correction of deviations, on the other hand, can be done either by the speaker himself or by the listener. In the speaker’s case, when he or she is not sure how to express his or her thoughts clearly, or when he or she feels that his or her speech or the information provided is not accurate enough, he or she needs to make corrections repeatedly so that he or she can express the information more clearly and accurately and make it easier for the other party to understand. Of course, as far as the listener is concerned, if he thinks that the information provided by the speaker is incorrect, incomplete, or even unintelligible, he can either remind or guide the speaker to make corrections, and the role of corrections at this time is “clarification requests” or “confirmation checks”. Alternatively, the speaker can be directly corrected, and the role of such a correction is “verification of meaning”.

Pragmatic intuition is at work as an essential linguistic competence. Pragmatic intuition is the ability to judge the appropriateness of a given language, as well as the ability to reflect on and correct the language. The communicative competence proposed by [Hymes \(1972\)](#) also includes, to a large extent, pragmatic competence, as it is interpreted as the ability of a speaker to know how to use appropriate linguistic forms and strategies in a given context to carry out a particular communicative purpose, in addition to grammatical competence, in order to achieve communicative success. [Bachman \(1990\)](#) refers to the ability to use knowledge about language and to use it in communication as communicative language competence, which is composed of three components: pragmatic, strategic, and psycho-physiological mechanisms. This communicative language competence is characterized by 1) sensitivity to differences in dialects or language variants, 2) sensitivity to differences in linguistic domains, 3) sensitivity to the naturalness and appropriateness of language expressions, and 4) sensitivity to culturally colored referents and rhetorical devices. These elements of commu-



nicative language competence reflect the communicator's sensitivity to, or control over, the pragmatic norms determined by the contextual features of specific language use. This sensitivity and control are very similar to the pragmatic intuition discussed in this paper, and the fact that pragmatic competence is part of communicative language competence also strongly supports the view that "pragmatic intuition is a pragmatic competence".

#### 4.2. Pragmatic Intuition as Internalized Pragmatic Competence

Pragmatic intuition is not only an ordinary pragmatic competence, but also an internalized pragmatic competence. Internalization is the process of making a code of conduct or a way of behaving part of one's subconscious or non-subconscious mind; it is the result of learning or some kind of repeated experience. Internalization is another important concept in developmental psychology, which refers to a process of taking in the character or norms of others and adopting them as one's own. In generative linguistics, internalization refers to the process by which a speaker gradually acquires knowledge of the structure of his or her language, especially when children acquire language. Chomsky (1986) sees language as a cognitive system internalized in the human brain, and the ultimate goal of linguistic research is to reveal the essential features of this internalized linguistic system that enables humans to express and understand each other using their native language. He also distinguishes between the internalized language and the externalized language approaches to linguistic research, which he himself certainly endorses and practiced, because he believes that the internalized language approach uses the native speaker's intuition about the grammaticality of the language used or He argues that the internalized language approach uses native speakers' intuition or sense of grammaticality to explore the universal rules of a particular grammar. Cutting & Fordyce (2021), in their study of L2 pragmatic competence, argue that the shift from short term memory input to long term memory intake is a gradual internalization of differences in pragmatic competence

Since the language that language learners and communicators acquire and use is the internalized language, and they learn and acquire the knowledge and skills to use the language and internalize them as part of their cognitive system, it is logical that a keen sense of using the language, or pragmatic intuition, is internalized as an ability to use the language, i.e., pragmatic competence. Pragmatic intuition is the subconsciousization of language activity and the intuition of language knowledge, and is an internal, cognitive and intuitive ability to use language. In other words, the internalized language practice and linguistic knowledge is transformed into a pragmatic competence, i.e., internalized pragmatic competence.

### 5. Conclusion

In summary, this paper looks at and studies pragmatic intuition from the viewpoint of pragmatics. Pragmatic intuition is a keen sense of language, especially in

a particular context, and can be reflected in a language user's intuitive recognition of deixis, interpretation of conversational implicature, understanding of preconceptions, control of speech acts, and conscious adherence to or deliberate violation of many pragmatic principles.

Pragmatic intuition is essentially a kind of internalized pragmatic competence, or an internalized expression of pragmatic competence. It is not innate, but arises with the acquisition of language knowledge and language skills. It becomes reinforced and strengthened with the richness and proficiency of the communicator's experiences using language, and is eventually internalized as an innate or subconscious competence. When internalized by language users, it becomes a higher-level pragmatic or cognitive pragmatic competence that exists in their cognitive world, in which case pragmatic intuition in turn plays a significant and favorable role in language use. As an internalized pragmatic competence, it enables communicators to detect and correct deviations and errors in speech almost instinctively and instantaneously. When contextual involvement is required, it seems to be able to automatically "leap out" to select the most relevant context helping the communicator to express and understand the language correctly and appropriately, and ultimately to achieve communicative success.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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