

Pragmatics and Its Applications in Interdisciplinary Studies: A Critical Reappraisal of Reception in Arabic Linguistic Research

Houria HELLABI
abou bekr belkaid university
Tlemcen, Algeria
halabihouria@gmail.com

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Abstract

Pragmatics has long functioned as a shared analytical orientation across multiple fields of language study, and it remains, more than half a century after its consolidation as a “science of usage,” a remarkably resilient framework for studying language in use. Its resilience owes much to its capacity for renewed adaptation to linguistic, social, and cognitive questions rather than to any doctrinal unity among its theories. While the reception, adaptation, and productive extension of pragmatic theory in Western scholarship is well documented, its uptake within Arabic linguistic research – particularly its diffusion into discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, argumentation theory, and corpus linguistics – has not been systematically mapped. This paper addresses that gap by tracing the theoretical foundations of pragmatics, from speech act theory to its interdisciplinary deployment, and by examining, through an illustrative corpus-based case study of Arabic administrative discourse, how pragmatic and corpus-linguistic methods are being combined in contemporary Arabic scholarship. The paper argues that Arabic pragmatic writing has so far excelled in theoretical importation and disciplinary description but remains comparatively underdeveloped in empirical, corpus-driven, and politically engaged discourse

research. The paper closes by identifying the most salient markers of innovation in Arabic pragmatic linguistics and by outlining directions for future research.

Keywords: pragmatics; interdisciplinary studies; discourse analysis; critical discourse analysis; corpus linguistics; Arabic linguistics.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

Pragmatics constitutes an important station in the history of linguistic research oriented toward the study of language in use. Since the mid-twentieth century it has been regarded as a new science of usage, and despite the multiplicity of its theories and the diversity of its increasingly fragmented fields of operation, it has retained an appeal that many other Western linguistic theories have not (Recanati, n.d.; Moeschler & Reboul, n.d.). This resilience is arguably due to its capacity for continual, renewed adaptation to the linguistic, social, and cognitive issues raised by language in use. The pragmatic perspective functions, accordingly, as a fundamental gateway for analyzing texts and discourses in terms of both form and content, and it underlies some of the most prominent contemporary approaches to language: computational corpus linguistics, conversation analysis, critical discourse analysis, and studies of political discourse, audience rhetoric, and the new rhetoric.

The interdisciplinary character of pragmatic discourse analysis follows directly from this orientation. The analyst seeks to uncover the linguistic, social, and cultural structures that a linguistic community shares through the medium of the sign – and, increasingly, through the media forms supported by digital and artificial-intelligence technologies – while probing the underlying purposes of discourse and its implicit meanings. At the pedagogical level, both classical and second-generation pragmatic concepts inform text analysis, the pedagogy of authentic texts, and studies of classroom discourse.

1.2 Aim and Research Questions

The reception of pragmatic theory in Western linguistics, philosophy, and discourse studies is well charted. What remains comparatively under-examined is how this body of theory has been received, adapted, and extended within Arabic linguistic scholarship specifically – and with what

consequences for research on the Arabic language from the standpoints of positing (وضع), usage, and acquisition. This paper addresses that gap. It asks three questions: (1) What are the most salient features of the reception of pragmatic theory within Arabic-language research? (2) What is the value of this reception in light of recent developments in research on Arabic language issues? And (3) what are the most prominent markers of innovation in Arabic pragmatic linguistic writing, at both the theoretical and applied levels?

1.3 Structure of the Paper

Section 2 revisits the foundational concepts of pragmatics – its competing definitions, its disputed disciplinary boundaries, and the emergence of speech act theory from Austin through Searle – as a necessary basis for the discussion that follows. Section 3 turns to the deployment of pragmatics across interdisciplinary fields: models of interdisciplinarity, political discourse and argumentation analysis, critical discourse analysis, text linguistics and the new rhetoric, and corpus linguistics, closing with an illustrative case study of corpus-based research on Arabic administrative discourse. Section 4 answers the three research questions directly, states the paper’s contribution, and outlines its limitations and directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Foundations: Preliminary Concepts and Conceptions

2.1 Defining Pragmatics: Competing Traditions

The earliest commonly cited definition of pragmatics is Morris’s (1938) characterization of it as a branch of semiology – the science of signs – concerned with the relationship between signs and their users. This is a broad definition, extending beyond the linguistic domain into the semiotic and, arguably, beyond the human world altogether, since the universe teems with the signs that human beings use, intentionally or incidentally, to signify meaning. Recanati (n.d.) likewise treats pragmatics as the study of language use in discourse, with all its social, cultural, and cognitive implications; on this view pragmatics is concerned with meaning as reference and with linguistic forms whose meaning is determined only through use. A related conception, closer to the communicative-linguistic tradition, treats language as the use and circulation of signs between two or more parties according to rules that govern communicative dynamics. Pragmatics, on this cluster of views, is not a purely linguistic science confined to surface structure but, as Moeschler and Reboul (n.d.) affirm, a science of communication permitting the

description, analysis, and construction of communicative strategies among interlocutors under varying conditions.

This is the same orientation that runs through Grice's (1975) program for linking a theory of meaning to a theory of inference from the standpoint of the intentional nature of communication. It is also worth recalling Fairclough's (1989) distinction between a broad European conception of pragmatics as a general science of language use and a narrower Anglo-American conception, in which pragmatics is merely one sub-branch among several – alongside sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics – concerned with usage.

2.2 The Boundary Problem in Pragmatics

This initial, logic-centered conception reduced pragmatics to an offshoot of general semiology in its symbolic dimension – a semiology that views language in an idealized manner removed from the complexity of social interaction. The multiplicity of theoretical points of reference, and the divergence of their philosophical and linguistic commitments, has made the field difficult to delimit: to say “I am a pragmatist” raises difficulties that do not attach to identifying oneself as a grammarian, rhetorician, psychologist, or sociologist. Because pragmatics addresses how the mind connects meaning with context, and what lies outside the strictly linguistic, its practitioners have had to expand into cognate fields to approach the problems of linguistic communication – prompting some scholars to characterize pragmatics as a “wastebasket” category for whatever is left over in linguistics proper. Grice (1975) himself described pragmatics as a theory of performance rather than of competence, a characterization some have read as denying it the status of a rigorous linguistic science – notwithstanding the linguistic turn it underwent at the hands of Benveniste, Ducrot, and Anscombe under the banner of “integrated pragmatics.”

2.3 The Emergence of Speech Act Theory

In its emergence and grounding, pragmatics owes a decisive debt to Austin, who, responding to the logical-positivist philosophers on the semantic function of language and its relation to logical predication, delivered the lectures at Oxford (1952–1954) and Harvard (1955) that were posthumously published as *How to Do Things with Words* (Austin, n.d./1962). The importance of Austin's intervention lies in his rejection of the view that language merely describes external facts, to be judged true or false according to correspondence with reality.

Wittgenstein (1953) is widely regarded as Austin's inspiration: his studies of language games heralded speech act theory and inaugurated a linguistic turn that criticized Frege's and Russell's treatment of the relationship between language and logic, while affirming the necessity of examining the actual use of expressions to arrive at meaning. On this view, speech act theory transcends the classical, correspondence-based conception of language. Austin considered that classical stance – built, in his view, on illusion – a descriptive fallacy (Al-Khalifa, 2021), particularly given the vast number of utterances that do not describe the world or state a fact about it but rather accomplish an action with individual and social consequences. The sentence “You are free,” although declarative on its surface, is transformed by the context of its utterance – spoken by a master to his slave – into a performative act of manumission, equivalent to “You are no longer a slave.”

This functional approach to language ties it closely to two dimensions of human nature: creative power, and the mental capacity that shapes both the structure of the world and one's stance toward it. The remainder of this section elaborates the core apparatus of speech act theory as developed by Austin and refined by Searle.

2.4 Locutionary, Illocutionary, and Perlocutionary Acts

Austin distinguished two broad types of utterance in verbal communication. The first comprises declarative, descriptive statements judgeable as true or false. The second comprises performative acts, felicitous or infelicitous depending on the conditions of their accomplishment – as in naming, bequeathing, apologizing, wagering, advising, promising, or threatening. Such acts are accomplished only when their felicity conditions are met. Austin specified two kinds of condition: a constitutive condition, requiring a socially accepted conventional procedure authorizing the act (as in marriage, divorce, sale, or gift) and its performance by duly qualified persons under the appropriate circumstances; and normative conditions, which are not strictly necessary but complete the act's ideal, unabused form – as when the speaker is sincere in the thoughts, feelings, and intentions to which the act commits them. This account proved imperfect, since the two types overlap in actual usage and speaker intention is often difficult to discern, requiring reliance on the conventional, positional signification of the expressions used.

Austin revised this view by distinguishing three levels of the speech act: the locutionary act, the ordered arrangement of uttered sounds within the verbal chain according to a grammatical composition that achieves reference; the illocutionary act, the meaning conveyed beyond the literal meaning of the utterance; and the perlocutionary act, the effect produced by the illocutionary act, whether behavioral or linguistic. Austin treated the illocutionary act as the core of the entire performative process, developing a typology of illocutionary force. On this basis the speech act – as the basic unit of discourse – divides into declarative-descriptive acts, which report reality, and performative-effective acts, which change the reality to which the addressee belongs. The utterance “Thank you” illustrates the three levels at once: as a locutionary act it is simply the expression uttered; as an illocutionary act it is the act of thanking, understood as a behavioral and expressive act; and as a perlocutionary act it is the effect of the thanks on the person thanked.

The central idea championed by Austin, and radically extended by Searle (1969), is that speech in communication aims to affect the addressee – not merely to express inner feelings or convey ideas – since psychological influence on the addressee is the path toward changing behavior, attitude, and reality. Discourse thereby becomes an instrument for changing reality. At the same time, insistence on the performative nature of discourse should not distract from the study of linguistic discourse itself, nor reduce speech acts to a mere series of behavioral stimuli and responses, since doing so would require, as al-Hajj Salih (2012) argues, exiting the domain of linguistics altogether for philosophy and the human sciences in general.

2.5 From Constative/Performative to a General Theory of Speech Acts

The speech act is what is accomplished, through an utterance, in a given communicative situation; an organized sound sequence is, in this light, an act like any other acquired human act. The most important insight of this conception is the transformation of an expression’s propositional content into an act with social consequences, positive or negative. One should therefore abandon the assumption that utterances are merely descriptive or informative and instead recognize them as accomplishing directives, verdictives, commissives, declaratives, or expressives, depending on content and circumstance. The sentence “The salt is on the table” need not be a mere description of fact; it may function as an answer to an implicit request, an offer, a polite invitation, or,

depending on the relationship between speaker and addressee, even a display of minimal courtesy – all governed by the rules of conversation and the principles of dialogue.

Everyday communication confirms the performative, effective nature of language: a father who carries his young child to the car eventually replaces that physical act with the single word “Get in” once the child achieves minimal self-reliance. Likewise, informing an addressee of some state of affairs requires the addressee to deploy world knowledge and background knowledge to grasp the utterance’s benefit and purpose – moving beyond the literal, positional meaning of the words toward the underlying intent, as in metonymic and figurative expressions, or the indirection captured in Arabic rhetoric by the notion of “the style of the wise man” (asking for something other than what is literally requested).

3. The Deployment of Pragmatics in Interdisciplinary Studies

3.1 Models of Interdisciplinarity

Interdisciplinary studies connected with linguistics do not fall under a single classification. Three broad models can be distinguished: a centralist model, exemplified by sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and geolinguistics, in which one discipline retains analytical priority; a pluralist model, which brings together different theories on an equal footing without merging them into a single discipline – as in genetic structuralism in literary criticism, audience and media studies in their relation to linguistics and rhetoric, literary pragmatics, and cognitive pragmatics; and an integrationist model, exemplified by critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics, in which different bodies of knowledge are integrated in their tools and methods around a shared object of study while each discipline retains its own analytical boundaries. [Note to author: the original source for this three-model typology could not be verified in the course of this revision and should be confirmed before submission – see accompanying review notes.]

3.2 Political Discourse and Argumentation

Discourse analysis, as an interdisciplinary field concerned with language use for social, expressive, and referential purposes, has become an important tool in language teaching and acquisition, allowing learners to distinguish formal, colloquial, and borrowed registers and to acquire a functional repertoire in the target language. Among the vital areas of discourse analysis

is political discourse analysis, a genre that transgresses the boundaries of the political field proper. From a pragmatic perspective, political speech acts form a tightly organized system of assertive, declarative, expressive, and commissive acts in which the implicit is paired with the explicit and the implied with the presupposed – exploited most heavily in polemical genres such as political debate. Grice's (1975) conversational maxims, and the ways political interlocutors flout them, are equally salient here.

Argumentation theory lies at the heart of the pragmatic analysis of political discourse, given the arguments an arguer fashions to win over an audience, influence beliefs, and carry out an act of persuasion – sometimes violating the principle of “face” in an attack on an opponent. This justifies, as Amossy (2017) argues, integrating argumentation theory within discourse analysis. Despite its importance in Western sociolinguistic scholarship, this field remains limited within Arabic academic pragmatic writing: with few exceptions, specialists in departments of Arabic language have been reluctant to approach political and ideological discourse directly, confining most interest to poetry and the novel even where these genres are themselves replete with political and ideological content, and rarely moving beyond linguistic description and stylistic choice toward the methods of modern discourse analysis.

Structural-systemic analysis is only a starting point; texts and discourses cannot be considered apart from the context of social life, where discursive strategies bear on the relationship between domination, language, and power (Fairclough, 1989). Traditional discourse analysis is characterized by fixity and a focus on linguistic value within a given context, whereas critical discourse analysis transcends structure toward social practice and action, resting on a dynamic approach engaged with ideology and the exercise of influence through the power of the linguistic symbol – a power typically reinforced by material force and institutional knowledge.

3.3 Critical Discourse Analysis: From Critical Linguistics to Multiple Models

Critical discourse analysis developed, on some accounts, out of critical linguistics, a movement that emerged at the University of East Anglia in the 1970s under Fowler and colleagues, who called for the study of power relations through text analysis. In the collaborative volume *Language and Control*, Fowler, Hodge, Kress, and Trew (1979) presented an interdisciplinary analytical framework reconciling systemic functional grammar (Halliday, 1978) with theories of

ideology, applied to political, media, and parliamentary discourse in Britain and South Africa. Critical linguistics aimed to expose the ideological referents implicit in linguistic choices, though it stopped short of critiquing the power of linguistic choice as such – a step taken more fully by critical discourse analysis proper.

The 1990s saw a flourishing of critical discourse analysis along several paths: Fairclough's (1992) model, which reconciles sociology, social semiotics, and systemic linguistics, drawing on Bourdieu, Habermas, and Foucault; Wodak's historical-discourse approach, which situates discourse within its historical-social context, such that meaning cannot be grasped except through its preceding and subsequent contextual components, drawing also on ethnography and Firthian linguistics (Wodak & Meyer, 2018); and van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, which links discourse to social analysis via the triad discourse–society–cognition and, through the concept of “recontextualization,” to inter-linguistic and social intersections – an approach extended, via Bernstein's method, to the analysis of pedagogical practice and classroom discourse. A further, organizational-analysis approach developed by Jager and Meyer draws on Halliday's functional theory, Foucault's order of discourse, and activity theory to build an integrated analytical model.

The dominant theme across these models is the exposure of relations of power and influence exercised over audiences through linguistic domination, particularly in media-directed political discourse. Key works available to Arabic readers include Fairclough's (1992) *Discourse and Social Change* and (1989) *Language and Power*, both translated by Muhammad Anani, and Wodak and Meyer's (2018) *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. The field has benefited substantially from computational corpus linguistics, which supplies the large-scale linguistic data needed for more credible quantitative results (Baker, 2006, p. 100). Teaching critical discourse analysis also has clear pedagogical value: it increases learners' and teachers' awareness of the social and cultural stakes of language, draws attention to ideological bias – particularly implicit bias – in instructional materials and classroom discourse, and can orient the educational system toward a critical vision of schooling itself. Because such instruction relies chiefly on authentic texts (advertisements, television news, posters, social media posts), it equips learners to participate in social change, extending pedagogy beyond linguistic form toward social, cultural, and pragmatic considerations.

3.4 Text Linguistics and the New Rhetoric

Argumentation, as a speech act and linguistic operation, is bound up with most linguistic, cultural, and social practices; scarcely any communicative act is devoid of an attempt to win over an interlocutor or influence beliefs. On one influential account, four types of discourse – narrative, tale-like, interactive, and dialogic – differ in their internal textual-linguistic features but all rest on argumentation, dominant in the interactive and dialogic types and present to varying degrees, with a narrative or tale-like cast, in the others. Political discourse in particular is often analyzed with a focus on argumentative fallacy, or what Aristotelian rhetoric calls sophistry; Raadi (2010) offers an influential account of its types and role in political dialogic texts, one that anticipates later work in critical discourse analysis.

Linguistic pragmatics has imposed its theoretical and methodological authority on text linguistics, which has come to compete with the new rhetoric for the legacy of classical rhetoric and its stylistic inheritance. Within text linguistics, textual cohesion and coherence became central concerns, examined through the formal and conceptual connectedness of texts within coherence theory. This tradition – associated with Halliday, Hasan, van Dijk, de Beaugrande, Adam, and Charaudeau (Charaudeau & Maingueneau, 2008), among others – has inspired a substantial body of Arabic linguistic writing applying textual-linguistic tools to poetry, oratory, religious texts, and other genres. The merging of pragmatic analysis with argumentation theory has matured these approaches, tracing the strategic choices from which the speech event proceeds in order to realize the speaker’s purposes across contexts of expression and performance.

3.5 Corpus Linguistics as an Interdisciplinary Gateway

Spoken and written corpora broaden the fields of pragmatic and discourse-analytic research by allowing investigation of how particular expressions serve specific communicative purposes within limited contexts and text types, and by allowing different discourse types to be distinguished on the basis of extensive textual data. The benefit extends well beyond discourse analysis: sociolinguistics can draw on large corpora to study the relationship between language and its social use, including patterns of linguistic-social discrimination – for instance, the dominance of certain pronouns in masculine discourse – and, in Western scholarship, the study of the “language of violence” among speakers of differing profiles began early with corpus methods. Corpora also support the study of discourse produced by socially influential groups

(preachers, party leaders, presidents, media figures), and studies of language and power within critical discourse analysis increasingly rely on computational corpora. Dialectal and sociolinguistic variation across the Arab world could, in principle, be studied similarly, should a comprehensive corpus of contemporary Arabic and its dialects become available; stylistic and text-linguistic studies stand to benefit in the same way, particularly in their quantitative dimension.

A corpus may consist of a single text or of a collection running to millions of words, and this expanding scale is a defining feature of computational corpora today. Baker (2006) stipulates that a corpus must be sufficiently large to reveal the prevalence of particular linguistic phenomena, distinguishing the customary from the rare. Kennedy (1998) proposed that a thousand-word corpus can suffice for studying phonetic-stress phenomena, while Biber (1993) proposed a million words in English as adequate for a descriptive study of grammar [dates for Kennedy and Biber require verification – see accompanying review notes]. The degree of variation a language exhibits in usage and structure is arguably the principal factor governing the size of corpus required for a given study.

3.6 Illustrative Case: Corpus-Based Analysis of Arabic Administrative Discourse

A further illustration of this interdisciplinary gateway is research on economic and administrative discourse – dialogues and press reports produced by economic experts on finance and business, and their impact on social structure and development. One relevant study analyzed the language of annual administrative-accounting reports, known in economic discourse as “disclosure discourse,” proceeding from a specialized, single-genre corpus in Partington’s (2003) sense, composed of three discursive types: management statements (from the CEO and the chairman of the board), stock news, and general economic news. [Full bibliographic details for this study could not be verified during this revision and must be supplied by the author before submission – see accompanying review notes.]

The corpus was built using a web-as-corpus approach combined with manual filtering, yielding 400 reports from Eastern and Western Arab companies (200 each for the chairman of the board and the CEO), a jointly built corpus of 400 randomly selected general and economic news articles, and a web-scraped corpus of 400 items on stock prices and market conditions – a

combined total of 1,200 texts and roughly 419,000 words. The corpus was automatically tagged using the Stanford University tool and the Arabic Treebank (Arabic Treebank-3), and analyzed using readability formulas (the Flesch formula and the Arabic-specific Osman formula), the AraTools suite for frequency and collocation analysis, and AntConc for processing the tagged corpus.

Among the study's findings on administrative discourse: a predominance of the masculine plural in address and third-person reference; frequent use of positively connoted terms (trust, responsibility, profit, success, progress); use of the possessive pronoun (we/our) to justify shortcomings by external factors, alongside embellished narration designed to instill hope and attribute success to internal factors and failure to external ones; and a marked excess of nouns over verbs – nearly double – taken to indicate a weakness in management's interaction with shareholders. At the level of text classification, the study developed a supervised machine-learning approach to automatic document classification, relying on measures such as the log-likelihood coefficient for word significance and the type-token ratio (TTR) for inferring author gender. This case illustrates, in miniature, both the promise and the current limits of corpus-based pragmatic research in Arabic: methodologically sophisticated at the level of tool use, but still comparatively rare, and in need of fuller integration with the critical and argumentative frameworks discussed in Sections 3.2–3.4.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Summary of Findings

This paper set out to answer three questions about the reception of pragmatic theory in Arabic linguistic research. On the first question – the most salient features of this reception – the evidence surveyed here suggests that Arabic scholarship has engaged most extensively with the foundational apparatus of speech act theory and with text-linguistic and coherence-based approaches to discourse, largely through translation and theoretical exposition, while engagement with political discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, and corpus-based pragmatics remains comparatively recent and unevenly distributed (Sections 3.2–3.6). On the second question – the value of this reception for research on Arabic – the case study in Section 3.6 indicates that where corpus methods have been adopted, they have produced

methodologically rigorous, quantitatively grounded findings about genres (administrative and economic discourse) that traditional Arabic linguistic description had left largely unexamined. On the third question – markers of innovation – the clearest signs of innovation lie precisely at this intersection of pragmatics, critical discourse analysis, and computational corpus methods, rather than in the further elaboration of speech act theory as such, which remains largely at the stage of importation and commentary in Arabic-language scholarship.

4.2 Contribution

The paper's contribution is to bring the theoretical foundations of pragmatics (Section 2) and its interdisciplinary applications (Section 3) into a single account oriented specifically toward assessing the state of Arabic pragmatic scholarship, rather than treating pragmatics as a purely Western theoretical object. In doing so, it identifies a specific and, we argue, underexplored gap: the scarcity of Arabic-language political discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis relative to the volume of Arabic scholarship on text linguistics and classical rhetoric, and the corresponding opportunity presented by computational corpus methods for closing that gap empirically.

4.3 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This paper is a conceptual and critical synthesis rather than an empirical study, and its claims about the state of Arabic pragmatic scholarship rest on a necessarily selective survey of the literature rather than a systematic bibliometric review; a systematic mapping of Arabic-language publications in this area would substantially strengthen the claims made in Section 4.1. Future research might usefully pursue three directions: first, building a comprehensive, dialectally representative corpus of contemporary Arabic, along the lines suggested in Section 3.5, to support corpus-based pragmatic and sociolinguistic research at scale; second, extending critical discourse analysis and argumentation theory to Arabic political and media discourse with the same methodological rigor evident in the corpus-based case discussed in Section 3.6; and third, developing a more systematic bibliometric account of the reception of Western pragmatic theory in Arabic scholarship, of the kind this paper has only been able to sketch.

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APA 7th edition. Entries are alphabetized by author surname. Where a work is an Arabic translation of a Western source, the original-language edition is listed as the primary entry and the Arabic translation is noted in parentheses; original Arabic/French titles are rendered in English for consistency.

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