SOCIAL NORMS OF MEANING IN PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

The article discusses sociopragmatics as a socially oriented branch of pragmatics and outlines its place in the broader pragmatic paradigm. Building on classic and recent work (Leech, Thomas, Eslami; Haugh, Kádár, & Terkourafi; Chang & Ren), sociopragmatics is defined as the study of how pragmatic meanings are shaped by social norms, roles and expectations in concrete speech communities. The subject and main tasks of sociopragmatics are described: modelling socially appropriate language use, identifying sociocultural patterns behind speech acts and politeness strategies, and analysing sociopragmatic failure in cross-cultural communication. Methodological approaches are characterised, including discourse and corpus analysis, experimental and survey techniques, and interdisciplinary links with sociolinguistics and political science. Special attention is paid to political discourse, where sociopragmatic choices are used to frame messages, negotiate power and manage public alignment. The article briefly reviews key scholars and directions in contemporary sociopragmatics, including recent work in Uzbek and regional journals, and argues that sociopragmatics provides a productive framework for systematic analysis of political communication in different cultural contexts.

Keywords: Sociopragmatics, pragmatics, sociopragmatic competence, political discourse, politeness, pragmatic failure.

Introduction

Pragmatics, in a broad sense, deals with language in use: it studies how utterances acquire concrete meanings in context, how speakers perform actions by means of words, and how interlocutors rely on shared background knowledge and expectations. Within this field, sociopragmatics has emerged as a distinct, socially oriented domain. It focuses not only on what is said and implied, but also on who is speaking, to whom, and under which social and cultural conditions.

The term sociopragmatics was originally introduced by G. Leech to designate the study of how pragmatic meaning reflects "local conditions" on language use, that is, norms of appropriate behaviour in particular communities and situations (Leech, 1983). Later work consolidated sociopragmatics as the "more social" side of pragmatics, in contrast to pragmalinguistics, which is concerned with the linguistic resources that encode pragmatic force.

In recent decades the field has developed rapidly. The Cambridge Handbook of Sociopragmatics highlights both the theoretical broadening of sociopragmatics and the diversification of empirical domains, from face and (im)politeness to workplace, digital and political discourse. At the same time, applied studies in different countries, including Uzbekistan, have started to use sociopragmatic tools for the analysis of literary, online and political communication. The present paper offers a systematised overview of sociopragmatics as a field: its place within pragmatics,

subject matter, research tasks and methods, with illustrative examples from political discourse and reference to key scholars.

Sociopragmatics within pragmatics

In contemporary handbooks sociopragmatics is described as the study of the social dimensions of language use (Haugh, Kádár, & Terkourafi, 2021). Pragmatics, in general, asks how speakers use language to do things and how hearers understand what is meant beyond the literal form. Sociopragmatics narrows this question: it examines how such usage is constrained by social variables – status, power, distance, group membership, gender and age – and by culturally specific norms of appropriate behaviour.

Leech's original distinction remains influential: pragmalinguistics covers the formal means for realising speech acts and politeness (e.g. modal verbs, hedges, indirect questions), whereas sociopragmatics concerns "the social perceptions underlying participants' interpretation and performance of linguistic action" (Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983). In this sense, a speaker may know how to form a grammatically correct and pragmatically recognisable request in a foreign language, but still fail to choose an appropriate level of directness or terms of address for a given social situation.

Thomas (1983) captured this difference through the concept of pragmatic failure: pragmalinguistic failure results from incorrect mapping between form and function, while sociopragmatic failure arises when speakers misjudge what counts as acceptable behaviour in a given culture or subculture. This distinction has been widely used in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics, and is still central in discussions of sociopragmatic competence.

Recent definitions stress that sociopragmatics is positioned "on the more social side of pragmatics", focusing on how meanings are negotiated within specific relationships, institutions and communities, including those mediated by digital platforms. This perspective makes sociopragmatics particularly relevant for the analysis of political communication, where group identities and power relations are foregrounded.

Subject matter, aims and sociopragmatic competence

The subject of sociopragmatics can be summarised as the complex of social norms, expectations and evaluations that regulate language use in a given community. These include conventions of address forms, degrees of directness, acceptable topics, turn-taking patterns, and culturally grounded judgements of politeness and impoliteness.

A central aim of sociopragmatics is to describe these norms systematically and show how they are instantiated in real interaction. This involves, among other things, identifying sociopragmatic variables such as power, distance and weight of imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987), and analysing how they motivate speakers' choices in different contexts. For instance, an apology produced by a child to a teacher will typically differ in form from an apology to a peer, even within the same language; such differences illustrate sociopragmatic sensitivity to status and distance.

The notion of sociopragmatic competence has become important both in theoretical discussions and in applied fields like language teaching. It is often defined as the ability to select linguistically correct forms that are at the same time socially and culturally appropriate. Chang and Ren's study of American and Chinese children's realisation of apology and refusal demonstrates that sociopragmatic competence develops more slowly than pragmalinguistic

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competence: children may acquire the relevant expressions earlier than they fully master the social conditions for using them.

Interlanguage and cross-cultural pragmatics, as well as sociopragmatic analyses of local communities, frequently show that many misunderstandings in interaction stem precisely from sociopragmatic rather than purely grammatical gaps. This explains why there is growing interest in designing teaching materials that explicitly integrate sociopragmatic aspects – politeness norms, forms of address, culturally typical scenarios – along with grammar and vocabulary.

Methodologically, sociopragmatics combines the qualitative traditions of pragmatics and discourse analysis with quantitative and mixed-method approaches. Core methods include:

- **Discourse and conversation analysis.** Detailed examination of naturally occurring interaction – recorded conversations, interviews, institutional encounters – allows researchers to reconstruct how participants orient to power, distance and identity through their linguistic choices.

- **Corpus-based approaches.** Large collections of spoken or written texts are used to identify recurrent patterns of address forms, mitigation devices and evaluative language in different registers (parliamentary debates, press conferences, social media), including their diachronic change.

- **Experimental and survey techniques.** Discourse completion tasks, role-plays and perception questionnaires make it possible to elicit speakers' intuitions about appropriate and inappropriate behaviour and to compare these intuitions across social groups and cultures.

- **Ethnographic and case-study designs.** Participant observation in specific communities – from ritual settings to online forums – remains important for capturing local norms that are not easily visible from external observation alone.

In Uzbek and regional scholarship, sociopragmatic analysis is frequently applied to transformations of sentence structure across formal and informal speech forms, to communication styles in social networks, and to the role of pragmatic markers in literary and everyday dialogue. Such studies typically combine close textual reading with qualitative discussion of cultural norms (e.g., respect for elders, collectivist values) and are gradually incorporating corpus and survey methods.

Sociopragmatics and political discourse

Political discourse represents a particularly fertile domain for sociopragmatic research. The Cambridge Handbook of Sociopragmatics explicitly dedicates a chapter to argumentative, political and legal discourse, emphasising that these genres are anchored in the same social concerns that define sociopragmatics: power, face, alignment and identity (Fetzer & Witczak-Plisiecka, 2021).

In political communication the primary task is not only to inform but also to shape beliefs, emotions and collective identities. Sociopragmatic analysis shows how this task is realised through choices of address terms, pronouns, metaphorical frames, politeness and impoliteness strategies. For example, the systematic use of inclusive we and vague they in election speeches constructs a symbolic boundary between an in-group ("we, the people") and unspecified

opponents or elites. The apparent simplicity of such pronouns masks their complex sociopragmatic function: they encode solidarity and antagonism at the same time.

Recent work on political discourse in American contexts examines how social position – institutional role, military rank, presidential authority – is linguistically negotiated in speeches, with particular attention to speech acts, politeness strategies and departures from Gricean maxims (Oraibi, 2022). The analysis shows that even small shifts in formulation (e.g. between imperative and modalised suggestions) index different degrees of authority and alignment with the audience.

In Uzbek and other post-Soviet settings, sociopragmatic studies demonstrate that political texts often combine elements of formal state discourse with more personalised, intimate forms of address that appeal to traditional values and family metaphors. Abdiyev (2024), for instance, discusses how politicians' speeches rely on context-bound sociopragmatic techniques – repetition of key value words, strategic mitigation of criticism, use of culturally loaded honorifics – to frame messages and foster public engagement.

Sociopragmatics also interacts with critical discourse analysis when political discourse is examined from the perspective of ideology and power. Here the focus is on how socially accepted norms of politeness, deference or debate style themselves become part of political control or resistance. This critical orientation does not contradict the descriptive nature of sociopragmatics; rather, it extends the analysis to the level of societal consequences of particular speech practices.

The contemporary landscape of sociopragmatics is marked by a combination of classic theoretical contributions and diverse empirical studies. On the theoretical side, Leech's distinction between pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics and his politeness framework remain foundational. Thomas's work on pragmatic failure continues to be cited as a key reference for understanding sociopragmatic mismatch in cross-cultural communication.

The Cambridge Handbook of Sociopragmatics edited by Haugh, Kádár and Terkourafi (2021) reflects the breadth of current research: chapters cover face, emotion, morality, power, workplace communication, service encounters, digital interaction and political discourse, among others. Sociopragmatics is thus no longer limited to politeness in everyday conversation; it has become an umbrella term for social-pragmatic aspects of discourse in many institutional and media contexts.

Empirical work on sociopragmatic competence, such as Chang and Ren's longitudinal and cross-sectional studies, shows how children and second-language learners acquire norms of apology, refusal and other speech acts, and how this acquisition interacts with age, exposure and cultural background. Research on gender and sociopragmatics explores how men and women, as well as non-binary speakers, orient differently to interactional norms in various communities, emphasising that such differences are context-dependent rather than universal.

In Uzbek and neighbouring academic traditions, sociopragmatics is actively used in studies of literary discourse, digital communication and sentence-level transformations across registers. Researchers analyse politeness markers, honorific forms and pragmatic particles in Uzbek, often linking them to values of respect, collectivism and generational hierarchy. This line of work contributes to the global field by providing detailed descriptions of under-represented languages and discourse traditions, and by testing sociopragmatic theories beyond the typical Anglo-European data.

Conclusion

Sociopragmatics occupies a clearly defined yet flexible position within pragmatics. It concentrates on how social structures, cultural norms and interpersonal relations shape the ways speakers perform and interpret speech acts, manage politeness, and negotiate identity and power. On the theoretical level, the distinction between pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics, together with the notions of sociopragmatic competence and pragmatic failure, offers a useful framework for describing various types of success and breakdown in communication.

Methodologically, sociopragmatics benefits from the combination of discourse-analytic, corpus-based, experimental and ethnographic approaches. When applied to political discourse, this combination makes it possible to trace how seemingly small linguistic decisions – pronouns, terms of address, degrees of directness, metaphorical frames – function as sociopragmatic techniques of framing, persuasion and alignment, both in global arenas and in specific national contexts.

Ongoing work in different linguistic traditions, including Uzbek research on literary, online and political communication, shows that sociopragmatics has become an important interdisciplinary field connecting linguistics with sociology, psychology and political science. This trajectory suggests that further development of sociopragmatics will be closely linked to comparative studies of discourse practices across cultures and to the analysis of new communicative environments created by digital media.

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