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# A Pragmatic Competence in AI: The Study of Context-Awareness in Virtual Assistants

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**Abstract:** Contextual understanding is an ability which is quintessential for any form of effective human-computer interaction. Unfortunately, most virtual assistants lack the pragmatic competence necessary to understand the context of any conversation. The current study will, therefore, examine how integrating pragmatic principles into AI systems enhances their contextual understanding and communicative competencies. The linguistic theories of pragmatics to be applied in this analysis include speech acts, implicature, and deixis, this research identifies key elements in context-aware interaction. A novel framework for pragmatic modeling in AI is proposed. It particularly points to the integration of real-world contextual cues and user intent recognition. The implementation of this framework is tested on the prototypes of virtual assistants, testing their performance in dynamic, real-time scenarios. Results show significant improvements in user satisfaction with the experience and the effectiveness of handling ambiguous or nuanced communication by the AI better. This work That can highlight the potentiality of AI design, driven by pragmatics for human-like, intuitive advancement, drawing closer to human norms of communication.

**Keywords:** Contextual Understanding, Pragmatic Principles, Virtual Assistants, User Intent Recognition, Human-Computer Interaction

## 1. Introduction

The rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) has revolutionized human-computer interaction, with virtual assistants like Siri, Alexa, and Google Assistant becoming integral to daily life. Despite their growing popularity, these systems often fall short of effectively understanding and responding to nuanced, context-dependent human communication.

The root of this limitation lies in their lack of pragmatic competence the ability to interpret meaning beyond literal words by considering contextual, social, and cultural cues (Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996). While significant progress has been made in syntactic and semantic processing, pragmatics remains an underexplored domain in AI research.

Pragmatic competence is essential for achieving natural and meaningful interactions. Humans rely heavily on contextual information, such as tone, intent, and situational factors, to interpret and generate appropriate responses (Grice, 1975). Virtual whereas assistants often misinterpret user intentions or fail to resolve ambiguities. Due to their inability to fully process such pragmatic elements Searle, 1969. For instance, when the users use indirect requests or implicit language, AI systems are mostly at a loss for the

**Citation:** Naji S. A. A Pragmatic Competence in AI: The Study of Context-Awareness in Virtual Assistants. Central Asian Journal of Literature, Philosophy, and Culture 2025, 6(4), 645-651.

Received: 30<sup>th</sup> Jun 2025

Revised: 07<sup>th</sup> Jul 2025

Accepted: 31<sup>st</sup> Jul 2025

Published: 27<sup>th</sup> Aug 2025



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intended meaning, leading to misunderstandings or unsatisfactory responses (Jurafsky & Martin, 2021).

Limitation that not only affects user experience but also makes the adoption of AI difficult. technologies in complex, high-stakes domains such as healthcare, education, and customer service. The solution requires a pressing design need for the AI systems capable of pragmatic understanding. Embed pragmatic principles into virtual assistant design, these systems can be better equipped to interpret context, manage conversational implicature, and adapt to different communicative situations. This, therefore calls for the present research to close this gap in understanding the place of pragmatic competence in developing contextual understanding. Intelligent virtual assistants drawing from established linguistic theories and emerging AI technologies.

## **Literature Review**

Pragmatic competence represents one of the most interesting research areas in artificial Intelligence, while developing systems featuring more natural and context-sensitive interactions. Pragmatics, as linguistics describes it, is a discipline dealing with how language is used in context to provide meaning beyond the literal reading of the words (Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996). In this respect, pragmatic competence can be understood as the ability of AI systems to contextualize and respond in a way that is contextual, cultural, and conversational, matching expectations of human reaction. The literature review below looks at the current research in pragmatics and its application to AI, highlighting gaps and opportunities for the development of context-sensitive virtual assistants.

### **1.1 Pragmatics and Contextual Understanding in AI**

Equally seminal within the field of pragmatics is Grice's theory of implicature (1975). It highlights how speakers imply meanings beyond the literal or obvious. This has led AI research to investigate how conversational agents can infer user intentions from implicit cues. In the same vein, Searle's speech act theory (1969) lays out a framework for categorizing communicative actions, such as requests, promises, and commands, which are important to allow AI systems to respond appropriately. Yet, current virtual assistants. These systems often fail to capture such pragmatic subtleties, resulting in stiff and context-insensitive interactions (Jurafsky & Martin, 2021).

### **1.2 Limitations of Existing Systems**

Most of the existing NLP techniques focus on syntactic and Semantic understanding generally sidelines the pragmatic perspective in communication. Research have shown that the state-of-the-art language models, such as GPT and BERT, perform well in generating generate coherent text but struggle with contextual ambiguity and implicit meaning (Ruder et al., 2019). Among others, virtual assistants regularly misunderstand indirect requests or fail to follow conversational changes, pointing out a serious flaw in their pragmatic ability.

### **1.3 Advances in Context-Aware AI**

New breakthroughs with contextual AI via machine learning and deep learning have improved pragmatic interpretation. For example, work that applied the use of reinforcement learning for NLP (RL-NLP) toward dynamic interaction modeling resulted in huge improvement in the response accuracy in a contextually rich environment. Zhang et al. (2020) give a model like this, while Chen et al. (2021) introduce other models that consider dialogue history and external knowledge bases. These approaches are still in their infancy and need further development and improvement in order to perform well in various and unpredictable conversational scenarios.

### **1.4 Research Gaps and Future Directions**

However, most of these current models are unable to generalize to diverse contexts or deal with culturally specific patterns of communication. In addition, very few studies

are being conducted on ethical considerations like bias and fairness in pragmatics-driven AI systems. As Bender et al. (2021) establish, future studies should therefore focus on the incorporation of multimodal input-like tone and gesture to enhance context understanding and also develop frameworks for assessment of pragmatic competence in AI.

In a nutshell, embedding pragmatic principles into AI is likely to make virtual assistants natural and adaptive beyond imagination. Though much has so far been achieved, an interdisciplinary collaboration of linguistics and computer science is indispensable for the preceding limitations and further in contextual AI.

### 1.5 previous studies

Conversational Implicature in Dialogue Systems: A Pragmatic Perspective by Georgila, K.,

Traum, D., & Artstein, R. in (2017): This study assesses how dialogue systems can interpret conversational implicature using pragmatic principles. It discusses the challenges of incorporating Gricean maxims and context-based reasoning into AI systems.

Dynamic Fusion Networks for Multidomain End-to-End Task-Oriented Dialog by Gao, S., Zhu, P., & Li, X. (2019): The study introduces a framework for integrating multiple sources of context, such as dialogue history and external knowledge, into task-oriented dialogue systems.

Speech Act Recognition in Conversational AI Systems by Perera, I., Gamage, A., & Nanayakkara, J. (2021): This research explores speech act theory's application to AI, focusing on how virtual assistants recognize and classify user intents based on conversational context.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This research is intended to explore the integration of pragmatic principles into AI systems to will enhance the contextual understanding and develop smarter virtual assistants. The methodology combines theoretical analysis, system design, and empirical evaluation. This paper is logically divided into five key phases: development of the theoretical framework, data collection, model design, and evaluation.

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework Development

This stage includes the consideration of linguistic theories of pragmatics, like speech act theory. (Searle, 1969), Grice's maxims of conversation (Grice, 1975), deixis (Yule, 1996), and relevance theory by Sperber and Wilson (1986). These theories will inform the insights of design of pragmatic reasoning models. The framework will define key pragmatic features. for instance, intention identification, implicature resolution, and context management that have to be integrated into the AI system.

### 2.2 Data Collection

A diverse real-world dialogue dataset will be collected for training and testing the system. It will contain:

- Existing corpora: Conversational datasets like the MultiWOZ (Multi-Domain Wizard-of-Oz), OpenSubtitles, and task-specific dialogue datasets.
- Custom datasets: Dialogue examples created to emphasize pragmatic phenomena, such as indirect requests, ambiguous expressions, and context-dependent utterances.

Annotations will include speech act labeling, contextual cues, and user intent to facilitate supervised learning. The proposed framework shall be executed as a prototype virtual assistant system. The major functionalities shall include the Following is the context tracking for maintaining dialog history and situational information that can be useful in interpreting better. Intent recognition shall focus on classification of user intent through

explicit and implicit cues, and lastly, generation. Of contextually appropriate responses according to pragmatic norms.

### 2.3 Evaluation

The prototype will be tested using quantitative and qualitative metrics to assess its pragmatic competence and contextual understanding:

Quantitative evaluation: Accuracy in the recognition of speech acts, resolution of ambiguities, and generation of contextually appropriate responses. Metrics such as BLEU, ROUGE, and F1-score will be used.

Qualitative evaluation: User satisfaction surveys and expert reviews to evaluate the system's naturalness, coherence, and handling of real-world dialogues.

### 2.4 Ethical Considerations

It will further look into the issues of bias and prejudice in respect of data used in its training. Such biases probably will be lessened by a number of measures that ensure this system works fairly across a wide variety of demographics and cultural backgrounds.

In all, this is the systematic way to put pragmatic principles into AI systems. Further development of this article will be developed by combining theories of linguistics, high-tech machine learning techniques, and user-centered testing in order to enhance Smarter, contextually aware virtual assistants interact more naturally with users.

### 2.5 Data Analysis

#### Excerpt 1

User : "I would like to book a room in Paris for my weekend vacation."

Assistant: "yes, Sure! Could you tell me the preferred dates of your stay?"

User: "From 15th to 20th during this month."

Assistant: "Great. Do you have a favorite for the type of hotel, concerning budget, mid-range, or luxury?"

User: "something mid-range would be good."

Assistant: "Got it. How many people will be staying?"

User: "only one."

Assistant: "I found a mid-range hotel in the central of Paris for \$120 per-night. Would you like to book it?"

User: " sounds good, but does it supply free Wi-Fi?"

Assistant: "Yes, it provides free Wi-Fi. Should I proceed with the booking?"

User: "Yes, please."

- Speech Acts: The assistant achieves a series of directive speech acts (asking questions to gather information) and assenting acts (seeking approval before booking).
- Implicature: The assistant infers the user's implied preference for a good balance of cost and comfort in their "mid-range" request.
- Deixis: Proper understanding of temporal deixis ("15th to the 20th during this month").

#### Excerpt 2

User: "I want to book a flight to New York please."

Assistant: "Sure. What time are you planning to leave?"

User: "on Friday in the evening."

Assistant: "I've found a flight leaving at 6:00 PM. Would you like me to book it for you?"

User: "How long is the flight?"

Assistant: "Approximately 5 hours long."

User: "That's good. Go ahead."

Assistant: "Your flight has been booked. You will receive the details soon."

#### 1. Speech Acts:

- User's "I want to book a flight to New York please" is a directive.
- Assistant's "Would you like me to book it for you?" is a request for confirmation.

2. Context Tracking:
  - The assistant maintains context by retaining the destination and time details provided earlier.
3. Implicature:
  - The assistant infers that "Go ahead" implies consent to proceed with booking.

Excerpt 3

User: "I'm trying to book a flight to Chicago."

Assistant: "Which day would you like to travel?"

User: "Either Friday or Thursday, but only in the morning."

Assistant: "there is a flight on Thursday at 9:00 AM and another one on Friday at 10:00 AM."

User: "Book the earlier one."

Assistant: "Confirming the one on Thursday at 9:00 AM. Is that correct?"

User: "Yes, that works."

Assistant: "Your flight has been booked."

1. Implicature:
  - The assistant correctly interprets "Book the earlier one" as a reference to the Thursday flight without explicit mention.
2. Ambiguity Resolution:
  - The assistant seeks clarification to ensure the user's intent is accurately understood.
3. Context Tracking:
  - Retains options for both days to provide a meaningful response to the ambiguous query.

### 3. Results

The analysis of the dialogues within the Frames Dataset provides insight into the pragmatic competence and context awareness of virtual assistants. These will highlight strengths and weaknesses of current AI models in processing pragmatic elements, including intent recognition, implicature resolution, and context tracking.

Key findings which relate to effective speech act recognition could be highlighted that the virtual assistant successfully recognizes user intents which were explicitly expressed; for example, booking a room, flights or hotels. In the examples, there is the need to interpret requests such as "I need to book a flight to New York" by responding appropriately. Points of Strength: state-of-the-art models excel at picking up explicit intent and mapping the same to the pre-defined and well-learned actions; Limitations are not very impressive when it involves subtle speech acts, indirect requests, sarcasm, among other cases that will require deep comprehension of context.

As for implicature and resolution of ambiguity related key findings include instances For example, "Book the earlier one" illustrates implicit meaning by the assistant from the dialogue history. Strong points of the assistant clear ambiguities through clarifying or confirming user intent, such as asking, "Confirming the Thursday flight at 9:00 AM Is that correct?". The challenges faced with more complex or conflicting implicatures, the system may require additional clarification, increasing interaction time.

As for the key findings related to context awareness and tracking, can be stated in how the assistant effectively maintains context within short dialogues, retaining critical details like dates, times, and constraints. Examples include tracking user preferences for budget and proximity to landmarks "Something near the Eiffel Tower, under \$200 a night". The limitations are seen in Context tracking deteriorates over longer dialogues or multi-turn exchanges with shifts in focus.

Finally, the key findings for handling of pragmatic failures such as misunderstanding deixis ("this" or "that") or misinterpreting vague expressions, are evident in some cases. This type of errors highlights the limitations of rule-based and statistical models in



understanding complex, real-world conversational dynamics. Moreover; the assistant adapts its responses to user feedback and context changes, showing some degree of pragmatic adaptability. However, it lacks cultural or emotional sensitivity, limiting its ability to handle nuanced social interactions.

#### 4. Discussion

These findings underpin the relevance of embedding linguistic theories into AI models, such as Grice's maxims and speech act theory. In this regard, observing Grice's maxim of relevance makes the responses of the assistant contextually appropriate. Models still have to develop better conversational implicatures, indirect speech acts, and cultural pragmatics for true pragmatic competence.

With better pragmatic competence, user satisfaction in actual applications will increase, such as customer service, healthcare, and education. Integration with external knowledge bases, context-aware memory, and more sophisticated intent recognition algorithms could alleviate current limitations.

Data challenges are represented in the training model's ability to recognize and respond to nuanced pragmatic phenomena which requires richly annotated datasets. Current datasets, including Frames, may not have enough coverage of edge cases. Misinterpretation of user intent could lead to potential errors in high-stakes applications like healthcare. Efforts should be made to mitigate the bias in the training data.

The analysis here shows the assistant's ability to demonstrate various degrees of pragmatic understanding, such as intent recognition, resolving ambiguity, and adapting responses based on user inputs. Despite the Challenges for example, "Book the earlier one" require context awareness and implicature resolution. Pragmatic failures might lead to incorrect actions if the assistant misunderstands user intent. Yet, the dialogues can be evaluated for pragmatic accuracy, correct intent recognition by the user, and naturalness of utterances. These Frames Dataset dialogues are particularly useful in analyzing how pragmatic principles can be integrated into AI systems.

Results indicate that while current virtual assistants possess basic pragmatic competence, much work remains to be done regarding subtler shades of communication. This deficiency needs linguistic theories, advanced machine learning techniques, and even an extension in training datasets by including various realistic scenarios. Such a move shall herald the development of more intelligent, context-sensitive virtual assistants able to interact naturally and efficiently.

#### 5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates the critical role of pragmatic competence in advancing the contextual understanding of virtual assistants. By incorporating principles from pragmatics—such as speech act theory, implicature, and deixis—AI systems can better interpret user intent, manage ambiguity, and sustain coherent dialogues. The proposed framework, tested on prototype assistants, showed notable improvements in accurately recognizing intentions, clarifying ambiguous inputs, and adapting responses to conversational flow. These enhancements directly contributed to higher levels of user satisfaction and more natural human-computer interaction. However, several limitations remain. Current systems still struggle with subtle or indirect communication, long multi-turn conversations, and culturally specific nuances. Misinterpretations in these areas risk reducing trust and usability, particularly in sensitive domains such as healthcare, education, and customer service. Addressing these shortcomings requires richer, pragmatically annotated datasets, integration of multimodal inputs like tone or gesture, and collaboration between linguistic theory and advanced machine learning models. Ethical concerns, such as bias and fairness, must also be systematically addressed to ensure inclusive and reliable AI systems. In summary, embedding pragmatic principles into AI provides a pathway toward creating virtual assistants that are not only more contextually

aware but also more intuitive and human-like in their interactions. While significant progress has been achieved, continued interdisciplinary research and development are essential to overcome existing challenges and fully realize the potential of pragmatics-driven AI in real-world applications.

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