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Pragmatics and audiovisual translation

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What is pragmatics?

Successful communication undoubtedly presupposes, but does not automatically derive from, the mere recognition of the dictionary meanings of the words uttered. A constellation of other factors are involved in utterance interpretation, jointly determining what is referred to as ‘interpersonal meaning’, ‘meaning in context’ or ‘meaning in interaction’ (Thomas 1995). These include the situational context in which the utterance is produced, sociocultural and encyclopaedic knowledge as well as cognitive and conversational principles. Thus, the field of semantics with its rather restricted focus on meaning within the language system, namely the sense of words and the propositions expressed by sentences (Hurford and Heasley 1983: 1–3), fails to account for interpersonal meaning in its totality. The field traditionally associated with the study of meaning in interaction is pragmatics. As Thomas explains (1995: 22; emphasis added):

This [definition of Pragmatics as meaning in interaction] reflects the view that meaning is not something which is inherent in the words alone, nor is produced by the speaker alone, nor by the hearer alone. Making meaning is a dynamic process, involving the negotiation of meaning between speaker and hearer, the context of utterance (physical, social and linguistic) and the meaning potential of an utterance.

Despite early attempts to define pragmatics in contrast to semantics, most modern approaches argue for a complementary relationship between the two. For proponents of the latter stance, pragmatics exploits propositional meaning in elucidating the expression (by the speaker) and the recognition (by the hearer) of communicative intentions (Dascal 2003: 6–10). However, the comprehension of interpersonal meaning is not always straightforward; quite often, propositional meaning diverges considerably from the speaker’s communicative intention and this will become evident in the following section where specific pragmatic phenomena are explored.

Pragmatics as a field has bloomed over the second half of the twentieth century. Several trends have emerged and developed, such as philosophical pragmatics (Austin 1962, Searle
Pragmatic phenomena and AVT

This section examines three salient pragmatic phenomena, namely speech acts, politeness and implicature, and explores their relevance to the analysis of audiovisual texts. The subsections will follow the same structure for the sake of reader-friendliness: first, each phenomenon will be introduced by means of an example. The way this phenomenon has been approached within pragmatics will be presented and any concepts/theories will be briefly explained. By referring to a selection of key studies that have explored this phenomenon in the context of AVT, it will be shown how the relevant theoretical insights and methodological tools can be applied in practice. At the same time, the discussion in each subsection will tease out the potential ramifications of mishandling the relevant aspects of pragmatic meaning for the comprehension and enjoyment of audiovisual texts. Before embarking upon each phenomenon, we should always bear in mind that as opposed to the single layer of naturally occurring interaction between at least two participants, communication in audiovisual texts usually unfolds on two layers or levels: in films, for instance, the communication among the film characters takes place on the horizontal level while on the vertical level lies the communication between the filmmakers and the audience (Vanoye 1985: 99–118). As will be illustrated in the following sections, it is precisely this double-layeredness (Kozloff 2000) and complex audience design, in tandem with the multimodal nature of audiovisual material, that render the aforementioned pragmatic phenomena particularly worthy of investigation in the context of AVT.

Speech acts

Actions may speak louder than words but, interestingly, speakers use language to do a variety of things on a daily basis. Consider the following utterances:
Examples 1–5

1 I’ll come back, I promise.
2 Don’t copy what I say!
3 Sweet dreams!
4 You should eat sunflower seeds, as they are rich in iron.
5 Sharp scratch!

Speech Act Theory, which has played a pivotal role in the development of pragmatics, emerged in the early 1960s as a reaction against the logical positivism of Truth Conditional Semantics (TCS) (Thomas 1995: 28). In the paradigm of TCS, sentences are essentially statements representing a state of affairs in the external world and, hence, can be evaluated in terms of truth or falsity (ibid.: 30). In other words, TCS was firmly based on the premise that the sole purpose of language is to describe some state of affairs, known as the descriptive fallacy (Hurford and Heasley 1983: 21). Austin, a philosopher of language, in his 1962 seminal publication entitled How to Do Things with Words brought into sharp relief that language does not merely reflect reality; it also creates reality, a belief that has been ever since shared by all the approaches developed within pragmatics. As evident in the examples above, people not only describe the world but crucially perform actions via language, such as promising (1), reproaching (2), leave-taking (3) and advising (4).

According to Austin, a speech act consists of three different layers or sub-acts: the locution, i.e. what is uttered, the illocution or (illocutionary) force, i.e. the speaker’s communicative intention and the perlocution, i.e. the effect of the illocution upon the addressee(s), which can be manifested by means of a verbal or nonverbal reaction (Thomas 1995: 49). For instance, the locution of (5), which is very often said by nurses before a blood test or an injection, would be ‘sharp scratch’, the illocution would be that of a warning, and the perlocution might be that the patient looks the other way. Austin’s work is very important as it is with his Speech Act Theory that communication ceases to be considered simply a process of linguistic encoding-decoding and starts to involve intentions. Quite often, though, an utterance may have two illocutions simultaneously. The adjacency pair in Example 6 is a good case in point:

Example 6

[The following talk exchange takes place at the dinner table]

Mum: Can you pass me the salad, please?

Daughter: There you go.

In essence, Mum’s utterance is an indirect request. Like all indirect speech acts, it has two distinct but complementary illocutions: (a) a direct illocution, which arises when the grammatical form and the linguistic expressions of the sentence uttered are interpreted literally, and (b) an indirect illocution which is any additional communicative force the utterance may have (Searle 1979: 30–32). Hence, the direct illocution of ‘Can you pass me the salad, please?’ is an enquiry about her daughter’s ability to pass the salad, while its indirect illocution is a request that her daughter pass the salad. The addressee is able to capture the indirect
Illocution by virtue of the conventionality of this utterance; certain linguistic expressions such as ‘can you’, ‘could you (possibly)’ lead to standard requestive interpretations and are generally considered polite. On this basis, Example 6 illustrates conventional indirectness (Blum-Kulka 1989: 68, cf. Blum-Kulka 1987: 141). Language indirectness and, in particular, non-conventional indirectness (ibid.), will be examined in detail below.

One of the first researchers to show interest in the handling of speech acts in AVT is Bruti (2006, 2009). Bruti (2006) focuses specifically on compliments, which she treats as ‘culturally constrained speech acts’, and examines them in subtitled films from English into Italian. In a more recent publication (Bruti 2014), she compares the translation of compliments in professional subtitling to that in fansubbing. Moreover, Bonsignori et al. (2012) explore how English greetings, leave-takings and good wishes are dubbed into Italian (cf. Bonsignori and Bruti 2015). In Somwe Mubenga (2009) speech acts feature as the core units of meaning in the research methodology for film discourse put forward by the author under the name of ‘multimodal pragmatic analysis’. Finally, Pedersen (2008) proposes a model of subtitle quality assessment that is largely based on aspects of speech act theory and, in particular, on the importance of conveying the speaker’s illocution to the target audience.

Politeness

As Pinker (1994: 230) aptly remarks, ‘when we put words into people’s ears we are impinging on them and revealing our own intentions, honourable or not, just as surely as if we were touching them’. Jack’s utterance addressing Alice he has just met in a club (Example 7), epitomizes this quite clearly:

**Example 7**

Jack: So, your place or mine?

Being polite, in the broadest sense, means to show consideration towards the feelings of others by making appropriate verbal, paraverbal and nonverbal choices in a given sociocultural context (Sifianou 2001: 116). Although we all have an idea of what is polite and are able to recognize behaviour that deviates from the norm, politeness is a very complex notion and has been variously defined and approached within linguistics. At the most basic level a distinction needs to be made between deference and politeness as a pragmatic phenomenon. Deference can be described as ‘the respect we show to other people by virtue of their higher status, greater age, etc.’, which is construed in the grammar (e.g. the choice between tu/vous in French, du/Sie in German, tu/Lei in Italian tú vs. Usted in Spanish and so on) and/or lexicon of languages (e.g. address forms and honorifics, such as Doctor, Professor and Sir/Madam) (Thomas 1995: 150–151). As such, deference is very close to the common perception of ‘politeness’ and has been mainly studied within sociolinguistics. Pragmatics, on the other hand, is not interested per se in ‘any moral or psychological disposition towards being nice to one’s interlocutor’ (ibid.: 178) but rather in politeness as ‘a strategy (or a series of strategies) [deliberately] employed by the speaker to achieve a variety of goals’ which include, but are by no means limited to, ‘promoting harmonious relations’ (ibid.: 157–158). Several theories have been proposed for politeness as a pragmatic phenomenon, e.g. Lakoff (1973), Brown and Levinson (1978/1987), Leech (1983) and Fraser (1990). In the present volume, the focus will be exclusively on Brown and Levinson’s ‘face management’ approach, which is perhaps the most influential paradigm, quite popular among AVT scholars, as well.
Brown and Levinson’s (1978/1987) politeness theory is built around face referring to every person’s feeling of self-worth or self-image, which can be maintained, enhanced or damaged through interaction. Face is twofold: positive face is reflected in our desire to be liked and approved of by others and negative face encapsulates our desire to have the freedom to act as we choose and not to be imposed upon. Accordingly, there are face-threatening acts (FTAs), namely speech acts that can threaten the addressee’s negative face (e.g. requests, orders, threats, warnings, offers, promises, compliments) or his/her positive face (e.g. expressions of criticism/disapproval/contempt, complaints, disagreements, challenges). Similarly, there are FTAs that pose a threat to the speaker’s negative face (e.g. expressing thanks, accepting apologies/offers, excuses, unwilling promises and offers) or his/her positive face (e.g. apologies, acceptance of compliments, admissions of guilt/responsibility).

If a speaker decides to actually perform an FTA, there is a range of strategies to choose from based on his/her assessment of the size of the FTA in question, which can be calculated by taking into account the power and distance between the interlocutors as well as the rating of the imposition (Brown and Levinson 1978/1987). This selection of strategies includes: performing the FTA without any redress (bald on-record), performing the FTA with redress using positive politeness, performing the FTA with redress using negative politeness and performing the FTA with off-record politeness.

Speakers tend to opt for performing the FTA with no redressive action, namely speaking directly without any mitigation whatsoever, in Examples 8–11 (Thomas 1995: 170–171):

**Examples 8–11**

8 In an emergency: e.g. ‘Help me out of here’

9 When the FTA is perceived as being in the addressee’s interest: e.g. ‘Have a chocolate’

10 When the power differential is great: e.g. ‘You are to stand to attention every time the door is opened’

11 When the speaker has chosen to be deliberately offensive: e.g. [Mr Tam Dalyell, MP, in the House of Commons on 29 October 1986, referring to the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher] ‘I say that she is a bounder, a liar, a deceiver, a crook’.

When performing the FTA with positive politeness, the speaker appeals to the addressee’s positive face by using in-group identity markers, expressing interest in him/her and/or claiming common ground (Sifianou 2001: 129):

**Example 12**

I know you are a gem. Give me just a few more days to return the book.

Alternatively, if the context warrants it, negative politeness may be employed by means of deference markers, hedging, admitting/apologizing for the imposition, and/or being thankful or indebted, as illustrated below (adapted from Thomas 1995: 172):
Example 13

[From a student’s email to his lecturer]

Dear Prof. X, I would be grateful if we could perhaps meet on Thursday to discuss my essay. Many thanks.

Using off-record politeness would be another possibility when performing FTAs. More specifically, the speaker can give hints, resort to metaphors/irony/sarcasm, and/or be ambiguous/vague. For instance, the speaker may say:

Example 14

Gosh, I’m out of cash. I forgot to go to the bank.

Here, as Sifianou (2001: 129–130) explains,

the exact interpretation is left to the addressee, because it is not clear whether a statement or a request has been made. Thus if the addressee understands it as a request and says something like ‘I would like to help you but I’m out of cash myself’, the speaker could still say ‘Oh! I didn’t mean I wanted you to lend me money’. This strategy is used when the risk of loss of face is judged as great.

Off-record politeness options can be intimately linked with the generation of implicatures that will be discussed below, along with their communicative advantages.

One of the main criticisms articulated against Brown and Levinson (1978/1987) is that they seem to suggest that positive and negative politeness strategies are mutually exclusive. In everyday conversation, however, the speaker can employ both in a single utterance (Thomas 1995: 176):

Example 15

Do me a favour—piss off!

In a similar vein, it is not always easy to identify the precise strategy used: for example, although Jack’s utterance addressing Alice in Example 7 is an indirect invitation to spend the night together, thus potentially illustrating off-record politeness, due to the easily recognizable sexual associations it tends to carry as a fixed expression it could be also regarded as a bald on-record FTA in this context.

Hatim and Mason (1997) were the first AVT scholars who drew attention to politeness in subtitling, expressing the concern that this aspect of interpersonal meaning may suffer in the target text due to the physical constraints intrinsic to this AVT modality. Indeed, limitations of time and space necessitate the reduction of the original which often involves changing (indirect) requests into direct imperatives as well as omitting hedging and indicators of modality: for instance, when faced with rather strict constraints, the subtitler might be tempted to render ‘I was wondering if you could give me a lift’ as ‘Give me a lift’. As Díaz Cintas and Remael (2007: 155) advise, these reformulations ‘must be undertaken with care’ because they ‘can make a character come across more abrupt, more decisive or less
polite’ and, therefore, not as intended by the filmmakers, who have voiced criticism of such distortions (Pérez-González 2014). The narrative ramifications of politeness shifts in subtitling are discussed in more depth in Mason (2001) and Remael (2003). In addition, Yuan’s (2012) investigation of audience response to politeness representations in Chinese>English subtitling sheds some light on how the impression of a character’s personality, attitude and intentions can differ between source- and target-viewers. Notwithstanding the risk for characterization posed by certain forms of text condensation, it should be recognized that pragmatic meaning in audiovisual texts can also be recovered, if only partly, from body language and/or prosody, as viewers systematically draw on them in the meaning-making process, rather than relying solely on the subtitles (Desilla 2014). The study by Gartononika and Şerban (2009) explores the treatment of FTAs in the English subtitles of the Greek film Loaf and Camouflage (1984) and reveals some interesting cases where offensive language has been, quite surprisingly, added in the target text for the sake of effect.

Implicature

In Example 6, Mum’s indirect request was considered an instance of conventional indirectness (Blum-Kulka 1989: 68). Now consider the following exchange which exemplifies non-conventional indirectness (adapted from Blum-Kulka 1989: 39):

Example 16

[This conversation takes place at a grocery store between a 5-year-old boy, his father and his grandmother]

Boy (pointing to an item on a shelf): What’s that?
Father (waiting in the queue): We can’t buy up the whole shop.
Grandmother: He wasn’t asking you to buy anything. He only wanted to know what it is. He’s a good boy.

Here, the addressees do not agree on a specific interpretation (Blum-Kulka 1989: 39). As opposed to the grandmother, the father interprets the boy’s utterance as conversationally implying a request (ibid.). Contrary to Mum’s utterance in Example 6 where both illocutions are valid simultaneously, the boy’s utterance can be interpreted either as a request or as an information-seeking question but not both (ibid.). The locution ‘What’s that?’ does not conventionally (i.e. in any context) convey a requestive intention. Thus, it appears that the indirect meaning in Example 16 is recovered taking primarily context into account. Indeed, as the term suggests, non-conventional indirectness is more context-bound than conventional indirectness. It is also worth noting that owing to their relatively wide range of possible interpretations, instances of non-conventional indirectness are presumably riskier and demand more processing effort than instances of conventional indirectness (cf. Weizman 1989, Dascal 1983).

In the present chapter, implicature is treated as a sub-type of non-conventional indirectness. The two most influential pragmatic approaches to implicature are subsequently presented. First, Grice’s pioneering study of implicature is outlined. Then, the focus is shifted to the cognitive psychological perspective of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995, Wilson and Sperber 2004). Particular emphasis is placed upon the relevance-theoretic
model of utterance comprehension, which accounts for both implicit and explicit meaning. It is also shown how this model has formed the basis for the pragmatic analysis component of a methodology proposed for the investigation of implicatures in AVT.

If indirectness can be costly and put smooth communication in peril, then why do speakers indulge in it anyway? As Lee and Pinker (2010) point out, the answer resides in its important pay-offs. Various explanations have been proposed for the universal phenomenon of indirectness, such as the regard for politeness described above, the desire to intensify the force of one’s message and/or to make one’s language more interesting and appealing (Brown and Levinson 1978/1987, Leech 1983). In the aforementioned explanations, the use of indirectness seems to help the speaker obtain some communicative advantage or avoid some undesirable effect (Thomas 1995: 122). In Example 17, let us revisit Jack’s indirect invitation to Alice (originally featured in Example 7), this time accompanied by her response:

Example 17

[This talk exchange takes place in a club. The interlocutors have just met. Jack, who is overconfident, flirts with Alice who does not seem interested]

Jack: So, your place or mine?

Alice: I’d rather eat chocolate!

In what follows, it will be demonstrated how Alice’s reply to Jack’s indirect invitation to spend the night together, and in particular, the implicatures it evokes can be catered for within both the Gricean and Relevance Theory frameworks.

The essence of Grice’s account of conversation and implicature resides in one of the William James lectures he gave at the University of Harvard in 1967 (Atlas 2005: 45), which was published in 1975 in a paper entitled ‘Logic and Conversation’. As the title suggests, conversation is treated here as a manifestation of rational behaviour. Grice claims that communication does not occur in a haphazard, accidental way, and that conversations are rule-governed, cooperative exchanges (1975/1991: 306). In the course of everyday communication, interlocutors are assumed to observe the Cooperative Principle (CP), which is formulated as follows:

Cooperative Principle: Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

(Grice 1975/1991: 307)

The CP is intended to encapsulate the rational, cooperative, goal-oriented nature of communication and gives rise to the following maxims of conversation (Grice 1975/1991: 308–309):

**Quantity**

- Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)
- Do not make your contribution more informative than is required
Quality
- Do not say what you believe to be false
- Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence

Relation
- Be relevant

Manner
- Avoid obscurity
- Avoid ambiguity
- Be brief
- Be orderly

As Grice observes, the maxims are not always adhered to; speakers often fail to observe them for various reasons (1975/1991: 310). Nevertheless, communication can proceed smoothly and, thus, be successful regardless of whether speakers adhere to the maxims or not, since addressees always entertain the assumption that (at least) the CP is observed (Marmaridou 2000: 229–230). Although there are various types of maxim non-observance, only one is characteristically associated with the generation of what Grice calls particularized conversational implicatures, namely maxim flouting or exploitation. In floutings speakers blatantly fail to adhere to a maxim in order to exploit it for communicative purposes (Grice 1975/1991: 310). At first glance, Alice’s response seems completely irrelevant thus flouting the maxim of Relation. However, based on Grice, there is no reason to assume that Alice is not a rational cooperative speaker. To maintain this assumption and be able to decipher Alice’s utterance, Jack needs to activate his background knowledge and, more specifically, that idea of chocolate as a substitute for sexual pleasure. Given this piece of information, one would be able to infer the implicature that Alice rejects Jack’s invitation and in quite a derisive manner, for that matter.

Grice’s CP ‘shook the world of language studies in the past century’ (Mey 2002: 911). The CP and maxims of conversation have been applied to different fields, including AVT (e.g. Zabalbeascoa 2005, Skuggevik 2009). He was one of the first to acknowledge the importance of inference in linguistic communication, and his pioneering work on implicature paved the way for future approaches. However, to the best of my knowledge, there are no studies specifically on implicatures in AVT from a Gricean perspective.

Having the Gricean programme as its point of departure, Relevance Theory set out to shed more light upon human communication, while attempting to answer some of the issues not satisfactorily addressed by Grice (Wilson 1994: 55–57). According to its proponents, the pivotal role of inference is not securely established in his theory, while the CP and maxims of conversation themselves pose additional problems: the rationale behind their postulation remains hazy and the maxim of Relation is neglected (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 35–37, cf. Wilson 1994: 56).

Relevance Theory has been described as a cognitive psychological theory; in the authors’ own words, ‘[t]he aim is to identify the underlying mechanisms, rooted in human psychology, which explain how humans communicate with one another’ rather than to define communication per se (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 32; emphasis added). One of the fundamental tenets of Relevance Theory is that ‘every aspect of communication and cognition is governed by the search for relevance’ (Wilson 1994: 46). People tend to pay attention to information that
they expect to be relevant to them at a given moment (ibid.). It is stressed that relevance is not an absolute concept but is achieved in varying degrees (Wilson and Sperber 2004: 609). Interactants select a specific input not simply because it is relevant but because it is the most relevant input available to them on a particular occasion (ibid.).

Along with foregrounding the role of relevance in verbal communication, Sperber and Wilson have revamped the notion of context. For them, context is not merely restricted to the immediate socio-physical context and co-text in which an utterance is produced; instead, it is conceptualized as potentially encompassing a whole range of assumptions that the hearer entertains about the world, such as encyclopaedic information, memories, cultural assumptions, beliefs about the speaker and so on (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 16–17). Interestingly, in this framework, context is not determined a priori, as many pragmatic theories including Grice would have it, but is construed during interpersonal communication (Sperber and Wilson 1998: 374). Relevance Theory is equipped with the conceptual tools for understanding context selection (Hill 2006: 3). One such tool is the coinage cognitive environment (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 30). A cognitive environment consists of all the facts or assumptions that one may perceive or infer; it encompasses anything available to us through senses, memory, culture and communication (ibid.; Hill 2006: 3). The relationship between cognitive environment and context can be schematically represented in Figure 16.1 below:

![Figure 16.1](image)

\[ \text{Figure 16.1 Text evokes Context (adapted from Hill 2006: 14).} \]

As Hill (2006: 14) explains, ‘[an] utterance does not evoke the audience’s entire cognitive environment. It only evokes certain assumptions, and these form the context in which the utterance is processed’.

At the same time, as part of the comprehension process, the addressee needs to construct appropriate hypotheses about both the explicit and the implicit meaning of an utterance or, in relevance-theoretic terms, the explicature(s) and implicature(s) respectively. Implicatures are defined as contextual assumptions or implications derived by the speaker’s intention and the hearer’s expectation that the utterance of the former is optimally relevant (Sperber and Wilson 1995: 194–195). Two different kinds of implicature are recognized, namely implicated premises and implicated conclusions (ibid.: 195). On the one hand, implicated premises are mainly retrieved from the addressee’s background knowledge and memory (ibid.). Such assumptions are identifiable by virtue of guiding the addressee towards an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance and being the
most readily accessible assumptions to this end (ibid.). Implicated conclusions, on the other hand, are deduced from the context and the explicatures of an utterance processed together (ibid.). Such conclusions are identifiable as implicatures based on the speaker’s expectation that the addressee will recover them, as the former intends his/her utterance to be relevant to the latter (ibid.). Hence, both implicated premises and implicated conclusions are included in the first interpretation complying with the principle of relevance (ibid.). Furthermore, the implicatures of an utterance can have varying degrees of strength: an implicature may be strong, i.e. highly predictable, or weak, i.e. not easily determinable (ibid.: 199).

In the light of the above, the inferential tasks that Jack would presumably undertake in order to understand Alice’s reply in Example 17 can be described as follows: Jack assumes that Alice’s utterance is optimally relevant to him; since what he wants to know (taking largely for granted that Alice would like to spend the night with him) is whether she prefers them to spend the night at his or her place, he assumes that Alice’s utterance will achieve relevance by replying to his question. This expectation of relevance may be satisfied by the assumption that chocolate is considered as a substitute for sexual pleasure, which is drawn from Jack’s cognitive environment. This assumption will be the implicated premise of Alice’s utterance that, together with the explicature—i.e. that Alice would rather eat chocolate than spend the night with Jack—can yield the implicated conclusion that Alice refuses to spend the night with Jack because she prefers a substitute of sexual pleasure instead. In turn, the strongly implicated conclusion processed together with background knowledge might generate a series of weak implicatures—i.e. that Alice is not attracted to Jack, she is irritated by his coarse flirting, etc. The surplus processing effort required by Alice’s indirect answer is compensated for by surplus cognitive effects, namely the strongly communicated implicature, and possibly the aforementioned weakly communicated implicatures. One should also add to the extra effects the tones of mockery and sarcasm conveyed by Alice’s utterance.

Emerging when speakers mean much more (or something completely different from) what they actually say, implicatures are prevalent not only in everyday communication but also in film dialogue (Kozloff 2000, cf. Desilla 2012). According to Desilla (2012: 35), ‘particularly, the concept of implicated premise acquires a very interesting dimension when applied to film communication, as it can flexibly include knowledge available from previous films’, thus catering for intertextuality (Stafford 2007: 83–84), which is very often achieved indirectly through dialogue, the visuals, music, cinematography, editing or combinations of the above.

Drawing on Relevance Theory, as well as multimodality and film studies, Desilla (2009, 2012, 2014), designed a methodology that sheds light upon the construal, cross-cultural relay and comprehension of film dialogue implicatures by filmmakers, translators and audiences, respectively, in an attempt to address the scarcity of studies of implicit meaning in AVT. More specifically, Desilla proposed a cognitive pragmatic definition of implicature—where relevance-theoretic concepts are adapted accordingly to cater for the semiotic complexity of subtitled films—that is worth quoting at length (Desilla 2014: 195):

Implicature in film can be defined as any assumption intended by the filmmakers which is implicitly and non-conventionally communicated in the film dialogue. Audiences can infer the intended implicatures via the selection and the joint processing of the most relevant elements from their cognitive environment. The cognitive environment potentially includes information entertained by the viewers themselves as well as information conveyed (perceived or inferred) by the various semiotic resources deployed in the film being viewed. The former may consist, inter alia, of encyclopedic and sociocultural
knowledge, as well as personal experience. The latter may be retrieved via the components of the mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing and soundtrack. In the case of subtitled films, the cognitive environment of the target audience obviously includes the subtitles which are added onto the visual image. The appropriate selection and exploitation of some of the aforementioned elements comprising the cognitive environment actually forms the particular context for the recovery of implicated conclusions. The utterance(s) that trigger the implicature(s) are intended by the filmmakers to evoke a specific context: background knowledge will be triggered in the form of implicated premises while the information readily conveyed via the film’s image and sound will be selected as immediate contextual premises.

Desilla’s methodology for investigating implicatures in films comprises three stages: multimodal transcription, pragmatic analysis and empirical testing of implicature comprehension by source- and target-audiences. Multimodal transcription (Baldry and Thibault 2006) was selected as a means of identifying the contribution of verbal and nonverbal semiotic resources to the construal of implicatures and the creation of overall meaning by the filmmakers, and was complemented by a pragmatic analysis of the utterances evoking implicatures and their target-language counterparts in the light of Relevance Theory (Wilson and Sperber 2004) (for analysis of specific examples see Desilla 2012, Pérez-González 2014). Featuring as the final stage of this methodological apparatus, the experimental component was designed to probe implicature comprehension by a sample of source- and target-viewers, while essentially testing the extent to which the intuitive pragmatic analysis undertaken represents a realistic account of implicature understanding by source- and target-audiences (for a more extended account of the experimental design and discussion of findings see Desilla 2014).

The proposed methodology was applied to a case study of implicatures in Bridget Jones’s Diary (2001), Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason (2004) and their Greek subtitled versions available on DVD. The comparison and contrast of source text and target text in terms of their constitutive explicatures and implicatures revealed three types of implicature relay: preservation (i.e. implicature into same implicature), explicitation (i.e. implicature into explicature), and modification (i.e. implicature into different implicature) (Desilla 2009). It was observed that the vast majority of the instances of implicature identified in the two romantic comedies are preserved in the subtitles, while explicitation (partial or total) is only occasionally opted for. Interestingly enough, half of the cases of explicitation concern instances of implicatures triggered by what translation studies scholars have called culture-specific items (Newmark 1988, Ramière 2004) or, more recently, extralinguistic culture-bound references (Pedersen 2005). Nevertheless, most implicatures belonging to this category were found to be kept implicit in Greek, with the translator resorting to explicitation only when the intact preservation of an extralinguistic culture-bound reference in the subtitles would highly jeopardize comprehensibility (Desilla 2009). The possible explanations considered for the low frequency of explicitation revolve around factors like subtitle mechanics, practices in the DVD subtitling industry, film polysemiosis, audiences’ needs and expectations, as well as distinctive characteristics of implicatures such as open-endedness (ibid.). In particular, it was suggested that spelling out implicatures in the subtitles can be both impossible—for example, due to strict physical constraints—and undesirable because of the audience’s expectations of target text faithfulness and/or the filmmakers’ preference for indirect communication in a given scene fragment. In addition, it was argued that explicitation is less urgent, or even redundant, whenever information easily retrievable from sound and/or image can help the target audience recover the intended implicatures.
Indeed, the majority of implicatures identified in the two films are multimodally construed, often serving a comedic function and, therefore, spelling them out in the subtitles would not only be superfluous but could lead to significant loss of effect. Kovacic (1994), who was the first to promote the concept of relevance as a criterion for source text reduction in subtitling, argues that information readily accessible from context is a highly likely candidate for omission, so that viewers are not overloaded with processing (cf. Bogucki 2004). Put differently, the relevance and, ultimately, the effectiveness of the subtitled text decreases as the audience’s processing effort increases (Gambier 2003: 185).

Last but not least, it would seem that the narrative functions—intimately linked to plot and characterization—served by a number of implicatures in the two films seem to dictate, more or less strongly, their cross-cultural preservation (Desilla 2009). One of the major narrative functions of implicatures resides in their contribution to the creation of intimacy (sexual and emotional) between the protagonists, a finding that is in accord with research in the language of intimates (e.g. Joos 1967, Tannen 1989, Terkourafi 2011). In this light, explicitation, especially if practised extensively on the part of the translator, can, hypothetically, affect this aspect of characterization. In other words, the target audience might perceive the protagonists as less intimate than intended by the filmmakers (Desilla 2009). At the same time, explicitation is likely to have its gravest consequences when applied to implicatures which are at the services of plot; certain implicatures in the two romantic comedies are skilfully employed for ‘misleading’ the viewers and keeping them in suspense. Spelling out these implicatures would automatically lead to the resolution of the ambivalence deliberately pursued by the filmmakers. Consequently, explicitation would disrupt the filmmakers’ control of the audience’s knowledge while simultaneously depriving the audience of the pleasure of searching for that knowledge, as well as of all the suspense experienced in the meantime (ibid.).

On the whole, from Desilla’s case study, it emerges that implicatures invite the audience to join the game of meaning making by operating at both the horizontal and the vertical levels of filmic communication. In Sperber and Wilson’s (1995: 207) terms, ‘style is the relationship’; the fairly large number of implicatures in the film dialogue reflects a high degree of closeness not only between the main characters but also between the filmmakers and the viewers. Hence, frequent explicitation in the subtitles may ultimately skew the target audience’s perception of the relationship between the filmmakers and the source-audience (cf. Hill 2006: 73). Given that the aim of subtitles is to make the film experience comprehensible but no less enjoyable, it seems that explicitation should be applied with caution, since it could significantly lower the degree of engagement of the target audience.

**New research avenues**

As shown above, pragmatic phenomena have an instrumental role in the comprehension and enjoyment of audiovisual texts. AVT is an excellent environment for both intercultural and cross-cultural pragmatic research (Guillot 2010, 2012), as illustrated by the work of *Tapping the Power of Foreign Language Films: Audiovisual Translation as Cross-cultural Mediation*, an AHRC-funded research network seeking to collate research on the pragmatics of AVT and foster stronger cross-disciplinary collaborations (Tapping the Power, n.d.). From an intercultural pragmatics stance, one can investigate how aspects of interpersonal meaning, such as speech acts and implicature, are handled in the target text and understood by target viewers. From a purely cross-cultural pragmatics perspective, it could be tested whether politeness norms in different cultures (e.g. the positive
and negative politeness orientations in Europe as presented in Hickey and Stewart 2005) actually govern the audiovisual translator’s behaviour.

As evidenced by the regrettably small number of studies on the pragmatics of AVT cited in this chapter, very little is known about the way pragmatic phenomena travel across modes and cultures. To begin with, there has been a restricted emphasis on films with far too little attention paid to other genres which have been translated for years and could offer interesting data, like sitcoms, reality television, talk-shows, etc. Also, most scholars have so far focused on interlingual subtitling, while other AVT modalities have been rather neglected. For instance, it would be worth looking at FTAs in dubbing and speech acts in surtitling. On a similar note, to date there has hardly been any research on the pragmatics of amateur subtitling, despite the growing body of literature on the nature and particularities of what Pérez-González (2014) discusses under *cybercultures of collaborative AVT*. In both political subtitling and aesthetic subtitling, translators boldly and innovatively resort to long explicative glosses within brackets and also notes at the upper part of the screen (Díaz Cintas and Muñoz Sánchez 2006, Pérez-González 2014: 256). Such contextual adjustment material (Hill 2006)—which is normally absent from the translator’s arsenal in mainstream professional subtitling mainly due to physical constraints and, if used, may cause frustration among mainstream viewers—is, by contrast, expected and appreciated by fansub audiences. Thus, studies on the treatment of implicatures in the context of amateur subtitling are likely to yield different findings to those of existing work on official DVD subtitles.

Last but not least, there have been extremely few empirical investigations of the understanding of pragmatic phenomena by actual audiences with scholars so far largely relying on their own intuitions about how film dialogue would be presumably interpreted. It is high time that research in the pragmatics of AVT systematically followed developments in the field of experimental pragmatics, which has been testing pragmatic hypotheses for over a decade now. As Sperber and Noveck point out (2004: 8), ‘experimental data can be used together with intuition . . . to confirm or disconfirm hypotheses’. New studies on the reception of pragmatic meaning utilizing methodologies from psycholinguistics and/or experimental psychology would significantly enhance our understanding of the way target audiences comprehend audiovisual texts in comparison to source audiences (Desilla 2014).

**Summary**

In line with the scope and aims of this volume, the present chapter has provided an overview of three salient pragmatic phenomena, i.e. speech acts, politeness and implicature, teasing out their significant role in the construal, translation and reception of audiovisual texts. An attempt has also been made to familiarize readers with some key studies on the pragmatics of AVT and highlight future trajectories in under-researched modalities and practices. The very fact that AVT allows for the opportunity to tamper with pragmatic meaning as intended by the filmmakers (e.g. through spelling implicatures out in the subtitles or changing a direct request into an indirect one in the dubbed text) renders pragmatic phenomena particularly worthy of investigation in this multimodal context. Indeed, it has been demonstrated that the double-layeredness of film communication *per se* necessitates the careful relay of pragmatic meaning across cultures as any mishandlings may affect character perception, plot development and/or viewer enjoyment. Ultimately, this chapter aspires to sensitize readers to the pragmatics of audiovisual texts and, hopefully, inspire some of them to come up with new research ideas in this fascinating area.
Further reading


Desilla, L. (2014) ‘Reading Between the Lines, Seeing Beyond the Images: An Empirical Study on the Comprehension of Implicit Film Dialogue Meaning Across Cultures’, *The Translator* 20(2): 194–214 | This article reports on the first attempt to explore the comprehension of film dialogue implicatures by actual source and target viewers, drawing on insights from cognitive (experimental) pragmatics, film-studies and AVT.


Thomas, J. (1995) *Meaning in Interaction. An Introduction to Pragmatics*, London: Longman | Although written over 20 years ago, this book remains an excellent introduction to pragmatics, covering all the key pragmatic phenomena and relevant theories. Its uniquely accessible and entertaining style, as well as its plethora of examples from real-life interactions, make it ideal for beginners in the field.

Related topics

13 Spoken discourse and conversational interaction in audiovisual translation
17 Multimodality and audiovisual translation: cohesion in accessible films
18 Sociolinguistics and linguistic variation in audiovisual translation
23 Audiovisual translation and audience reception

References


**Filmography**

