

PRAGMATICS

By YUAN ZHOUMIN

Modern pragmatics took shape under the profound influence of traditions in Western philosophy, linguistics, and cognitive science. Since such foundational theories as speech act theory, the cooperative principle, politeness theory, and relevance theory were established, the field has developed a relatively mature conceptual framework and set of research approaches. Pragmatics in China has long benefited from the translation and interpretation of these theories, as well as their application and empirical testing. Yet much early research relied on Western theories to explain Chinese linguistic data, or used Chinese data to validate existing theories, with comparatively less attention paid to original concepts, methods, and models. The challenge of deriving pragmatic theories from Chinese language practices and social realities—while ensuring explanatory power, empirical validity, and broader applicability—has therefore become central to the field's further development in China.

In the new era, language use in China is undergoing profound transformations. Digital and intelligent technologies are reshaping public communication, online interaction, social governance, and international communication at a fundamental level, while multimodal expression, online communities, and artificial intelligence (AI) dialogue systems are continually altering how meaning is generated and interactions are organized. Meanwhile, growing exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations, along with the expanding demands of international communication, have placed greater demands on how Chinese narratives are understood, received, and able to resonate with audiences. These changes lend new urgency to building an independent Chinese knowledge system in pragmatics—one that addresses Chinese issues, is rooted in Chinese linguistic materials, develops Chinese theories, and offers Chinese approaches. Such a system is essential both to the discipline's further development and to research on China's language conditions and the modernization of national governance.

The independent knowledge system of Chinese pragmatics encompasses at least four dimensions. First, it requires a clear orientation toward Chinese questions and concerns. Second, it calls for a theoretical commitment to originality. Third, it demands a systemic vision aimed at building a coherent framework. Fourth, it requires a strong awareness of practical problems rooted in social realities.

Emerging directions

In recent years, Chinese pragmatics has produced a body of research with considerable capacity to illuminate Chinese culture and society. New directions including Chinese cultural pragmatics, econopragsmatics, and ethical pragmatics have taken shape, while theoretical work on the politeness principle, the *renqing* (interpersonal favor) principle, linguistic memetics, pragmatic identity, proxemics, and conceptions of politeness through the lens of "family culture" has enriched the resources available for understanding verbal communication in Chinese society.

Building an independent Chinese knowledge system in pragmatics



Recent changes in Chinese usage lend new urgency to building an independent Chinese knowledge system in pragmatics—one that addresses Chinese issues, is rooted in Chinese linguistic materials, develops Chinese theories, and offers Chinese approaches. Photo: CFP

The field has also expanded into a growing range of applied settings, including doctor–patient communication, educational discourse, business interaction, media discourse, government affairs communication, and online interaction, bringing pragmatic research out of the study and into the realities of social life. Meanwhile, advances in interactional, experimental, digital, and computational pragmatics have introduced new perspectives on the construction of an independent knowledge system in Chinese pragmatics, with affective computing, pragmatic annotation, and AI dialogue systems increasingly entering the research agenda. For all this progress, however, significant gaps remain in the development of such a system.

The "two integrations"—integrating the basic tenets of Marxism with China's specific realities and fine traditional culture—offer important methodological guidance for constructing an independent knowledge system in pragmatics. Integrating Marxism with China's specific realities means grounding pragmatic research in practice and real-world problems, including communication in community-level governance, responses to public crises, and language services in urban and rural areas. Integrating Marxism with fine traditional Chinese culture, in turn, calls for identifying indigenous conceptual resources that can be adapted for systematic analysis.

Concepts such as *li* (ritual), *ren* (benevolence), *yi* (righteousness), *he* (harmony), *xin* (trustworthiness), *cheng* (sincerity), *ming* (name), *yan* (speech), *ci* (rhetoric), *du* (measure), *shi* (circumstances), and *shi* (timing) contain a wealth of pragmatic thought. They concern not only norms of

discourse and strategies of expression, but also the ordering of relationships between individuals, institutions, and communities. Modern pragmatics can develop these intellectual resources into more analytically rigorous conceptual categories.

Advancing this process also requires greater cultural, theoretical, and practical awareness. Cultural awareness means recognizing the distinctive features of Chinese pragmatic practices through comparison with those of other countries, rather than imposing a single theoretical framework on Chinese materials. Theoretical awareness entails addressing the fundamental questions of where an independent knowledge system in pragmatics comes from, why it should be constructed, and whom it should serve, so that Chinese materials become not merely "illustrations" or "examples," but sources of theoretical development. Practical awareness, meanwhile, calls for bringing pragmatic research into real-world settings and testing the explanatory power and effectiveness of its theories in fields such as education, healthcare, the judiciary, government affairs, the media, and human–machine dialogue.

Coordinated efforts

Building an independent knowledge system in Chinese pragmatics requires coordinated progress on several fronts. The relationships between pragmatics and semantics, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, communication studies, public relations, cognitive science, and computational linguistics should be further clarified to create an open yet clearly defined "pragmatics+" framework. In foundation-

al theory, core categories such as "cooperation," "implicature," "speech acts," "face," "politeness," "relevance," "identity," and "relationships" should be reinterpreted and extended from a Chinese perspective. In applied pragmatics, researchers should systematically examine interactional rules, discourse strategies, and mechanisms of evaluation across institutional settings such as education, the judiciary, healthcare, government affairs, the media, and business. At the interdisciplinary level, "situational pragmatics" could provide an overarching framework for integrating cognitive, social, cultural, institutional, and technological variables. Engineering pragmatics, meanwhile, should focus more closely on pragmatic inference, strategy generation, and evaluation standards in dialogue systems, intelligent customer service, social robots, and industry-specific large language models.

Universities and research institutes can establish practice bases and joint laboratories with government agencies, hospitals, internet platforms, and AI companies, opening pathways from theoretical research to tool development and social application. Open and shared pragmatic data platforms should likewise standardize corpus collection, transcription, annotation, storage, sharing, and ethical review, providing a solid data foundation for theoretical innovation. A Chinese pragmatics terminology database should also be developed, together with a bidirectional Chinese–English framework for comparison and interpretation. Core concepts in international pragmatics such as "face," "politeness," "relationship," and "identity" should not simply be mapped

mechanically onto their apparent Chinese equivalents; their meanings instead require close analysis in light of regional and cultural variation.

Conceptual innovation alone cannot support the development of an independent knowledge system in Chinese pragmatics; robust methods and data are equally essential. Corpora should represent people across different regions, age groups, and occupations, encompassing both formal institutional discourse and everyday interaction. Beyond textual materials, they should systematically incorporate multimodal signs, including facial expressions, gestures, gaze, acoustic features, images, short videos, and the co-occurrence of text and images. Experimental research should move beyond static judgment tasks toward contextualized, interactive, and ecologically valid designs that maintain control over variables while strengthening explanatory validity in real-world settings. Pragmatic research can also be brought to bear on public policy communication, community-level governance, responses to emergencies, and narrative strategies in international communication. The digital and intelligent era, moreover, calls for the development of human–AI collaborative pragmatic models that integrate pragmatic inference, strategy generation, contextual understanding, ethical judgment, and social acceptability into dialogue-system design, thereby improving the quality and trustworthiness of AI-based language services.

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