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Pragmatics and its Reflection in Todays Films

Mamadjanova Nargiza Mahmujanovna
Associate Professor, Andijan State University

A B S T R A C T
This article provides an in-depth analysis of pragmatics and its reflection in contemporary cinema. It also discusses the importance of disciplines such as conversation analysis, linguistic ethnography, and sociolinguistics in the perception of film by contemporary film audiences.

A R T I C L E I N F O

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INTRODUCTION

Modern analytically oriented pragmatics has primarily been developed within disciplines concerned with face-to-face communication, that is, context-dependent interaction. These include text linguistics, discourse and conversation analysis, linguistic ethnography, sociolinguistics, and microsociology (face-to-face interaction). Across all these fields, pragmatics has prototypically focused on specific instances of spoken interaction. These involve: (a) particular linguistic expressions produced by specific participants in a conversation (usually more than two), (b) expressions embedded within psychologically, sociologically, and physically situated contexts governed by perception, and (c) interactions in which participants bring shared background ("world") knowledge relevant to the situation.

Pragmatics is generally concerned with the interactive aspect of face-to-face communication, namely, how people understand one another linguistically within a context-dependent framework. Many of the characteristic and typical topics of pragmatically oriented research are based on viewing communication primarily as situated spoken interaction. These include deixis, anaphora, turn-taking, openings and closings, conversational organization, discourse framing, discourse markers, and the role of paralinguistic and nonverbal features in interaction, among others.

The central problem of film is that the "relationship" it establishes lacks the core features of face-to-face communication, particularly those that pragmatics traditionally focuses on. First, film viewing is not an interactive process in the same way that conversation is. The viewer encounters a "finished" product–a pre-

constructed message–and generally has no legitimate means of influencing the structure of the message or the direction of the film discourse. A specific "film exchange" is not inclined toward "communicative feedback" in the way conversational exchanges are. Moreover, film viewing is not necessarily an interpersonal event: especially in contemporary conditions, films can be watched entirely alone through television, video, or DVD. During a screening, the active presence of the filmmakers (the film crew and actors) is not normally assumed, and even when they are present (as at premieres), their presence does not alter the pre-constructed nature of the film discourse, nor does it change the absence of direct interactive communication between the "sender" (the filmmakers) and the "receiver" (the audience).

Second, the process of film production is designed not to rely on the specificity of its presentation context. Since cinema venues and audiences are expected to be diverse and numerous, the film must be capable of functioning across this diversity. Regardless of the particular characteristics of the screening context, the ability to convey a clear message remains the most crucial factor.

In cinematic discourse, it is necessary to closely examine the pragmatic implications of defining the term "fact," as well as to analyze how audiences form perceptions of the distinction between reality and fiction. In many studies, the concepts of "truth" or "fact" are not clearly defined and are often implicitly treated as synonymous with reality. However, in cinema these terms differ in terms of their pragmatic functions. McHale proposes truth as a goal that fiction strives to achieve and emphasizes that audience interpretation is influenced not by films' presentation of objective reality, but by how truth is constructed.

From a pragmatic perspective, truth in cinema is dependent on contextual cues and the communicative intentions of the filmmaker. Nichols (2010, p. 51) defines reality as "an attempt by the filmmaker to translate their perspective on the real historical world into audiovisual form, derived from their direct engagement with the film's subject." This definition highlights the subjective nature of cinematic truth, indicating that meaning is not fixed but negotiated between the filmmaker's intentions and the audience's interpretive framework.

The role of the audience is decisive in determining a film's authenticity. Viewers rely on pragmatic cues such as tone, representational style, and directorial choices to assess the truthfulness of a narrative. The classification of a film as documentary or fictional depends not only on its content but also on how audiences interpret its communicative strategies. Thus, the perception of "falsehood" or "fabrication" in cinema is shaped not by rigid genre boundaries, but by pragmatic signals that guide interpretation.

Mc Hale defines fictional film as "non-assertion (or false assertion, or suspended illocutionary force)." Nichols, by contrast, describes it as "a distinctive world created by the filmmaker into which we enter without being directly addressed." LaMarre and his co-author do not provide a precise definition of fictional film but treat it as a condition separate from reality. Godmilow and her co-author adopt a similar approach, discussing fiction as the opposite of documentary film. More specifically, Godmilow analyzes how fictional films transform events into narratives surrounded by polished plots that elicit emotional responses and encourage less critical engagement. While this may be valid, the present study adopts Plantinga's definition of fiction, as it also applies to documentary film–namely, the representation of a character or reality. In this view, fiction is neither entirely real nor entirely false. This definition highlights the complexity of fabrication in documentary cinema, emphasizing that falsification is not merely the invention of characters or realities, but rather the misrepresentation of existing ones.

Among the authors discussed, Godmilow is the only one to explicitly emphasize audience perception. She argues that viewers must possess the ability to critically evaluate documentaries through their own perception. Feldman considers audience perception as a process shaped by rising levels of education and socio-economic status. La Marre portrays audience members as slow to adapt to change and slow to grasp innovations in documentary cinema. The most compelling approach to audience perception is offered by Plantinga, who focuses less on the audience itself and more on the relationship between filmmaker and viewer as the most important factor shaping how subject matter is perceived. In this sense, audience

perception is a process formed through exposure to documentary film. How a documentary is structured directly influences how it is received by viewers.

Cinema, like any art form, is typically an object that involves real participants–namely, its concrete creators and actual audiences. However, in essence, it exists independently of any particular individual or specific situational context. Viewers need not personally know the filmmakers, just as filmmakers need not personally know their viewers. Filmmakers often argue that during the process of film production, the director (along with the crew and sometimes "visitors") serves as the only actual audience. Once the film is completed, the director often becomes redundant. This condition reflects the perspective of all viewers, who experience the film not merely as a product intended for individual consumption, but as a contribution to a broader collective experience.

Like literary, theatrical, musical, and visual artworks, a cinematic work is a recorded message rather than a conversation. Unlike conversational messages, a film does not emerge through interaction, coordination, or short-term reciprocal exchanges between participants. Instead, it is presented in a completed, fixed, and durable form. This form is designed to be perceived repeatedly by diverse audiences across various situations, over extended periods of time and space. Furthermore, the communicative process specific to film is trans-situational: it retains its essential structure despite the diverse and context-specific conditions of its exhibition. This distinguishes film from spoken interaction, which is limited to a particular situation. However, if a film lacks even a prototypical model of communication - that is, some core features of conversation – can it truly be considered "communication" at all? When no direct contact exists between participants, the very concept of "communication" becomes difficult to sustain.

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