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THE NOTION OF PRAGMATIC POTENTIAL: HOW SYNTACTIC CONSTRUCTIONS REALIZE A COMMUNICATIVE EFFECT

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Abstract: *This article examines the concept of pragmatic potential and how syntactic constructions contribute to creating specific communicative effects. Building on the work of Vilen Komissarov, pragmatic potential is viewed as the ability of language units to express meaning effectively depending on the communicative situation. The discussion also draws on Adele Goldberg, who argues that syntactic constructions are meaningful patterns that serve particular communicative purposes rather than being purely structural forms. Combining these perspectives, the article shows how speakers use syntactic choices to shape meaning, convey intentions, and influence interpretation within real-life discourse contexts.*

Key words: *Pragmatic potential, syntactic constructions, communicative meaning, constructions grammar, functional linguistics, speaker intention.*

Pragmatic potential can be understood as the ability of linguistic forms to produce specific effects on the listener or reader. According to Komissarov, meaning is not fixed within words or structures alone; instead, it emerges through use in context¹³. This means that the same sentence may carry different implications depending on factors such as the speaker’s intention, the relationship between participants, and the situational background. Regarding to Ludwig Wittgenstein, an English linguist contributed to the philosophy of the language a lot, **pragmatic potential** of language units aimed at identifying certain functions of linguistic units when they perform certain functions in a definite context in the process of human communication¹⁴.

A **Russian linguist** S.T. Petrovna, who worked in functional linguistics, once said **“Pragmatic potential of grammatical units is understood by as the ability of linguistic means to influence the recipient.”** According to this view, grammatical structures—such as sentence types, word order, or syntactic constructions—carry an inherent ability to influence the recipient’s interpretation, emotions, or reactions. This means that even when two sentences express similar factual content, their grammatical form can alter their communicative impact.

1. *You might want to close the window.*
2. *It is cold in here.*
3. *It is very noisy outside.*

¹³ Komissarov, V. N. (1991). *Theory of translation (Linguistic aspects)*. Vysshaya Shkola

¹⁴ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations*, 1953

Grammatically, the sentence *I* is a suggestion. However, its pragmatic potential allows it to function as a polite request, a warning, or even a subtle complaint, depending on the context. In a cold room, it may signal discomfort or in a formal setting, it softens a directive. In the sentences 2 and 3 the speaker’s act – illocutionary act can be interpreted as an implicit request or complaint even though the structure of utterances is declarative. Thus, pragmatic potential highlights the functional role of grammar as an active tool in communication, emphasizing that linguistic choices are closely connected to intention, context, and effect on the audience.

Pragmatic potential is closely tied to communicative effectiveness by a range of language means. Speakers rely on it to adjust their language according to social norms, politeness strategies, and desired outcomes. Importantly, pragmatic meaning is not always explicitly encoded, rather it often arises from the interaction between linguistic form and contextual knowledge.

Although syntax and syntactic structure of the utterances are traditionally considered separate from meaning construction grammar, as developed by Adele Goldberg, challenges this view by arguing that syntactic constructions can carry meaning. A construction is defined as a conventional pairing of form and meaning, ranging from simple patterns to complex sentence structures.

She baked him a cake.

The verb *bake* does not inherently mean “to give,” yet within this construction, the sentence implies that something is created for someone, suggesting transfer or benefit. This demonstrates that syntactic constructions contribute semantic and pragmatic information beyond individual words. They function as templates that shape how an utterance is interpreted.

Moreover, constructions can signal emphasis, perspective, and speaker attitude.

It was John who broke the vase.

This cleft construction highlights a particular element (John) and implies contrast or correction, showing how syntax can guide the listener’s attention and interpretation.

What is the interaction between Pragmatic Potential and Syntax?

When pragmatic potential and syntactic constructions are considered together, it becomes evident that syntax plays a crucial role in achieving communicative goals. Speakers do not choose sentence structures randomly, instead, they select forms that align with their intentions and the communicative context. It should be noted that the main aim of communicative and pragmatic grammar consists of defining pragmatic potential of grammatical units and syntactic constructions.¹⁵ There can be several reasons why the speaker uses the certain construction to put an impact on the listener.

1. Expressing politeness and indirectness

¹⁵ Saidova M.S., *FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF TEXTS OF OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS IN ENGLISH, UZBEK AND RUSSIAN LANGUAGES, NEW CENTURY INNOVATIONS, Volume-51_Issue-1_April_2024*
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Close the door.

Could you close the door?

I was wondering if you could close the door.

All three sentences convey the same basic action, but their pragmatic potential differs significantly. The imperative form is direct and potentially abrupt, while the interrogative and more complex structure introduce politeness and indirectness.

2. Emphasis and Information Structure

The teacher praised the student

It was the student that the teacher praised.

The second sentence uses a cleft construction to emphasize “the student,” possibly in contrast to others. This shift in structure alters the focus of the message without changing its core content.

3. Conveying Speaker Attitude and Evaluation

He made a mistake.

A mistake was made.

The passive construction in the second sentence removes or downplays the agent, which may serve to avoid blame or create a more formal tone. This is common in academic, political, and bureaucratic discourse, where responsibility is often softened or obscured.

4. Creating Dramatic and Emotional Effects

In literary discourse, syntactic constructions are frequently used to produce emotional or stylistic effects. For instance, short, fragmented sentences can convey urgency or tension:

He ran. Faster. No time to think.

In contrast, long, complex sentences may create a reflective or descriptive tone. Authors carefully manipulate syntax to shape the reader’s experience, demonstrating the strong link between structure and communicative impact.

Context as a Determining Factor

While syntactic constructions give speakers the structural tools to form sentences, their real communicative force only emerges within a particular context. Language does not function in a vacuum; every utterance is shaped by the situation in which it is used and by the people involved in the interaction. Cultural expectations, social roles, and shared background knowledge all play a crucial role in how a message is understood. What may sound polite, appropriate, or even neutral in one context can be interpreted very differently in another.

For instance, in some cultures, speakers tend to rely on indirect forms—such as questions or hints—because they are seen as more respectful and less imposing. In other settings, however, being direct is often associated with honesty, clarity, or efficiency.

Could you open the window?

The statement might be interpreted as polite and considerate in one context, but unnecessarily indirect or even evasive in another. Similarly, the same grammatical structure can carry different meanings depending on who is speaking, to whom, and under what

circumstances. Tone of voice, physical setting, and the relationship between participants can all influence whether an utterance is taken as friendly, formal, ironic, or even rude.

These variations show that meaning is not simply encoded in syntactic form; rather, it is co-constructed by speakers and listeners within a shared communicative environment. Syntax provides the framework, but context fills it with life. As a result, understanding language requires more than analysing sentence structure—it also involves recognizing the social and pragmatic factors that guide interpretation. In this sense, language should be seen as a flexible, context-sensitive system in which grammar and usage work together to produce meaningful communication.

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