Pragmatics By Stephen Levinson

Unlocking the Nuances of Meaning: A Deep Dive into Stephen Levinson's Pragmatics

Have you ever found yourself in a conversation where the speaker says one thing, but you intuitively understand they mean something entirely different? Perhaps a sarcastic comment delivered with a straight face, or a polite suggestion that carries an underlying demand. This fascinating world of unspoken meaning, of how context shapes our understanding of language, is precisely what the field of pragmatics seeks to unravel. And when it comes to pragmatics, one name stands out prominently: Stephen Levinson.

Levinson, a distinguished linguist, has made profound contributions to our understanding of how we use language in real-world situations. His work, particularly his seminal book "Pragmatics" (1983), has become a cornerstone for anyone interested in the social and contextual aspects of communication. It's not just about the words themselves, but the intricate dance between what is said, what is implied, and how those implications are understood. Let's embark on a journey, step-by-step, to explore the rich landscape of pragmatics as illuminated by Stephen Levinson.

The Essence of Pragmatics: More Than Just Words

What Exactly is Pragmatics?

At its core, pragmatics is the study of how context influences the interpretation of meaning. While semantics deals with the literal meaning of words and sentences, pragmatics ventures into the realm of how speakers use language to achieve communicative goals and how hearers interpret those utterances based on shared knowledge, social conventions, and the surrounding circumstances. It's the difference between knowing what "it's cold in here" literally means and understanding that it might be a request to close a window or turn up the heating.

Levinson's work emphasizes that linguistic meaning is not solely determined by the linguistic code but is heavily dependent on the context in which it is produced and interpreted. This includes the physical setting, the social relationship between speakers, their prior knowledge, and the overall purpose of the interaction. Think about the word "bank." Semantically, it can refer to a financial institution or the side of a river. Pragmatically, the context will immediately tell you which meaning is intended.

The Gricean Maxims: A Foundation for Understanding

A pivotal contribution to pragmatics, and one that Levinson deeply explores, comes from the philosopher H.P. Grice. Grice proposed the Cooperative Principle, suggesting that participants in a conversation are typically trying to make their contributions such as are required, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. To achieve this cooperation, speakers adhere to four maxims:

1. **Maxim of Quantity:** Be as informative as is required, but not more so.

2. **Maxim of Quality:** Try to make your contribution one that is true; do not say what you believe to be false or for which you lack adequate evidence.
3. **Maxim of Relation:** Be relevant.
4. **Maxim of Manner:** Be clear; avoid obscurity of expression, ambiguity, and be brief and orderly.

Levinson highlights how speakers often *flout* these maxims, not out of a desire to be uncooperative, but to convey implied meanings, known as implicatures. For example, if someone asks, "Are you coming to the party tonight?" and you reply, "I have to study for a big exam," you are flouting the Maxim of Relation by not directly answering the question. However, the implicature is clear: you are not coming to the party because of your exam.

Implicatures: The Art of Saying Less, Meaning More

This concept of implicature is central to Levinson's exploration of pragmatics. He distinguishes between two main types:

Conversational Implicatures

These are the meanings that arise from the assumption that the speaker is following the Cooperative Principle. As illustrated with the exam example above, conversational implicatures are context-dependent and can be cancelled. If you had meant you *were* coming despite the exam, you would need to add a clarification.

Conventional Implicatures

These meanings are attached to specific words or constructions and do not depend on the Cooperative Principle or context for their derivation. For instance, the word "but" carries a conventional implicature of contrast. Saying "It's raining, but I'm going for a walk" implies that the rain is a reason one might *not* go for a walk, but the speaker is doing so anyway.

Levinson's meticulous analysis of these concepts provides a robust framework for understanding how we navigate the complexities of everyday conversation, inferring meaning beyond the literal words. This is particularly relevant in fields like discourse analysis and sociolinguistics, where understanding conversational implicatures is crucial for interpreting social interactions.

Levinson's Key Contributions to Pragmatics

Deixis and Distance

One of Levinson's significant contributions is his work on deixis. Deictic expressions, such as "here," "there," "this," "that," "I," "you," "now," and "then," are words whose meanings are dependent on the context of utterance, specifically on the speaker's location and time of speaking. Levinson systematized the study of deixis, categorizing it into person deixis (I, you), place deixis (here, there), and time deixis (now, then).

He argued that these deictic centers are established by the speaker in the context of an utterance. This concept of "egocentric particulars" – meanings anchored to the speaker's perspective – is fundamental to understanding how

we ground language in our immediate experience. His research on the spatial and temporal organization of language provides invaluable insights into how speakers and hearers establish common ground.

The Three-Level Theory of Utterance Structure

Levinson proposed a sophisticated model for analyzing utterance structure, proposing three levels of meaning that contribute to the overall interpretation of an utterance:

1. **Literal (or Sentence) Meaning:** The semantic content of the words and their grammatical arrangement.
2. **Reconstructible Inferred Meaning:** This refers to the meaning that can be systematically derived through principles like Grice's maxims. This is where conversational implicatures are born.
3. **Non-Reconstructible Inferred Meaning:** This category encompasses meanings that are not systematically derivable. These are often idiosyncratic, highly context-specific, and rely on a wealth of shared background knowledge or cultural understanding.

This tiered approach highlights the layered nature of communication. We don't just process a sentence; we engage in a dynamic process of interpretation that draws on linguistic knowledge, reasoning abilities, and our understanding of the world and our interlocutors.

Politeness Theory and Face

While Levinson didn't *originate* politeness theory (that credit largely goes to Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, a different Stephen Levinson!), his work on pragmatics provides the foundational concepts that underpin it. Politeness theory, drawing heavily on pragmatics, explores how we use language to manage social relationships and avoid causing offense. It centers on the concept of "face," which refers to an individual's public self-image.

Face is divided into two aspects: positive face (the desire to be liked and approved of) and negative face (the desire to be free from imposition). Many utterances, especially those that might threaten face (such as requests or commands), are often phrased indirectly or with mitigating devices. This is where pragmatics becomes indispensable. Understanding the implied meaning behind a polite request—like "Would you mind closing the door?"—allows us to recognize the speaker's effort to maintain both their own and the hearer's face. Levinson's work helps explain *why* we use indirect language and how those indirect cues are interpreted pragmatically.

Why Stephen Levinson's Pragmatics Matters

Bridging Linguistics and Cognition

Levinson's pragmatics acts as a crucial bridge between linguistic theory and cognitive psychology. By investigating how speakers and hearers reason about meaning in context, his work sheds light on the cognitive processes involved in language use. It demonstrates that understanding language is not a passive reception of information but an active, inferential process.

Applications Beyond Academia

The insights from Levinson's pragmatics have far-reaching applications:

1. **Artificial Intelligence and Natural Language Processing (NLP):** For machines to truly understand human language, they need to grasp pragmatic nuances. AI systems are being developed to interpret implicatures, understand politeness, and decipher context-dependent meanings, areas significantly informed by Levinson's work.
2. **Cross-Cultural Communication:** Different cultures have distinct pragmatic conventions. Understanding these differences, as explored through pragmatics, is vital for effective intercultural dialogue and avoiding misunderstandings.
3. **Education and Language Learning:** Teaching language effectively involves more than just grammar and vocabulary. It requires an understanding of how to use language appropriately in different social contexts, a skill honed by pragmatic awareness.
4. **Communication Skills Training:** For professionals in fields like law, business, and healthcare, mastering pragmatic communication can significantly enhance their effectiveness and build stronger relationships.

A Framework for Continued Exploration

Stephen Levinson's "Pragmatics" remains a foundational text because it offers a coherent and systematic approach to a complex field. It provides the conceptual tools and theoretical frameworks necessary for further research into the intricacies of human communication. Whether you're a student of linguistics, a budding AI researcher, or simply someone fascinated by the art of conversation, delving into Levinson's work offers a profound appreciation for the subtle yet powerful ways we convey and interpret meaning.

Conclusion: The Art of Implied Meaning

In conclusion, Stephen Levinson's contributions to pragmatics have fundamentally reshaped our understanding of how language functions in the real world. By meticulously dissecting concepts like the Gricean maxims, implicatures, deixis, and the structure of utterances, he has provided us with a powerful lens through which to view the dynamic and context-dependent nature of communication. Pragmatics, as illuminated by Levinson, reveals that the true meaning of our words often lies not just in what we say, but in what we imply, and how our interlocutors skillfully navigate those implied meanings. It's a testament to the richness and complexity of human interaction, a continuous process of meaning-making that is both a science and an art.

Pragmatics by Stephen Levinson is a foundational work in the study of linguistic pragmatics that offers a comprehensive analysis of how context influences the interpretation of meaning in communication. This seminal book, published in 1983, has significantly shaped modern understandings of language use, interaction, and the social aspects of communication. It is widely regarded as a cornerstone text in the fields of linguistics, cognitive science, and philosophy of language.

Understanding Pragmatics: An Introduction

Pragmatics is a subfield of linguistics concerned with how people produce and interpret meaning in real-world contexts. Unlike semantics, which studies the inherent meaning of words and sentences in isolation, pragmatics considers the situations, intentions, and social norms that shape communication. Stephen Levinson's "Pragmatics" emphasizes that language use cannot be fully understood without accounting for contextual factors. The book explores how speakers and listeners collaborate to make sense of utterances, often relying on shared knowledge, assumptions, and sociocultural norms.

Key Concepts in Pragmatics According to Levinson

Levinson introduces several core concepts that underpin pragmatic analysis:

Implicature

Implicature refers to the additional meaning inferred by the listener based on the speaker's utterance, which is not explicitly stated. Levinson distinguishes between:

1. **Conversational Implicature**: Derived from the cooperative principle and conversational maxims, where meaning is inferred through context and assumed mutual understanding.
2. **Generalized Implicature**: Implicature that typically holds across many contexts and does not depend heavily on specific circumstances.

The Cooperative Principle and Maxims

Levinson builds on Paul Grice's cooperative principle, which posits that speakers typically aim to be informative, truthful, relevant, and clear. This principle is operationalized through four maxims:

1. **Quantity**: Provide as much information as needed, but not more.
2. **Quality**: Strive for truthfulness and avoid misleading or false statements.
3. **Relation**: Be relevant to the ongoing conversation.
4. **Manner**: Be clear and orderly in expression.

Levinson discusses how violations of these maxims can generate implicatures, leading to nuanced communication.

Deixis and Reference

Deixis involves words and phrases that require contextual information to be understood, such as "this," "that," "here," and "you." Levinson explores how deixis anchors utterances to specific contexts, enabling speakers to direct attention and specify references.

Speech Acts

The book also delves into speech act theory, which considers how utterances function as actions—such as

asserting, questioning, commanding, or promising. Levinson demonstrates how understanding speech acts is crucial to interpreting pragmatically complex interactions.

The Structure of Levinson's Pragmatics

Levinson's approach to pragmatics is characterized by a systematic exploration of various elements that influence communication:

Context and Situational Factors

The context encompasses physical environment, social relationships, cultural norms, and prior discourse. Levinson emphasizes that these elements are integral to interpreting utterances correctly.

Politeness and Face Theory

Building on earlier work by Brown and Levinson, the book discusses politeness strategies involved in maintaining positive and negative face needs. These strategies help mitigate face-threatening acts in social interactions.

Presupposition and Entailment

Levinson examines how certain parts of speech presuppose or entail information assumed to be known or accepted by participants, influencing how messages are constructed and understood.

Applications of Pragmatics in Various Fields

Levinson's work has diverse applications beyond theoretical linguistics:

Language Teaching and Learning

Understanding pragmatics helps language learners navigate social norms, politeness conventions, and conversational strategies across cultures.

Artificial Intelligence and Natural Language Processing

Pragmatic theories underpin advances in AI systems designed to interpret user intents, manage dialogues, and generate contextually appropriate responses.

Legal and Ethical Communication

Pragmatic insights assist in analyzing how language influences perceptions and decisions in legal contexts, advertising, and media discourse.

Critiques and Developments Since Levinson's Work

While Levinson's "Pragmatics" laid a solid foundation, subsequent research has expanded and critiqued some of its ideas:

Formal Pragmatics and Dynamic Semantics

Modern approaches incorporate formal logic and dynamic semantics to model context-dependent meaning more precisely.

Cross-Cultural Pragmatics

Research increasingly emphasizes cultural variations in politeness, implicature, and pragmatic norms, highlighting the importance of cultural competence.

Cognitive and Neuroscientific Perspectives

Emerging studies explore the neural mechanisms underlying pragmatic processing, opening new avenues for interdisciplinary research.

Why Levinson's "Pragmatics" Remains Influential

Levinson's systematic methodology, comprehensive scope, and integration of multiple pragmatic phenomena make his work an enduring reference point. It provides a detailed framework for analyzing real-life communication, bridging theoretical insights and practical applications.

Key Takeaways for Students and Researchers

1. Pragmatics is essential for understanding how meaning is constructed in context.
2. Communication involves cooperative principles, implied meanings, and social norms.
3. Analyzing discourse requires attention to deixis, speech acts, presupposition, and implicature.
4. Interdisciplinary approaches enrich pragmatic theories, connecting linguistics with cognitive science, anthropology, and AI.

Conclusion

"Pragmatics" by Stephen Levinson remains a cornerstone in the study of language and communication. Its detailed examination of how context influences meaning, combined with practical insights into conversational dynamics and social norms, makes it an invaluable resource for linguists, language teachers, AI developers, and anyone interested in the intricacies of human interaction. As the field continues to evolve, Levinson's foundational work continues to inform and inspire ongoing research into the complex relationship between language, cognition, and society.

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Final thoughts on Pragmatics By Stephen Levinson

In summary, Pragmatics By Stephen Levinson is an essential tool for managing and sharing structured knowledge in the modern digital world. Its consistent formatting, portability, and versatility make it suitable for education, professional use, and personal reference. By understanding how to create, edit, annotate, store, and share Pragmatics By Stephen Levinson responsibly, users can maximize its value and ensure a reliable and efficient information experience across all devices.

Stephen Levinson's Pragmatics: A Step-by-Step Exploration of Meaning in Context

In the intricate tapestry of human communication, meaning is rarely a static entity. It is a dynamic, fluid construct, shaped by a myriad of contextual factors that extend far beyond the literal words uttered. For decades, the field of pragmatics has sought to unravel this complexity, and at its forefront stands Stephen Levinson, a seminal figure whose work has profoundly influenced our understanding of how we derive meaning from language in use. Levinson's contributions, particularly his seminal work "Pragmatics," have become foundational texts for linguists, philosophers, cognitive scientists, and anyone seeking a deeper appreciation of the subtle art of conversational inference.

This article embarks on a detailed, analytical exploration of Stephen Levinson's pragmatics, delving into the core principles and theories he has so effectively articulated. We will navigate the labyrinth of context, inference, and the unspoken rules that govern our interactions, providing a step-by-step understanding of this vital linguistic discipline. Whether you're a seasoned academic or a curious newcomer to the study of language, this journey will illuminate the pragmatic underpinnings of everyday conversation, highlighting the genius of Stephen Levinson's foundational insights.

The Core Tenets of Pragmatics: Beyond Literal Meaning

At its heart, pragmatics is the study of language as it is used in real-world situations. It moves beyond the realm of semantics, which focuses on the inherent meaning of words and sentences in isolation, to investigate how context influences interpretation. Stephen Levinson, in his influential writings, emphasizes that understanding utterances requires more than just decoding their dictionary definitions. We must consider the speaker's intentions, the shared knowledge between interlocutors, and the broader social and situational context. This is where the magic of

pragmatic inference truly lies.

The Role of Context in Pragmatic Interpretation

Levinson, drawing heavily on the work of philosophers like Paul Grice, highlights the pervasive influence of context. He distinguishes between several types of context that are crucial for understanding:

1. **Linguistic Context:** This refers to the surrounding linguistic material, the words and sentences that precede and follow an utterance. The meaning of a word or phrase can shift dramatically depending on its linguistic environment.
2. **Situational Context:** This encompasses the physical environment, the time, the place, and the ongoing activities in which the communication takes place. A simple statement like "It's hot" can have vastly different pragmatic implications depending on whether it's said on a beach in July or in a chilly office in December.
3. **Social Context:** This includes the relationship between the speakers, their social roles, and their shared cultural background. The way we address someone, the level of formality we employ, and the assumptions we make about their knowledge are all dictated by social context.
4. **Epistemic Context:** This refers to the shared background knowledge and beliefs that speakers and hearers bring to an interaction. What is obvious to one person might need to be explicitly stated to another, and this difference is governed by epistemic considerations.

Levinson argues that speakers implicitly rely on these contextual cues to convey information that is not explicitly stated. Hearers, in turn, actively use these cues to infer the speaker's intended meaning, a process he terms pragmatic inference.

Gricean Maxims and Conversational Implicature

Central to Levinson's exploration of pragmatics are the foundational principles of H.P. Grice, particularly his Maxims of Conversation. Grice proposed that conversations are typically cooperative, governed by an overarching Cooperative Principle. To adhere to this principle, speakers generally observe four maxims:

1. **Maxim of Quantity:** Give as much information as is required, but not more than is required.
2. **Maxim of Quality:** Be truthful. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
3. **Maxim of Relation:** Be relevant.
4. **Maxim of Manner:** Be perspicuous. Avoid obscurity of expression, ambiguity, be brief, and be orderly.

Levinson elaborates on how speakers can *flout* these maxims, intentionally violating them in a way that signals to the hearer that something beyond the literal meaning is intended. This deliberate flouting, when recognized by the hearer, generates conversational implicature – the implied meaning. For example, if someone asks, "Did John do well on his exam?" and the response is, "Well, the class was very difficult," the speaker is likely implying that John did not do well, without directly stating it. This is a classic example of exploiting the Maxim of Relation, implying that the difficulty of the exam is relevant to John's performance.

Levinson's Key Contributions to Pragmatic Theory

While building upon Grice's legacy, Stephen Levinson has made significant original contributions that have shaped the landscape of pragmatic inquiry. His work has provided more nuanced frameworks for understanding the mechanisms of inference and the systematic nature of pragmatic phenomena.

Conversational Implicature: A Deeper Dive

Levinson's "Pragmatics" meticulously examines different types of conversational implicature. He differentiates between generalized conversational implicature (GCIs) and particularized conversational implicature (PCIs).

1. **Generalized Conversational Implicature (GCIs):** These are implicatures that arise from the use of particular linguistic expressions, independent of any specific context. For instance, if someone says, "I met a man," it is generally understood that the speaker does not know the man well, or perhaps is even meeting him for the first time. This is an implicature associated with the indefinite article "a."
2. **Particularized Conversational Implicature (PCIs):** These implicatures are highly dependent on the specific context of the utterance. The same utterance can give rise to different PCIs in different situations. As illustrated earlier with the "difficult exam" example, the implicature is tied to the specific conversational scenario.

Levinson's detailed analysis of these distinctions has been instrumental in developing more robust theories of how speakers generate and hearers compute implied meanings.

The Principle of Informativeness and Scale of Pragmatic Scales

A cornerstone of Levinson's theoretical framework is the **Principle of Informativeness**, which he views as a higher-order principle that guides the operation of the Gricean maxims. This principle suggests that speakers aim to be as informative as possible, within the constraints of relevance and avoiding superfluity. He proposes that the generation of implicature is often driven by the choice of linguistic expressions from a "pragmatic scale."

Consider the scale: {all, most, many, some, few}. If a speaker chooses to say "Some students passed the exam" rather than "All students passed the exam," the hearer can infer that not all students passed. The hearer assumes the speaker chose the weaker, yet true, statement from the scale because the stronger statement ("All students passed") was not true. This systematic inference, based on the presumed informativeness of the chosen expression over alternatives on a pragmatic scale, is a powerful mechanism for generating implicature and a key insight from Levinson's work.

Conversational Structure and Politeness Theory

Levinson's work also extends to the structure of conversation itself. He has explored how pragmatic principles shape turn-taking, adjacency pairs (like question-answer, greeting-greeting), and the organization of discourse. His research on politeness, particularly in collaboration with Penelope Brown, is also highly influential. Politeness, in this framework, is understood as a strategic deployment of linguistic resources to manage "face" – the public self-image of individuals.

Levinson and Brown identified "face-threatening acts" (FTAs), which are actions that inherently risk damaging a speaker's or hearer's face. They proposed a taxonomy of politeness strategies, ranging from bald on record (direct and potentially face-threatening) to off record (indirect and ambiguous), with positive and negative politeness strategies falling in between. Understanding these strategies is crucial for explaining why we say things the way we do in social interactions, and how pragmatics plays a vital role in maintaining social harmony.

The Enduring Legacy of Levinson's Pragmatics

Stephen Levinson's contributions to pragmatics have had a profound and lasting impact across numerous disciplines. His rigorous theoretical frameworks, coupled with insightful analyses of conversational data, have provided researchers with the tools to dissect the complexities of human communication.

Impact on Linguistics and Philosophy

For linguists, Levinson's work has been indispensable in understanding how meaning is constructed beyond the sentence level. His theories have informed research in areas such as semantics-pragmatics interface, discourse analysis, and sociolinguistics. Philosophers of language have also found immense value in his systematic approach to implicature, which sheds light on the nature of meaning, intentionality, and rationality in communication.

Applications in Cognitive Science and Artificial Intelligence

The cognitive sciences have embraced Levinson's pragmatic models to understand how the human mind processes language. Researchers in artificial intelligence are actively using his principles to develop more sophisticated natural language processing (NLP) systems capable of understanding and generating human-like dialogue. The ability of AI to grasp nuance, context, and implied meaning is directly informed by Levinson's foundational work in pragmatics and inferential reasoning.

Relevance in Everyday Communication

Beyond academic circles, the principles of pragmatics, as elucidated by Levinson, offer a powerful lens through which to understand our own everyday interactions. By becoming more aware of the subtle ways meaning is conveyed and interpreted, we can improve our communication, reduce misunderstandings, and navigate social situations with greater efficacy. Recognizing the implied meanings behind polite requests, appreciating the humor in a well-timed ironic remark, or understanding why a seemingly simple statement carries a heavy subtext – all of these are made clearer through the study of pragmatics.

Conclusion: The Art of Meaning-Making

Stephen Levinson's work on pragmatics is not merely an academic exercise; it is a profound exploration of the art of meaning-making. By meticulously detailing the interplay of context, inference, and social conventions, he has demystified the seemingly effortless way we communicate. His step-by-step approach to understanding pragmatic phenomena, from the fundamental Gricean maxims to the intricate mechanisms of implicature, provides a robust

framework for linguistic analysis and a valuable guide for navigating the complexities of human interaction. The enduring legacy of Stephen Levinson's pragmatics lies in its ability to illuminate the hidden architecture of conversation, revealing the intricate dance of unspoken assumptions and shared understanding that makes human communication so rich and remarkable.

Access to knowledge has always shaped how people think, learn, and grow. What has changed in recent years is not the desire to learn, but the way learning happens. With the option to download Pragmatics By Stephen Levinson in digital format, information is no longer something people wait for. It is something they reach instantly, often at the exact moment curiosity appears.

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Questions & Answers About pragmatics by stephen levinson

No	Question	Answer
1	What is the main focus of Stephen Levinson's book 'Pragmatics'?	Stephen Levinson's 'Pragmatics' offers a comprehensive overview of how context influences the interpretation of meaning in language, integrating theories and research to explain pragmatic phenomena.
2	How does Levinson define pragmatics in his book?	Levinson defines pragmatics as the study of how people use context to understand and produce meaningful communication beyond the literal meanings of words.
3	What are some key concepts discussed in Levinson's 'Pragmatics'?	Key concepts include speech acts, deixis, presupposition, implicature, and politeness theory, which are essential to understanding how communicative intent is conveyed and interpreted.
4	How does Levinson address the relationship between syntax and pragmatics?	Levinson explores how pragmatic factors influence the interpretation of syntactic structures, emphasizing that meaning is shaped not just by grammar but also by contextual and social factors.
5	What contributions does Levinson's 'Pragmatics' make to contemporary linguistics?	Levinson's work synthesizes diverse pragmatic theories and provides a foundational framework that bridges linguistic form, context, and social interaction, influencing modern pragmatics research.
6	Does Levinson discuss cross-cultural differences in pragmatics?	Yes, Levinson examines how pragmatic principles vary across cultures, affecting communication styles, politeness strategies, and interpretation of indirect speech acts.

7	Why is Levinson's 'Pragmatics' considered a seminal text in the field?	It is considered seminal because it systematically integrates theoretical insights, empirical findings, and interdisciplinary approaches, making it a key reference for students and researchers in pragmatics and related fields.

pragmatics, Stephen Levinson, speech act theory, contextual meaning, language use, implied meanings, context analysis, communication intent, conversational implicature, pragmatic competence

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