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PRAGMATIC MEANING AND CONTEXT IN MEDIA

How Language Works Beyond Its Literal Boundaries in Contemporary Media Discourse

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Abstract:This article examines the intersection of pragmatic meaning and contextual interpretation within contemporary media discourse. Drawing upon foundational theoretical frameworks established by H.P. Grice, John L. Austin, John R. Searle, Geoffrey Leech, and Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, the study explores how media language functions beyond its literal semantic content to achieve persuasive, ideological, and social goals. The analysis addresses key pragmatic mechanisms — including speech acts, conversational implicature, presupposition, and relevance — and demonstrates their systematic deployment across print journalism, broadcast media, and digital platforms. Special attention is given to the challenges posed by post-truth discourse, artificial intelligence-driven content generation, and cross-cultural communication in global media environments. The article argues that pragmatic competence is not merely a linguistic concept but a critical literacy skill essential for media consumers and producers alike in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: pragmatics, media discourse, implicature, speech acts, context, framing, relevance theory, post-truth media

Annotatsiya: Ushbu maqola zamonaviy media diskursida pragmatik ma‘no va kontekstual talqin o‘rtasidagi munosabatni o‘rganadi. Tadqiqot H.P. Grice, Jon Ostin, Jon Serl, Jefri Lich, Dan Sperber va Deydr Uilson kabi olimlar tomonidan yaratilgan asosiy nazariy tushunchalar — nutq aktlari, suhbat implikaturasi, presuppozitsiya va relevantlik nazariyasi — asosida olib boriladi hamda media matnlarida bu mexanizmlarning tizimli ravishda qo‘llanilishini ko‘rsatadi. Bosma jurnalistika, teleradio eshittirishlar va raqamli platformalar qamrab olinadi. Alohida e‘tibor post-haqiqat diskursi, sun‘iy intellekt tomonidan yaratilgan kontent va global media muhitidagi madaniyatlararo muloqot muammolariga qaratiladi. Maqola pragmatik savodxonlik nafaqat lingvistik tushuncha, balki XXI asrda media iste‘molchilari va ishlab chiqaruvchilari uchun zarur bo‘lgan tanqidiy ko‘nikma ekanligini ta‘kidlaydi.

Kalit so‘zlar: pragmatika, media diskursi, implikatura, nutq aktlari, kontekst, freymlashtirish, relevantlik nazariyasi, post-haqiqat media

Аннотация:Настоящая статья посвящена изучению прагматического значения и контекстуальной интерпретации в современном медиадискурсе. Опираясь на фундаментальные теоретические концепции Г. Грайса, Дж. Остина, Дж. Сёрля, Дж. Лича, Д. Спербера и Д. Уилсон, в исследовании анализируются такие ключевые прагматические механизмы, как речевые акты, разговорная импликатура, пресуппозиция и релевантность, и демонстрируется их систематическое использование в медиатекстах. Исследование охватывает печатную журналистику, вещательное вещание и цифровые платформы. Особое внимание уделяется проблемам постправдивого дискурса, генерации контента с помощью искусственного интеллекта и межкультурной коммуникации в мировых СМИ. В статье

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доказывается, что прагматическая грамотность является не просто лингвистическим понятием, но и навыком критического мышления, необходимым каждому потребителю и создателю медиаконтента в современном информационном пространстве.

Ключевые слова: прагматика, медиадискурс, импликатура, речевые акты, контекст, фрейминг, теория релевантности, медиа постправды

Introduction: Language in media is never neutral. Every headline, broadcast statement, tweet, or editorial carries layers of meaning that extend far beyond the dictionary definitions of the words employed. A journalist who writes that a politician 'admitted' rather than 'stated' a fact has already made an evaluative move. A broadcaster who describes protesters as 'rioters' or 'demonstrators' has framed an entire political reality within a single lexical choice. These phenomena are not accidental. They are the product of deliberate — or culturally conditioned — pragmatic decisions: choices about how language is used in context to achieve specific communicative effects.

The study of pragmatics, broadly defined as the branch of linguistics concerned with how context shapes meaning, has grown substantially in relevance over the past four decades. While the foundational work of philosophers and linguists such as H.P. Grice (1975), John Austin (1962), John Searle (1969), Geoffrey Leech (1983), and Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1986) established the theoretical architecture of the field, the explosion of digital media, social platforms, and algorithmically curated content environments has given pragmatic analysis a new urgency. The question is no longer simply how speakers and listeners negotiate meaning in face-to-face interaction, but how meaning is constructed, manipulated, and received across vast and fragmented media ecosystems.

This article offers a systematic examination of pragmatic meaning and context as they operate in contemporary media. It proceeds in the following manner: Section 2 establishes the theoretical foundations of pragmatics most relevant to media analysis. Section 3 examines speech acts in media texts. Section 4 explores conversational implicature and how it enables media language to say more than it literally states. Section 5 addresses presupposition as a structuring device in journalistic framing. Section 6 applies Relevance Theory to the dynamics of media reception. Section 7 considers the pragmatics of digital and social media. Section 8 addresses the particular challenges of post-truth discourse and misinformation. Section 9 reflects on cross-cultural dimensions of pragmatic meaning in global media. The article concludes by arguing for the centrality of pragmatic literacy in contemporary media education and practice.

Theoretical Foundations: Core Concepts in Pragmatics

Grice and the Cooperative Principle

The intellectual scaffolding of modern pragmatics was largely erected by the philosopher H.P. Grice through his articulation of the Cooperative Principle and its associated conversational maxims, presented in his landmark 1975 paper 'Logic and Conversation.' Grice proposed that communication is fundamentally governed by an assumption of cooperation: participants in a conversation generally act in ways that serve the acknowledged communicative purpose of the exchange. This broad principle is operationalized through four specific maxims: Quantity (be as informative as required, but no more), Quality (do not say what you believe to be false), Relation (be relevant), and Manner (be clear, brief, and orderly).

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HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
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Of particular importance for media analysis is the phenomenon of conversational implicature, which arises when a speaker appears to violate one of these maxims yet the listener, operating under the assumption that the speaker is still being cooperative at some deeper level, infers an additional, unstated meaning. This inferential gap between what is said and what is communicated is the pragmatic engine behind much of the meaning-making in media discourse. When a news anchor says, 'The minister declined to comment,' the Gricean listener infers far more than silence: the implicature often conveys guilt, evasiveness, or institutional embarrassment, none of which are literally stated.

Austin, Searle, and Speech Act Theory

Parallel to Grice's work, the philosophy of language was being transformed by J.L. Austin's speech act theory, most fully developed in his posthumously published How to Do Things with Words (1962). Austin's central insight was that utterances do not merely describe the world; they perform actions within it. Austin distinguished between the locutionary act (the act of saying something with literal content), the illocutionary act (the action performed in saying something, such as warning, promising, or accusing), and the perlocutionary act (the effect the utterance has on the listener, such as alarming or persuading).

John Searle (1969) refined and systematized Austin's taxonomy, classifying illocutionary acts into five broad categories: assertives (stating, reporting, describing), directives (requesting, ordering, advising), commissives (promising, committing), expressives (apologizing, thanking, congratulating), and declarations (pronouncing, declaring, certifying). For media discourse, this framework is especially powerful. A media outlet does not merely report facts; it asserts, accuses, implies, warns, and at times declares. Recognizing which illocutionary act a media text is performing is the first step toward a critical reading of its communicative intent.

Geoffrey Leech and the Pragmatics of Politeness

Geoffrey Leech's Principles of Pragmatics (1983) extended the Gricean framework by introducing the Politeness Principle, which operates as a complementary force to the Cooperative Principle in governing communicative behavior. Leech argued that many apparent violations of Gricean maxims are in fact motivated by social considerations of face-management — the desire to protect one's own positive social image and to respect that of others. His work introduced a set of politeness maxims (tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy) that account for the indirectness, hedging, and euphemism so characteristic of institutional communication and media language.

In media contexts, Leech's framework illuminates why politicians speak in calculated ambiguities, why official statements employ passive constructions to obscure agency, and why broadcast journalists adopt particular registers of formality and deference when interviewing powerful figures. The strategic management of face — both the speaker's and the audience's — is a constant feature of mediated communication, shaping not only the surface form of media language but its deeper ideological content.

Sperber, Wilson, and Relevance Theory

Perhaps the most cognitively oriented of the major pragmatic theories is Relevance Theory, developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson in their foundational work Relevance: Communication and Cognition (1986, revised 1995). Rather than positing a set of social maxims, Sperber and Wilson argued that human communication is governed by a single cognitive principle:

HSR (LONDON),
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http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

the search for maximum relevance with minimum processing effort. An utterance communicates the assumption that it is relevant enough to be worth the listener's attention, and comprehension involves selecting the interpretation that yields the greatest cognitive reward — the greatest number of new contextual implications — at the lowest inferential cost.

For media analysis, Relevance Theory draws attention to how media producers design texts to be effortlessly processed by target audiences, packaging complex ideological content within familiar frames, emotionally engaging narratives, and culturally resonant references. The more a media message aligns with the audience's existing cognitive environment — their background knowledge, assumptions, and values — the more relevant it appears, and the more readily its implicatures are accepted as obvious truths rather than constructed interpretations.

Speech Acts in Media Discourse

Applying speech act theory to media discourse reveals the extent to which news production is an active intervention in social and political reality, not a passive mirror of it. Consider the performative force of media declarations: when a major news organization 'calls' an election, pronounces a public figure 'guilty' in the court of public opinion, or labels an organization 'terrorist,' it is performing a declaration in the Searlean sense — an utterance that, by virtue of the institutional authority of the speaker, brings a new social fact into existence.

Research by Al-Muhaissen et al. (2024) on the pragmatic functions of media discourse in the French press demonstrated that journalistic texts systematically deploy speech acts to achieve goals that exceed simple information transmission. Their study found that news discourse markers performed distinct pragmatic functions, including agenda-setting, evaluation, and audience engagement, with assertive and expressive speech acts appearing with particular frequency in news analysis and opinion content. These findings confirm that the illocutionary dimension of media language is not incidental but structural.

A more granular illustration is provided by recent pragma-stylistic research on American media coverage of politically charged incidents. The analysis revealed that media outlets moved well beyond factual reporting to employ assertive, directive, and expressive speech acts in ways that constructed particular narrative frames, strategically using presuppositions and stylistic options to achieve specific perlocutionary effects on their audiences. The choice of speech act type — whether to assert, to imply, or to insinuate — is, in this sense, as ideologically significant as the choice of vocabulary or syntax.

Implicature and What Media Does Not Say

If speech act theory reveals what media texts do, the theory of implicature reveals what they avoid saying directly. Conversational implicature is the mechanism by which the most powerful ideological work in media is often accomplished: not through explicit assertion, which can be challenged and refuted, but through implied meanings that the reader or viewer is invited to infer on their own, thereby feeling a sense of autonomous judgment rather than directed interpretation.

The pragmatic concept of implicature explains, for example, why political advertising so frequently employs juxtaposition — placing an opponent's image alongside footage of a crisis without explicit causal claim — or why headlines are crafted with strategic ambiguity. A headline reading 'Company profits surge as workers strike' does not explicitly allege corporate callousness, but

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the conversational implicature — generated by the juxtaposition of the two clauses — is clear to most readers. The reader performs the inferential work, and because the conclusion appears self-generated, it is often held with greater conviction than if it had been directly stated.

Researchers analyzing comparative media framing have shown that outlets such as Al Jazeera and CNN, while both ostensibly reporting on the same political events, construct markedly different implicatures through their selection of speech acts, presuppositions, and rhetorical emphases. Al Jazeera's coverage frequently frames evaluative judgments within narratives of regional identity and collective responsibility, while CNN tends to situate similar content within frameworks of individual accountability and liberal democratic norms. The surface content may overlap substantially; the pragmatic implicatures differ profoundly. This finding underscores that context — institutional, cultural, and political — is not external to media meaning but constitutive of it.

Presupposition and the Architecture of Media Framing

Presupposition — the taken-for-granted background assumption that a sentence builds upon — is one of the most potent tools in the media pragmatician's toolkit precisely because it operates below the threshold of conscious scrutiny. While a factual claim can be contested, a presupposition must first be identified before it can be challenged, and identification requires a level of metalinguistic awareness that most media consumers rarely deploy in routine reading or viewing.

Consider the presuppositional structures embedded in a headline such as: 'When will the government acknowledge its failure on climate policy?' The headline presupposes that the government has, in fact, failed on climate policy — a proposition that is arguably the most significant claim being made, yet one that is presented not as a claim requiring evidence but as shared background knowledge. The explicit question concerns timing; the implicit assertion is already embedded in the question's grammatical structure. This technique is ubiquitous in journalism, particularly in opinion and analysis sections, where presuppositional framing allows writers to insert contested interpretations as unexamined premises.

The concept of framing in media studies, as developed by scholars such as Erving Goffman (1974) and Robert Entman (1993), is in significant measure a pragmatic concept, even when not explicitly theorized as such. To frame an issue is to select certain aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient, which in pragmatic terms means establishing the contextual parameters within which an audience will process subsequent information. These contextual parameters are largely established through presupposition: by assuming certain facts, values, and causal relationships rather than stating them, the frame becomes the invisible architecture within which meaning is constructed and evaluated.

A pragma-semantic study of news headlines published in the Journal of Applied Linguistics and Literary Studies (2025) found systematic patterns of ideological presupposition in the framing of political events, with headlines routinely encoding value judgments, causal claims, and social categorizations as presupposed background rather than asserted content. Such findings suggest that headline analysis using pragmatic tools offers a particularly rich site for critical media literacy work.

Relevance Theory and Media Reception

While Gricean theory focuses primarily on the production of conversational meaning, Relevance Theory, with its cognitive orientation, offers a more powerful account of media reception

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http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

— how audiences process and make sense of media texts within their existing knowledge environments. From a relevance-theoretic perspective, successful media communication is communication that achieves a rich array of contextual effects — new inferences, confirmed assumptions, altered beliefs — with minimal processing demands on the audience.

This framework illuminates several key features of contemporary media practice. First, it explains the structural preference for narrative over argument in mainstream media. Narrative requires less effortful processing than logical argumentation; it triggers familiar cognitive schemas, deploys emotionally engaging characters and conflicts, and delivers its ideological content as the 'natural' outcome of a story rather than the conclusion of a reasoned case. From a relevance-theoretic standpoint, narrative is cognitively cheaper to process and therefore more persuasive in the pragmatic sense: it achieves maximum contextual effect with minimum inferential cost.

Second, Relevance Theory illuminates the role of what Sperber and Wilson call the 'cognitive environment' — the set of facts and assumptions an individual has access to and is capable of processing — in determining which implicatures a media text successfully communicates to which audiences. A media message that presupposes familiarity with certain cultural references, historical events, or ideological frameworks will generate rich implicatures for audiences who share that cognitive environment and virtually none for those who do not. This differential pragmatic accessibility is a key mechanism through which media simultaneously unites and divides audiences along cultural, political, and demographic lines.

The 2025 survey of pragmatics in the era of large language models published by the Association for Computational Linguistics confirmed that context remains the foundational concept in pragmatic interpretation: deictic expressions, implicatures, and indirect speech acts all depend upon the listener's or reader's ability to access and mobilize relevant contextual information. This finding has direct implications for media analysis, reminding us that pragmatic meaning is never simply in the text but is always co-constructed between text and audience in context.

Digital Media and the Pragmatics of Online Communication

The emergence of digital communication environments — social media platforms, online news portals, comment sections, podcasts, and interactive multimedia formats — has not displaced the classical pragmatic frameworks but has significantly complicated their application. Digital media introduce novel affordances and constraints that reshape how pragmatic meaning is produced, transmitted, and received.

One of the most significant pragmatic challenges of digital media is the near-total absence of non-verbal context. In face-to-face communication, a substantial proportion of pragmatic meaning is carried by prosody, gesture, facial expression, and physical proximity — all the contextual cues that help interlocutors calibrate the illocutionary force of utterances and interpret implicatures accurately. In digital text-based communication, these cues are absent or reduced to partial substitutes: punctuation, capitalization, emojis, and response time. The pragmatic ambiguity that results is not merely inconvenient but consequential, as misread illocutionary intentions are a significant source of online conflict, misunderstanding, and manipulation.

Digital pragmatics — the subfield that has emerged to address these challenges — has documented a range of novel communicative practices that develop to fill the contextual gap. Hashtagging, for example, is a pragmatic device that explicitly establishes the contextual frame

HSR (LONDON),
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http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

within which a post is to be interpreted, functioning as a kind of indexical label that activates specific cognitive environments in the reader. Meme-sharing deploys shared cultural knowledge to communicate complex ideological positions with extraordinary economy, relying on the audience's ability to activate relevant contextual assumptions to derive meaning from apparently simple images. These practices confirm that pragmatic meaning-making is as fundamental a feature of digital communication as of face-to-face interaction, even as its mechanisms adapt to the affordances of new media.

The pragmatics of social media is further complicated by the phenomenon of asynchronous interaction — the fact that messages may be posted, read, shared, and responded to across widely separated time frames and contexts. The contextual assumptions that determined the pragmatic meaning of a post at the moment of its composition may differ substantially from those available to a reader encountering it days, months, or years later in a different social and political environment. This temporal displacement of context is a defining feature of digital media pragmatics with significant implications for how meaning, responsibility, and intent are assigned to online communication.

Post-Truth Discourse, Misinformation, and Pragmatic Manipulation

No examination of pragmatic meaning in contemporary media can avoid engaging with the phenomenon of post-truth discourse — the systematic exploitation of pragmatic mechanisms to circulate false or misleading information while maintaining a veneer of communicative legitimacy. Post-truth discourse is not primarily a failure of factual accuracy; it is a pragmatic phenomenon, characterized by the strategic manipulation of implicature, presupposition, framing, and the Gricean maxims to produce false impressions without technically false assertions.

Research published in the journal Pragmatics (2025) examined social media posts about a high-profile defamation lawsuit in both Chinese and English, finding that post-truth discourse is characterized by the dominance of personal beliefs and emotional appraisal over evidential reasoning in shaping public opinion. The study found that reverse news — content that inverts or distorts established facts — systematically deploys assertive and evaluative speech acts, complex attitudinal appraisals, and illocutionary force markers to invest false claims with the pragmatic authority of established fact. The post-truth media environment is, in this sense, a pragmatic battlefield.

A particularly insidious form of pragmatic manipulation in digital media is the exploitation of the Gricean maxim of Quality — the assumption that speakers are not asserting what they believe to be false — as a cover for implication. By technically adhering to propositional accuracy while generating false implicatures through selective framing, misleading juxtaposition, and strategic presupposition, media actors can create profoundly misleading impressions while maintaining deniability. 'I never said he was corrupt; I merely asked whether his financial disclosures were complete' is a classic example: the implicature of corruption is communicated while the explicit assertion remains technically defensible.

Research by Lewandowsky, Ecker, and colleagues (2023) has further demonstrated that misinformation in digital media not only exploits pragmatic inference mechanisms but also actively degrades the epistemic environments within which those mechanisms operate. When audiences are exposed to sustained campaigns of pragmatic manipulation, their background assumptions — the cognitive context within which they process new information — become corrupted, making accurate implicature derivation increasingly difficult. The pragmatic damage inflicted by systematic

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http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

misinformation is therefore not merely a matter of individual false beliefs but a degradation of the shared contextual infrastructure upon which meaning-making depends.

The role of artificial intelligence in media production adds a further dimension to these concerns. Research published in the Forum for Linguistic Studies (2024) examined how AI integration in the French press affects the pragmatic function of media discourse, finding that while AI tools enhance efficiency and personalization, they raise significant concerns about content bias and the integrity of journalistic practices. AI-generated content, optimized for engagement metrics rather than truth-telling, may systematically favor the pragmatic strategies — emotionally salient framing, confirmatory implicature, relevance-maximizing narrative — that audiences find cognitively rewarding, regardless of their epistemic value.

Cross-Cultural Dimensions of Media Pragmatics

The globalization of media has made cross-cultural pragmatic competence an increasingly urgent concern. Different linguistic and cultural communities operate with different background assumptions, different standards of conversational implicature, different face-management conventions, and different interpretive schemas — all of which means that a media text calibrated for one cultural audience may communicate radically different pragmatic meanings to another.

This challenge is particularly acute in international news coverage, where pragmatic presuppositions embedded in reporting reflect the cultural common ground of the producer rather than the receiver. A news item assuming familiarity with liberal democratic norms of political accountability, for example, carries presuppositions that are simply invisible to audiences operating within different political-cultural frameworks. The pragmatic content of the report — its implicatures about legitimacy, responsibility, and appropriate response — may be entirely lost or fundamentally misconstrued.

Researchers working within the framework of cross-cultural pragmatics have documented systematic differences in the deployment of politeness strategies, indirectness conventions, and implicature norms across cultural groups, with consequences for how media messages are interpreted. Studies comparing English-language and Chinese-language media discourse have found, for instance, that appraisal systems — the linguistic resources for expressing evaluation and stance — differ significantly in their patterns of co-occurrence and pragmatic loading, meaning that evaluative media content translated across these linguistic boundaries may carry substantially different illocutionary force in the target language than in the source.

These findings carry practical implications for global media organizations, international journalism training, and media literacy education. A media producer who lacks awareness of the cross-cultural pragmatic dimensions of their communication is not merely at risk of being misunderstood; they are at risk of inadvertently reinforcing the very cultural assumptions and power asymmetries that responsible international journalism seeks to challenge.

Pragmatic Literacy as a Media Competence

The cumulative argument of the preceding sections points toward a practical imperative: the development of pragmatic literacy as a foundational component of media education and critical citizenship. Pragmatic literacy, in the sense employed here, denotes the capacity to identify and critically evaluate the contextual mechanisms through which media language produces meaning

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http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

beyond its literal content — to recognize speech act types, identify implicatures, expose presuppositions, and assess framing choices, rather than processing media texts as transparent windows onto factual reality.

This capacity is not a luxury of specialist academic training. It is a democratic necessity. In a media environment characterized by institutional fragmentation, algorithmic curation, and the systematic weaponization of pragmatic inference for political and commercial ends, citizens who lack pragmatic literacy are structurally vulnerable to manipulation. They will consume implicatures as if they were assertions, accept presuppositions as if they were established facts, and mistake the pragmatic framing of events for their neutral description.

Media literacy curricula worldwide have increasingly recognized the importance of critical analysis of media language, but the explicitly pragmatic dimensions of this analysis — attention to the mechanisms of contextual meaning-making rather than simply to factual accuracy or source credibility — remain underdeveloped. An integration of applied pragmatic frameworks into media literacy education would equip learners to ask not only 'Is this true?' but 'What is this text doing? What does it imply? What does it presuppose? Whose cognitive environment does it address, and what meanings does it generate there?'

For journalists and media producers, pragmatic awareness is equally essential — not merely as a defensive skill against manipulation, but as a positive ethical commitment. The pragmatic dimension of journalistic language is not accidental or trivial; it is where the most consequential communicative choices are made. A commitment to accuracy and fairness in journalism must therefore extend to the implicatures generated by word choices, the presuppositions embedded in framing decisions, and the face-management strategies deployed in the representation of sources and subjects.

Conclusion: This article has argued that pragmatic meaning — the meaning that language produces in context, beyond its literal semantic content — is not a peripheral feature of media discourse but its central operating mechanism. Media texts are speech acts, deployed within specific contextual environments to achieve specific communicative goals. They generate implicatures that say far more than they explicitly assert. They embed presuppositions that structure the interpretive frame before the audience has had a chance to consent to it. They are processed by audiences through relevance-driven inference that is powerfully shaped by existing cognitive environments. And they operate across cultural contexts where the background assumptions enabling pragmatic interpretation cannot be taken for granted.

The theoretical frameworks reviewed here — from Grice's Cooperative Principle and Austin and Searle's speech act theory, through Leech's politeness principles and Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory, to the emerging field of digital pragmatics — provide a rich and powerful set of analytical tools for understanding these dynamics. Applied to contemporary media phenomena including post-truth discourse, AI-generated content, cross-cultural framing, and digital communication, they reveal the systematic and consequential nature of the pragmatic choices that constitute media language.

The stakes of this analysis are not merely academic. In a world where the communicative environment is increasingly defined by the strategic deployment of pragmatic inference for political, commercial, and ideological ends, the capacity to read language pragmatically — to see through the

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http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

frame to the framing act, to recognize the implicature beneath the assertion, to question the presupposition before engaging with the claim — is among the most important intellectual tools available to engaged citizens, responsible journalists, and critical media scholars alike.

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