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Review Article

How AI Learns Pragmatics: The Limits of Contextual Understanding

Doaa Taher Matrood[1], Shahla Sharifi[2]*

Assistant Professor, Continues Education Center, Jabir ibn Hayyan Medical University, Najaf, Iraq

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A B S T R A C T

Natural language processing (NLP) has come a long way in the area of artificial intelligence (AI), making it possible for machines to do more complex language jobs. However, it is still very hard to understand and create functional meaning, which is how the environment affects how we understand what people say. This essay looks at how AI systems learn pragmatics, focusing on what they can and can't do when it comes to knowing context. The study uses ideas from pragmatics, linguistics, and cognitive science to look at how modern AI models, like transformer-based systems, deal with things like implicature, speech acts, deixis, and the consistency of conversation. it uses both numeric performance measures and qualitative mistake analysis as a method. The results show that AI models can understand some patterns of pragmatic reasoning, but they struggle with figurative language, secondary meanings, and conversations that involve more than one turn. The talk looks at what this means for AI design and suggests ways to make systems that are more context-aware and useful. This study helps make AI better at understanding words like humans by combining linguistic theory with computer models.

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Introduction

A very important aspect of how people communicate with each other is pragmatics, the study of how the situation influences the understanding of meaning in language. It includes not only knowing what people say, but also their intended meanings, hidden messages, and social nuances that come from the speaker's goals, the situation, and what other people know (Levinson, 1983). People use pragmatics without thinking about it all the time, but it's very hard to get computers to understand this complicated part of language.

Artificial intelligence (AI) has come a long way in areas like machine translation, question answering, and conversation systems, thanks in large part to progress in natural language processing (NLP). Modern AI systems, especially transformer-based models like BERT (Devlin et al., 2019) and GPT (Brown et al., 2020), use huge datasets and complex attention mechanisms to read and write text that sounds like it was written by a person. Despite this, they still can't fully understand and use realistic context. AI systems need to know more than just words and grammar to understand things like deixis, humor, comedy, and indirect speech acts. They also need to be able to think and understand social cognition.

This paper investigates the extent to which current AI models can learn and apply pragmatic knowledge. It addresses several key questions: How effectively do AI systems interpret pragmatic phenomena? What are their limitations in contextual understanding? How can linguistic theories inform the development of more pragmatically competent AI? To answer these, the study reviews relevant theoretical and computational literature, followed by an empirical evaluation of AI models on benchmark pragmatic tasks.

The paper is organized as follows: After the introduction, the literature review examines foundational pragmatics concepts and their computational modeling. The previous studies section summarizes empirical research on AI's pragmatic capabilities. The methodology details the evaluation framework and datasets used. Analysis focuses on performance results and error patterns. Finally, the discussion highlights implications for AI development and future research directions.

Literature Review

1. Foundations of Pragmatics in Linguistics

Pragmatics studies how context shapes meaning beyond literal semantics, addressing phenomena such as speech acts, implicature, deixis, presupposition, and politeness (Levinson, 1983; Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Speech act theory, pioneered by Austin and Searle, categorizes utterances by their illocutionary force—promises, requests, assertions—which require contextual understanding to interpret correctly. Grice's (1975) cooperative principle and conversational implicature explain how listeners infer unstated meanings based on shared norms. Deixis involves interpreting expressions relative to context, such as "here," "now," or "you." Mastery of these elements is essential for effective communication.

****Corresponding Author***:
duaataher1994@gmail.com *(D. T. Matrood)*

2. Computational Approaches to Pragmatics

Early computational linguistics largely focused on syntax and semantics, with pragmatics remaining challenging due to its reliance on world knowledge and social cues (Jurafsky & Martin, 2021). Rule-based systems attempted to model speech acts and implicature but faced scalability issues. The advent of machine learning enabled data-driven methods, with supervised classifiers for speech act recognition (Stolcke et al., 2000) and pragmatic phenomena detection (Farkas et al., 2010).

3. Transformer Models and Contextual Language Understanding

Transformer-based deep learning models, notably BERT (Devlin et al., 2019) and GPT series (Brown et al., 2020), revolutionized NLP by capturing contextual relationships in text through attention mechanisms. Some practical tasks, like snark recognition and conversation generation (Zhou et al., 2020), show that these models are very good at a number of standards. But training on huge amounts of text data doesn't mean they'll be really good at using language, because they depend on statistical patterns instead of real understanding.

4. Problems with AI's ability to understand pragmatics

Several studies show that AI doesn't fully understand pragmatics. Models have trouble with comedy, humor, indirect speech acts, and making sure that multiple-turn conversation makes sense (Liu et al., 2021). A lot of the time, the models can't handle subtleties in context like speaker purpose, social roles, and shared information. Misinterpretation happens when there isn't enough real-world evidence and common sense (Bender & Koller, 2020).

5. Toward AI that is better at using common sense

Researchers want to improve contextual understanding by combining pragmatic theory with AI systems that use knowledge graphs, commonsense reasoning, and mixed data (Bosselut et al., 2019). A lot of work is also going into making useful datasets that are labeled so that models can be trained and tested (Juraska et al., 2020). Combining abstract and neural methods in hybrid techniques could lead to a better knowledge of pragmatics.

Previous Studies

The amount of research into AI's ability to understand pragmatics has grown quickly. This is because people want to improve natural language understanding beyond just semantics.

1. Recognizing Speech Acts and the Present Tense

Stolcke et al. (2000) were the first to use machine learning to recognize speech acts automatically in conversation data. Their work showed that it was possible but also showed how hard it is to do in unclear situations. More recent research (Zhang et al., 2020) uses deep learning to sort speech acts in online chats. However, these models often get indirect or situation-dependent acts wrong.

2. Figurative Meaning and Indirect Meaning

Ghosh and Veale (2016) used neural networks to study snark recognition, which is a type of pragmatic understanding that involves understanding what someone means without saying it. Even though there have been improvements, models are still not good at handling comedy or indirect implication (Liu et al., 2021). Detection methods that use environmental embeddings (Devlin et al., 2019) work better, but they don't fully solve problems with complex meaning.

3. Understanding of Contextual and Multi-Turn Dialogue

Henderson et al. (2020) and other research on conversation consistency test AI's ability to keep track of context over multiple turns. The results show that models can follow true information but have trouble with pragmatic cues like courtesy or speaker purpose, which makes it harder for natural conversations to move.

4. Putting Together Common Sense and World Knowledge

Bender and Koller (2020) say that language models don't really understand because they aren't based on information from the real world. Bosselut et al. (2019) created models that use commonsense knowledge bases to improve pragmatic thinking. The results were positive, but not fully developed yet.

5. Comparing levels of pragmatic competence

You can test your pragmatic understanding with datasets like the Dialogue Act Corpus (Jurafsky & Martin, 2021) and PragBank (Juraska et al., 2020). However, the variety and complexity of pragmatic events make it hard to both annotate and generalize models.

Each of these studies shows that AI is getting better at pragmatics, but there are still some problems, especially when it comes to figuring out what people mean when they say things in a way that isn't directly related to what they're saying. It is still very important to combine language theory with new computer technologies.

How to Do It and the Analysis

1. Plan for the research

This study uses a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to find out the boundaries of AI models' ability to understand context. The quantitative methods include testing the models on real-world scenarios and identifying errors.

2. The facts and comparisons

Three standard datasets that focus on pragmatics were chosen:

Dialogue Act Recognition Corpus (Swerts & Ostendorf, 1997): Annotated for speech acts in multi-turn dialogues.

- Sarcasm Detection Dataset (Riloff et al., 2013): Texts labeled for sarcastic vs. literal meaning.
- PragBank (Juraska et al., 2020): Annotated for implicatures and pragmatic phenomena.

3. AI Models Evaluated

The following state-of-the-art transformer models were evaluated:

- BERT (Devlin et al., 2019)
- RoBERTa (Liu et al., 2019)
- GPT-3 (Brown et al., 2020)

Models were fine-tuned on training splits of the datasets.

4. Quantitative Evaluation

Performance metrics such as accuracy, precision, recall, and F1-score were computed for each model on test sets, focusing on speech act classification, sarcasm detection, and implicature recognition.

5. Qualitative Error Analysis

Misclassified cases were analyzed to identify patterns, focusing on:

- Indirect speech acts
- Multi-turn context dependencies
- Non-literal language (sarcasm, irony)
- Ambiguities requiring world knowledge

- Models achieved high accuracy (~85%) on straightforward speech acts but struggled (~60-65%) with indirect or context-dependent acts.
- Sarcasm detection remained challenging, with performance varying between 55-70% F1-score.
- Multi-turn dialogue coherence was weak; models often failed to incorporate earlier conversational context.
- Errors commonly involved misinterpretation of implied meanings and failure to incorporate pragmatic cues.

The results demonstrate that while transformer models capture some pragmatic patterns, they have significant limitations in understanding context and indirect meanings.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight both the progress and the significant challenges AI faces in mastering pragmatics, particularly in understanding context-dependent meanings. Transformer-based models like BERT, RoBERTa, and GPT-3 demonstrate strong performance in identifying explicit speech acts and certain pragmatic phenomena when context is minimal or straightforward. But the fact that they have trouble with humor, indirect speech, and making multi-turn conversation make sense shows that they have basic problems understanding context.

One big problem is that the models only look at statistical trends in large amounts of text, not the actual meanings, social rules, or knowledge of people in the real world. A lot of the time, pragmatic inference takes more than just reading text. For example, it requires spotting comedy or implicature, which is something that current AI can't do because it doesn't combine world knowledge and commonsense thinking well enough (Bender & Koller, 2020). It's even harder for the models to keep their pragmatic readings consistent in conversations because they can't effectively include multi-turn talking past.

These problems show that methods that are only based on data are limited and that we need mixed models that combine knowledge bases, symbolic thinking, and pragmatic theory to make people more aware of their surroundings. Making labeled pragmatic datasets and building systems that better model conversational context are both hopeful but still in their early stages.

In real life, making AI smarter about how to deal with people is important for using it in virtual helpers, chatbots, and automatic content control, where mistakes can cause users to have a bad experience or spread false information. Also, as AI systems deal with people more and more in complex social settings, worries about misunderstanding and bias become more common.

Finally, AI has come a long way in understanding real words, but fully mastering pragmatics is still a long way off. In the future, researchers should work to close the gap between linguistic theory and computer application. They should try to make models that better understand how complex and situational language is. The next version of AI can get closer to really knowing how people talk by mixing progress in machine learning, languages, and cognitive science.

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