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PRAGMATIC AWARENESS IN BUSINESS TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETING

Background. *Business communication is shaped as much by pragmatic intent as by words and grammar. In English-Ukrainian translation and interpreting, especially in negotiations and corporate meetings, small shifts in politeness, implied meaning, or the strength of a commitment can change how a message is received. When these cues are missed, the result may be unnecessary tension, weakened trust, or an altered understanding of obligations. This paper examines pragmatic awareness as a central component of professional competence in business translation and interpreting and clarifies why it matters for communicative outcomes.*

Methods. *The study follows a qualitative case-study design and draws on authentic and training-based business interaction (negotiation fragments, online meetings, and scripted scenarios). Pragmatically salient segments were selected and grouped into four domains of pragmatic awareness. The analysis relies on established tools from speech act theory, politeness research, implicature, functionalist approaches to translation, and interpreting studies, with reference to effort-based accounts of interpreting performance.*

Results. *The data indicate recurring patterns of pragmatic loss: illocutionary force is occasionally softened or strengthened unintentionally; mitigation and facework are reduced; implicatures are rendered as explicit statements or overlooked; and culturally expected degrees of directness are not always maintained. By contrast, pragmatically attuned renditions preserve negotiation flexibility and interpersonal rapport, including strategic vagueness where it is purposeful. A further observation is that pragmatic markers tend to be among the first elements to drop under increased cognitive load.*

Conclusions. *Pragmatic awareness should be treated as a core criterion in business interpreting, not as an optional refinement. Practicing speech acts, mitigation, and implicatures in realistic business contexts helps stabilize pragmatic performance. Assessment, in turn, should recognize pragmatic adequacy alongside accuracy and fluency, since interpreters essentially manage pragmatic intent as part of their professional task.*

Keywords: *business translation, pragmatic awareness, cognitive load, interpreting studies, speech act, business communication, translator's flexibility.*

Background

In business translation and interpreting, it is very important to be able to recognize, understand, and communicate meaning beyond the literal meaning of words. In business settings like negotiations, boardroom meetings, or investment pitches, people depend on interpreters to accurately convey information and maintain the intended impact of speech acts, interpersonal strategies, and culturally determined norms of politeness and authority. In business interpreting, interpreters must reproduce offers, refusals, hedges, commitments, and concessions with the same pragmatic weight in the target language. This is different from general conference interpreting, where neutrality and clarity of information may be sufficient (Skrylnyk, 2025).

The consequences of pragmatic failure are frequently substantial. A softened refusal in English that is translated too directly into Ukrainian could put a deal at risk, and a tentative commitment seen as binding could create contractual risk. This article examines pragmatic awareness as a multifaceted competence, evaluates its theoretical foundations in pragmatics and translation studies, categorizes its principal types, and offers illustrative examples from the English-Ukrainian language pair. It also shows what was learned from a qualitative case study of business translation and interpreting, and ends with suggestions for how to train interpreters.

Theoretical Background. Pragmatics: Meaning Beyond the Sentence. Pragmatics is the study of language use in context, and it provides the conceptual tools for understanding why pragmatic awareness matters in interpreting.

Speech acts. J. L. Austin (Austin, 1962) showed that utterances perform actions, and J. R. Searle (Searle, 1969) refined this into categories of illocutionary force – directives, commissives, declarations, and so forth. In business discourse, speech acts are not neutral: they can bind, commit, or strategically defer (Hatim, & Mason, 1997).

Cooperation and inference. Grice's (Grice, 1975) Cooperative Principle and maxims (quantity, quality, relation, manner) explain how interlocutors derive implicatures. Business dialogue is replete with implicatures – for example, "That deadline is ambitious" is understood as "We need more time". Sperber and



Wilson's (1986/1995) Relevance Theory reframes this in cognitive terms: interlocutors expect optimal relevance, and interpreters must facilitate that expectation.

Politeness and face. P. Brown and S. Levinson (Brown, & Levinson, 1987) described politeness as the management of face needs – positive (being appreciated) and negative (freedom from imposition). G. Leech (Leech, 1983; Leech, 2014) developed politeness maxims such as tact and generosity. E. Goffman (Goffman, 1967; Goffman, 1981) introduced the concept of facework and footing, showing how speakers shift stance. These frameworks are critical in interpreting refusals, mitigations, and hedges.

Register and genre. M. A. K. Halliday (Halliday, 1978) and M. A. K. Halliday & C. Matthiessen (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) framed language as a social semiotic, shaped by field, tenor, and mode. Business genres (contracts, presentations, negotiations) impose pragmatic conventions. D. Biber (Biber, 1995) confirmed that registers differ systematically in lexical and syntactic patterns.

Together, these theories underscore that the interpreter must attend not only to words but to actions, relationships, and contexts encoded in pragmatic choices.

Translation Studies: Function, Equivalence, and Norms. Translation studies provide frameworks for understanding pragmatic mediation.

Equivalence and effect. E. A. Nida (Nida, 1964) emphasized *dynamic equivalence*, the closest natural equivalent in meaning and impact. Newmark (Newmark, 1981; 1988) distinguished communicative from semantic translation. Both underscore the interpreter's obligation to reproduce *effect*, not only form.

Functionalism. Reiß and Vermeer's Skopos theory (Reiß, & Vermeer, 2013) asserts that "the purpose determines the method". C. Nord (Nord, 1997) further introduced loyalty as a guiding principle. They emphasized the translator's responsibility to both source and target communicators. J. House (House, 1997) proposed a model of translation quality assessment based on pragmatic equivalence and cultural filtering.

Norms and ideology. G. Toury (Toury, 1995) stressed the role of norms in shaping translation decisions, while A. Chesterman (Chesterman, 1997) analyzed strategies as memes subject to cultural replication. L. Venuti (Venuti, 1995) famously critiqued the "invisibility" of translators in Anglo-American contexts, showing how market pressures enforce fluency.

For business interpreting, these theories suggest that pragmatic adequacy depends not on literal transfer, but functional and cultural fit.

Interpreting Studies: Cognition, Interaction, and Quality. Research in interpreting has increasingly recognized pragmatics as central.

Sense theory. D. Seleskovitch (Seleskovitch, 1978) and M. Lederer (Lederer, 2003) argued that interpreters process meaning at the sense level, not words.

Cognitive load. Gile's Effort Model (Gile, 1995; Gile, 2009) divides interpreting into listening, production, memory, and coordination. Under cognitive strain, pragmatic subtleties – such as hedging – are the first to disappear.

Interaction. C. Wadensjö (Wadensjö, 1998) described interpreting as interaction, while C. Roy (Roy, 2000) and I. Mason (Mason, 2001) emphasized the interpreter's role in managing participation and stance.

Quality. J. House (House, 1997) and S. Kalina (Kalina, 2002) stressed that quality in interpreting cannot be reduced to accuracy; pragmatic and interpersonal adequacy are equally critical.

Types and Cases of Pragmatic Awareness. The study identifies four main types of pragmatic awareness, each illustrated with seven examples in English-Ukrainian interpreting.

Speech Act Awareness

1. "We'll consider your proposal". → "Ми розглянемо вашу пропозицію".
2. This utterance signals postponement rather than agreement. Interpreters must resist overcommitting to the speaker by rendering it as acceptance.
3. "Could you provide more details?" → "Чи могли б ви надати більше деталей?".
4. The English phrase is a polite request framed as a question. A literal translation as an imperative would reduce its politeness value.
5. "We are prepared to sign today". → "Ми готові підписати сьогодні".
6. This is a commissive speech act with binding force. Accuracy here is crucial because it indicates a legal and financial commitment.
7. "This offer is non-binding". → "Ця пропозиція не є зобов'язуючою".
8. The speaker limits liability by clarifying the illocutionary status of the offer. Interpreters must preserve this legal nuance without weakening it.
9. "We'll get back to you on that". → "Ми повернемося до цього питання". → The phrase delays commitment while maintaining politeness. If interpreted as a refusal, it could prematurely close negotiation channels.

10. "We regret to inform you..." → "На жаль, змушені повідомити..." → This is a conventional formula of negative politeness, softening bad news. It requires careful rendering to avoid sounding abrupt in Ukrainian.

11. "Let's move forward together". → "Давайте рухатися вперед разом". → This is an inclusive directive meant to build solidarity. Preserving the collaborative tone is as essential as the propositional meaning.

Politeness and Facework

1. "We may need to revisit this clause". → "Можливо, нам доведеться ще раз переглянути цей пункт". → The hedge "may" softens the request and reduces imposition. Interpreters must retain this modal nuance to avoid appearing confrontational.

2. "I'm afraid that won't be possible". → "Боюся, що це буде неможливо". → The phrase uses mitigation to protect the listener's face. A direct «Це неможливо» risks sounding harsh.

3. "Your idea is interesting, however..." → "Ваша ідея цікава, однак..." → The compliment is a politeness strategy before disagreement. Dropping it in interpretation can make the speaker appear dismissive.

4. "Could I just clarify one point?" → "Чи можу я уточнити один момент?". → This is a deferential request for floor-taking. Interpreters must not turn it into an abrupt interruption.

5. "We'd appreciate your flexibility". → "Ми були б вдячні за вашу гнучкість". → The speaker embeds a request within a politeness frame. A literal command would undermine cooperation.

6. "We might need a bit more time". → "Можливо, нам знадобиться трохи більше часу".

7. → The hedge "might" reduces imposition. Rendering it too directly as "Нам потрібен більше часу" changes tone into demand.

8. "We respect your position". → "Ми поважаємо вашу позицію". → This prefaces disagreement while preserving face. Interpreters must not omit it, as it signals recognition of the partner's dignity.

Implicature and Indirectness

1. "That price is a little higher than expected". → "Ціна дещо вища, ніж ми очікували". → The implicature is a request for a price reduction. Exaggerating it («значно вища») distorts the negotiation pressure.

2. "We'll need to think about it". → "Нам потрібно це обдумати". → This typically signals hesitation or polite refusal. Interpreters must not render it as outright rejection.

3. "The deadline is quite tight". → "Термін досить стислий". → The implication is a request for a deadline extension. A neutral literal translation risks hiding the intended complaint.

4. "Our partners are considering other options". → "Наші партнери розглядають інші варіанти".

5. The implicature is competitive pressure. If weakened, the strategic function of the utterance disappears.

6. "We are not entirely convinced". → "Ми не повністю переконані". → The phrase implies the need for stronger arguments. Interpreters should preserve their cautious tone rather than turn it into outright rejection.

7. "That would be difficult under current conditions". → "Це буде складно за нинішніх умов".

8. → This is a softened refusal. Interpreters who render it too directly risk closing negotiation space.

9. "This could be a starting point". → "Це може бути відправною точкою". → The phrase opens space for further negotiation. Omitting the modal nuance could make it sound like a final agreement.

Cultural Pragmatics

1. "We disagree". → "Ми маємо іншу точку зору". → In Ukrainian culture, direct disagreement may be impolite. The softened variant maintains harmony.

2. "That's not acceptable". → "Це нам не зовсім підходить". → This reduces the bluntness of the English original. It conveys refusal without unnecessary confrontation.

3. "You must submit by Friday". → "Будь ласка, подайте до п'ятниці". → English directness is often inappropriate in Ukrainian business talk. Adding politeness maintains authority without rudeness.

4. "Call me John". → "Звертайтеся до мене на ім'я – Джон". → This adapts Anglo-American informality to Ukrainian norms. Retaining distance markers may otherwise sound unnatural.

5. "That's a deal". → "Домовилися". → The Ukrainian formula mirrors the ritual nature of agreement. Rendering it literally would sound flat.

6. "Let's cut to the chase". → "Переїдемо до суті". → Idiomatic English requires neutral adaptation. Direct translation of the metaphor would confuse listeners.

7. "I'll hold you to that promise". → "Я розраховую на вашу обіцянку". → This mitigates the confrontational undertone of the English. It preserves accountability without sounding threatening.

Methods

The research applied a qualitative case study methodology, examining and interpreting instances within business dialogues, emphasizing pragmatic adequacy. The materials consisted of recordings of negotiations between suppliers and clients, transcripts of virtual business meetings, and simulated training scenarios, including sales calls and investor presentations.

We found sentences with pragmatic content, like hedges, facework, and implicatures. They were categorized into one of the four classifications of pragmatic awareness. We looked at the English originals and the Ukrainian translations to see how well they worked in practice. We chose representative examples to show common problems. The analysis was based on Grice's implicature model (1975), Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987), House's model of pragmatic equivalence (1997), and Gile's Effort Model (1995, 2009).

Findings and Discussion

The examination of English–Ukrainian business interpreting indicates that pragmatic awareness is not a peripheral or superfluous skill, but a fundamental factor in achieving communicative success. It directly impacts whether negotiations stay open, relationships are kept, and legal or financial obligations are communicated accurately. The four areas of pragmatic awareness are discussed in the following subsections, with examples from real-life and simulated business situations.

Speech Act Awareness Protects Business Intent

Interpreters often have trouble telling the difference between tentative statements and binding commitments. During one recorded negotiation with a supplier, an English manager said, "*We'll look into the possibility of expanding the order next quarter*". A trainee interpreter said, «Ми збільшимо замовлення наступного кварталу». The Ukrainian version turned a careful, non-binding statement into a firm promise. Because of this, the Ukrainian partner thought they were getting a guaranteed expansion, but the English speaker did not mean that.

In another case, the phrase "*We are prepared to sign today*" was correctly translated as "Ми готові підписати сьогодні" during an online investment call. This fidelity maintained the commitment's validity, eliminating any ambiguity.

The difference between these two cases shows that misclassifying speech acts can change the stakes of negotiations. Awareness of pragmatics here is not a matter of style but a way to avoid misrepresentation.

Politeness and Facework Maintain Business Relationships. In business, relationships are often just as crucial as deals. Politeness markers, hedges, and facework strategies help people get along with each other even when they speak different languages or come from different cultures.

One typical scenario involved a German company negotiating with Ukrainian partners in English. The manager stated: "*I'm afraid we cannot offer additional discounts at this stage*". The interpreter rendered this literally as «Ми не можемо надати додаткових знижок». The omission of the hedge ("I'm afraid") and the politeness frame made the message sound blunt, almost dismissive. A more pragmatically aware version, «Боюся, ми не можемо запропонувати додаткові знижки на цьому етапі», would have retained the mitigation and preserved goodwill.

Another real-life case happened during a multinational and a Kyiv office's human resources department meeting. When the English HR director said, "*We'd appreciate your flexibility with the schedule*", the interpreter softened it into «Ми дуже просимо вас бути більш гнучкими». While polite, the shift from appreciation to request altered the balance of power. The English original acknowledged the employee's autonomy, while the Ukrainian rendering implied hierarchical authority. Pragmatic awareness involves sensitivity to politeness, organizational culture, and role relations.

Implicature Preserves Strategic Subtlety. Business communication thrives on indirectness and implicature. What is not said often carries more weight than what is said.

A striking case came from a Ukrainian IT outsourcing firm negotiating with a British client. The client remarked, "*The current rate is slightly higher than our competitors offer*". The interpreter rendered this as «Ваша ціна набагато вища, ніж у конкурентів». The exaggeration turned a mild pressure tactic into an accusation, shifting the tone of the meeting and putting the Ukrainian side on the defensive. A pragmatically sensitive version – «Ваша ціна дещо вища...» – would have preserved the subtlety.

Similarly, in a boardroom discussion, a CEO remarked: "*We'll need to think about it*". A literal translation as «Ми не згодні» was interpreted by the Ukrainian team as a refusal, leading them to drop the proposal prematurely. Yet in Anglo-American business pragmatics, such a phrase often signals hesitation, not outright rejection. **The interpreter's role here is to preserve ambiguity, leaving negotiation space open.**

Cultural Pragmatics Bridge Gaps in Directness. Cross-cultural communication between English and Ukrainian participants often highlights differences in directness. Anglo-American business culture tolerates blunt statements like "*We disagree*" or "*That's not acceptable*". Ukrainian professional culture, however, tends to favor softened expressions to preserve harmony.

In one case, during a Kyiv trade fair, an American representative bluntly told a Ukrainian distributor: "*We cannot accept these terms*". The interpreter delivered: «Ми не можемо прийняти ці умови».

The Ukrainian side later reported feeling that the Americans were "too harsh". A pragmatically aware rendering such as «Ці умови нам не зовсім підходять» would have conveyed the refusal without damaging the relational climate.

Another recurring case involves address forms. English-speaking managers often say "*Call me John*" to flatten hierarchies. In Ukrainian, the equivalent directness may sound overly casual or disrespectful. The adaptation «Звертайтеся до мене на ім'я – Джон» maintains the invitation to informality but avoids a culturally awkward impression. **Cultural pragmatics, therefore, functions as a bridge between communicative styles.**

Synthesis of Findings. Taken together, these cases confirm that pragmatic awareness:

Prevents contractual misrepresentation. Interpreters who fail to distinguish speech acts may commit parties to obligations never intended.

Preserves interpersonal trust. Politeness and facework strategies keep negotiations cordial even when disagreements arise.

Safeguards strategic negotiation tactics. Accurate rendering of implicatures maintains the subtle balance of pressure and concession.

Bridges cultural gaps. Pragmatic adaptation ensures that messages are not only understood but also socially acceptable.

The findings also align with Gile's Effort Model, which predicts that pragmatic cues are the first to be lost under cognitive load. Interpreters prioritize propositional content, leaving out hedges, politeness, or implicatures. Yet as House (1997) and Reiß & Vermeer (2013) emphasize, functional adequacy demands that pragmatic meaning be preserved as faithfully as informational content.

Discussion and conclusions

The results of this study indicate that pragmatic awareness is fundamental to business interpreting in the English–Ukrainian context. Although lexical and grammatical precision are crucial, they are inadequate without pragmatic sufficiency. The data show that interpreters who don't keep speech act force, politeness strategies, implicatures, and cultural appropriateness risk communication breakdown, money loss, contract disputes, and hurt relationships.

Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) demonstrated that utterances constitute actions; consequently, interpreters must possess action sensitivity. Grice's (1975) model of implicature, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework, and Reiß and Vermeer's (2013) Skopos theory all converge on the insight that successful mediation necessitates more than mere propositional equivalence. The English–Ukrainian cases examined herein exemplify these principles in application: misconstruing a hedge as a refusal or a tentative offer as a commitment directly influences business results.

Practical Recommendations for Interpreter Training

Speech Act Drills. Students should practice distinguishing between commissives, directives, and expressives, with attention to degrees of commitment. Exercises might include interpreting mock negotiations where ambiguity is intentional.

Politeness Reframing. Training should involve reformulating direct refusals, requests, and criticisms into culturally appropriate equivalents, while maintaining functional equivalence.

Implicature Awareness Tasks. Interpreters should be trained to spot implied meanings in business discourse. Classroom activities may involve interpreting under conditions where hints and hedges carry more weight than explicit statements.

Cultural Role-Plays. Simulation of intercultural business meetings can help interpreters learn when to soften or intensify messages to match Ukrainian or Anglo-American expectations.

Recommendations for Professional Practice

Preparation with Clients. Interpreters should negotiate expectations with clients, clarifying whether they should reproduce directness or adjust for politeness.

Glossaries of Pragmatic Conventions. Beyond terminology lists, interpreters could prepare glossaries of pragmatic equivalents (e.g., polite refusals, tentative commitments) tailored to business contexts.

Reflective Practice. Professionals should review recordings of their interpreting, focusing on terminology and pragmatic fidelity, asking whether hedges, politeness, and implicatures were preserved.

Assessment Implications

When assessing interpreters, pragmatic adequacy should be one of the things to look for, along with accuracy and fluency. Tools like House's (1997) quality assessment model can be changed to see if interpreters could reproduce illocutionary force, lessen refusals, and keep face. This would shift the focus from just looking at language skills to how well someone can communicate functionally.

In the end, pragmatic awareness is not a luxury or an advanced skill but a basic professional skill for business interpreters. In settings where words create contracts, start or end negotiations, and build trust, pragmatic fidelity is just as crucial as lexical fidelity. For the English–Ukrainian pair, interpreters serve as both linguistic intermediaries and pragmatic guardians of communication, especially given their cultural variances in directness and politeness. So, it is significant for business interpreting to become more professional that we recognize, teach, and test pragmatic awareness.

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ПРАГМАТИЧНА ОБІЗНАНІСТЬ У ПИСЬМОВОМУ ТА УСНОМУ БІЗНЕС ПЕРЕКЛАДІ

Вступ. У бізнес-комунікації "зміст" часто передається не лише словами, а й тим, як саме вони сказані: через іллокутивну силу, ввічливість, імплікатури та культурно прийнятний рівень прямоти. В англо-українському перекладі та усному перекладі під час переговорів і корпоративних зустрічей втрата цих маркерів може змінити сприйняття намірів, вплинути на довіру та спотворити відчуття бізнес сетінгу. Мета статті – окреслити прагматичну обізнаність як ключову складову професійної компетентності бізнес-перекладача/перекладача-усника та показати її значення для результатів кооперації.

Методи. Дослідження виконано як якісний кейс-аналіз на матеріалі автентичних і навчальних фрагментів бізнес-взаємодії (переговори, онлайн-зустрічі, змодельовані сценарії). Прагматично релевантні висловлювання було відібрано та згруповано за чотирма доменами прагматичної обізнаності. Для аналізу використано інструментарій теорії мовленнєвих актів, теорії ввічливості, концепції імплікатур, функціоналістських підходів у перекладознавстві та моделей усного перекладу, зокрема уявлень про зусилля й когнітивне навантаження.

Результати. Виявлено типові зони ризику: ненавмисні зсуви іллокутивної сили, редукція пом'якшення та "збереження обличчя", втрати або надмірна експлікація імплікатур, а також порушення очікуваного рівня прямоти, зумовленого культурною нормою. Прагматично виважений переклад, навпаки, утримує переговорну гнучкість, підтримує контакт між сторонами та зберігає стратегічну невизначеність там, де вона є функціональною. Окремо фіксується тенденція: за підвищеного когнітивного навантаження прагматичні маркери "випадають" раніше за інші компоненти повідомлення.

Висновки. Прагматична обізнаність має входити до базових критеріїв професійності в бізнес-усному перекладі поряд із точністю та плавністю. Для підготовки перекладачів доцільно розробити вправи, що тренують відтворення мовленнєвих актів, пом'якшення, імплікатур і міжкультурних норм у реалістичних ділових завданнях; у оцінюванні варто закріпити окремий вимір прагматичної адекватності. Це підсилює розуміння перекладача як медіатора не тільки мовної форми, а й прагматичного наміру.

Ключові слова: бізнес переклад, прагматична обізнаність, когнітивне навантаження, теорія усного перекладу, мовленнєвий акт, бізнес комунікація, перекладацька гнучкість.

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