

## PREFACE

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This special issue tries to offer a multifaceted picture of the role of pragmatic processing in written and spoken communication in a first and foreign language. The fourteen articles collected in the volume present the outcomes of a two-year project funded by the University of Pisa<sup>1</sup> which brought together researchers working in the fields of English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese linguistics and language teaching and sharing a common interest in the complex interaction of the features of different language systems, linguistic tasks and language users when pragmatic processing is required.

Pragmatic efficiency is crucial for successful communication, which is a complex social activity involving cognitive and linguistic skills as well as socio-cultural competence. Indeed, all levels of the linguistic system contribute to the (co-)construction of meaning (Levinson 1983; Sperber, Wilson 1995). Pragmatic skills allow us to successfully perform many different receptive and expressive language tasks, ranging from shaping the message for the function it must carry out, to correctly recognizing such function in a certain context, from selecting the best register for a communicative situation, to drawing inferences to interpret non-literal and implicitly communicated information (Ariel 2010; Domaneschi, Bambini 2020; Stemmer 2000). These activities, although apparently effortless for neurotypical language users – especially when they operate in their first language –, come with a significant cost in terms of cognitive resources (Domaneschi, Bambini 2020; Paradis 1998). Inferential processes need the rapid integration of linguistic and extra-linguistic information, which is demanding in terms of attention, memory, and mind-reading resources (Schumacher 2017). For this reason, non-typically developing language users with impairments in any of the cognitive areas mentioned (e.g., people with dyslexia, cf. Cappelli *et al.* 2018, 2022) might be less efficient than their neurotypical peers in tasks involving pragmatic processing. At the same time, pragmatic competence also relies on the knowledge of socio-cultural norms. Thus, operating in a foreign language might also pose challenges in terms of pragmatic processing and efficiency (Rubio-Fernandez, Jara-Ettinger 2020).

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For completely different reasons and probably in quite different ways, pragmatic inefficiency may have a negative impact on many everyday-life operations for both foreign language- and non-typically developing language users.

The importance of pragmatic abilities in the language classroom has been mostly explored in terms of the acquisition and development of the pragmatic skills required for appropriate social behaviour in the L2 (e.g., in initiating conversation, taking turns, performing felicitous speech acts, cf. Culpeper *et al.* 2018; Plonsky, Zhuang 2019; Taguchi 2019 among others). However, to the best of our knowledge, not much has been said relative to the underlying processes which allow people to select and process contextual cues. Such processes are grounded in the greatly diverse cognitive characteristics of individual language users rather than in culture and language-specific aspects of communication. Thus, a linguistic approach to the issue should assume a view of the pragmatic processing (i.e., interpretation) of texts as emerging from the complex interaction of intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of language use. The extrinsic, and generally cultural-specific aspects can be (and should be) explicitly taught. Awareness of the socio-cultural values underlying communicative events should be developed in foreign language learners. On the other hand, the intrinsic, individual aspects of pragmatic processing can only be accounted for and integrated into language teaching practices to ensure maximally inclusive learning environments.

Many activities proposed to foreign language learners rely on efficient pragmatic processing. Examples of common tasks proposed in the foreign language classroom include inferring rules and regularities from examples, resolving reference ambiguity, deriving novel word-meanings from contextual clues. They all require good pragmatic skills, as well as vocabulary knowledge and well-functioning working memory. Many reading and listening comprehension tasks found in standardised tests also rely on pragmatic efficiency, since learners must be able to construct a mental model of the text by filling in information which is not explicitly provided. In non-pathological situations, bridging and elaborative inferences are performed frequently and seemingly effortlessly, if appropriate lexical and cultural knowledge is available. On the other hand, learners with non-typical development might find some of these activities challenging (cf. Bambini *et al.* 2016, 2021; Cappelli *et al.* 2022; Cummings 2017, 2021). Investigating pragmatic processing in atypical learners can advance our knowledge of the underlying processes at work in successful communication which go otherwise unnoticed in unimpaired language use. This in turn can help improve our understanding of the obstacles posed to successful foreign language learning and use by tasks that are taxing on pragmatic processing

resources.

Each of the articles in this special issue of *Lingue e Linguaggi* tackles the question of the role of pragmatic processing in text comprehension from a different point of view and focuses on one of the many facets of this complex matter. Some articles explore the way in which different phenomena (e.g., punctuation, morphological processing of blends, interpretation of phrasal verbs, idiomatic expressions, and extended metaphors) may demand efficient pragmatic skills in order to be correctly processed and interpreted and open for further reflection on the effects of such demand for foreign language learners with and without specific learning difficulties (SLDs).

**Marcella Bertuccelli Papi** explores the cognitive complexity of punctuation by showing how the long-standing debate on the prosodic vs. grammatical function of punctuation marks is by itself insufficient to explain the complexities of punctuation. Bertuccelli Papi proposes to view punctuation as a complex system of signs which contribute to the economy of text interpretability by offering clues for the most efficient, efficacious, and appropriate processing of the text. **Elisa Mattiello** discusses the recognisability of lexical blends for EFL learners. Blends are generally not transparent in terms of morphemic structure, and their source words might be difficult to recognise, especially for foreign language users. Mattiello asked a group of Italian learners of English to identify the source words and meanings of a set of blends selected according to different phonological, morphotactic, semantic criteria. Results seem to indicate that the recognisability of English lexical blends by Italian native speakers depends on the characteristics and category of the blends but also on pragmatic factors, e.g., the context where blends are used. Belinda Crawford Camiciottoli's and Silvia Masi and Gianmarco Vignozzi's articles also focus on difficulties deriving from lack of linguistic transparency. More specifically, they investigate phrasal verbs and idiomatic expressions and the comprehension issues they may create for non-native speakers of English. **Belinda Crawford Camiciottoli** offers an in-depth analysis of phrasal verbs in academic lectures as a spoken genre that requires listeners to process complex and abstract content in real time. She proposes a corpus-based investigation of the use of phrasal verbs that reveals that they occur frequently and display substantial variation in form. The author also finds that roughly half of the occurrences have figurative meanings, which often display instances of pragmatic strengthening to both expand on core meanings and communicate speaker attitude. She concludes by discussing the pedagogical implications of the analysis and offers suggestions for strategies that may help L2 learners to cope with the demands posed by processing phrasal verbs. **Silvia Masi and Gianmarco Vignozzi** offer a parallel but different interpretation of phrasal verbs and idiomatic expressions. Their

contribution reports on the experimental investigation of the contribution of spontaneous gestures to the comprehension of co-occurring phrasal verbs and idiomatic expressions by learners of English. Interestingly, they compare the effect on learners with and without dyslexia (i.e., in a neurotypical and in a neurodivergent population). Masi and Vignozzi hypothesise that iconic gestures may assist all learners in the interpretation of semantically opaque expressions, but especially in learners with dyslexia who are known to be less efficient in processing figurative language and pragmatic meanings in general. The results of the study seem to confirm the authors' hypothesis and they conclude that multimodal teaching materials should be exploited to offer inclusive activities for EFL instruction to dyslexic learners. **Alessandro Aru's** article also focuses on figurative language, but from the wider angle of textual interpretation. More specifically, he focuses on the interpretation of extended metaphors in political discourse. Aru adopts Kövecses' "multi-level view of conceptual metaphor" and shows how the micrometaphors within the extended metaphor share the same source domain and the same image schemas and argues that they conceptualise the target domain at the level of frames (which is more specific and, therefore, richer in information), by elaborating specific aspects of the domains. The author offers a discussion of this phenomena from the point of view of its complexity and of the demands it may pose on the cognitive resources supporting pragmatic processing, thus presenting possible challenges for foreign language learners with and without SLDs.

The articles by Silvia Bruti and Nicoletta Simi focus on the interpretation of more global pragmatic phenomena such as impoliteness and humour. **Nicoletta Simi's** contribution reports on an experimental study which aimed at assessing the performance of English-speaking readers with and without dyslexia when they need to resolve lexical and syntactic ambiguity in jokes. The study addresses different types of ambiguity in punchlines and the way in which they may be processed by readers, considering the involvement of participants' vocabulary knowledge and working memory skills in the pragmatic process of interpretation. Data show that individuals with dyslexia were systematically outperformed by the neurotypical members of the control group. The largest difference in performance was observed in jokes relying on syntactic ambiguity, which leads the author to conclude that the need to reassign word classes to ambiguous elements in order to reach the correct contextual interpretation of a text is a demanding task in terms of working memory resources, and, therefore, a potential source of difficulty for comprehenders. **Silvia Bruti's** article focuses on the interpretation of (im)politeness by EFL learners. It assumes the twofold perspective of a reflection on the complexity of processing this pragmatic phenomenon and of an exploration of the merits of

explicit teaching of pragmatic issues in the EFL classroom. The author stresses the importance of teaching pragmatics, and (im)politeness in particular, to advanced learners of English. She then illustrates the results of a behavioural experiment carried out with different groups of EFL students with the aim of investigating to what extent they recognize and understand (im)politeness and its different nuances in interaction, without having received any formal instruction on the topic. By using excerpts from the TV series *Sherlock* (2010-2017), whose main character is a trigger for face-threatening acts, Bruti explores how learners with different backgrounds, levels of language competence, and access to different inputs (e.g., audio-visual or audio, both implemented by the written transcription of the dialogues) understand and recognise impoliteness.

The dual perspective found in Bruti's article, that is, the interest for the pragmatic processes at work in text interpretation on the one hand and for language teaching practices on the other, also underlies the contributions by Elisa Lupetti, Monica Lupetti and Ana Luiza Oliveira De Souza, Gloria Cappelli and Sabrina Noccetti. **Elisa Lupetti** focuses on the pragmatic effectiveness of texts written in French as a foreign language (FFL) by Italian-speaking university learners with previous knowledge of French. The data obtained from a reading comprehension task involving reporting the content of news articles reveal the influence of the native language on the L2, both for reading comprehension and for writing tasks. The author argues that being familiar with the topic, being able to exploit research tools and having lexical competence affect pragmatic effectiveness and guarantee an interactive approach, favouring the activation of the interaction between reader, text and context. Elisa Lupetti concludes that learners merge their ability to produce appropriate speech acts and socio-linguistic competence to achieve pragmatic effectiveness. **Monica Lupetti and Ana Luiza O. de Souza** explore the reading comprehension performance of Italian-speaking university students learning Portuguese as a foreign language (PFL) and compare it with that of Italian-Portuguese bilingual young people who speak Portuguese as a heritage language (PHL). The authors explore the possibility of using the cloze test as a tool to verify whether the performance and task outcome of the two groups of readers differ when it comes to the pragmatic processing of texts. The efficacy of the cloze test is also investigated in relation to grammatical and lexical knowledge. Cappelli's and Cappelli and Noccetti's articles discuss two steps of the same research. **Gloria Cappelli's** contribution investigates the performance of EFL learners with and without dyslexia in reading comprehension tasks. More specifically, the author tries to answer the question of whether, given the cognitive and communicative profile of the participants in the study, the type of questions (i.e., factual vs. inferential

questions) and the language of the text (i.e., Italian L1 vs. EFL) may be factors of increased difficulty and may consequently result in reduced accuracy. The data obtained through a reading comprehension task reveal significant differences between the learners with dyslexia and their neurotypical peers with respect to the inferential processing of texts. The participants without dyslexia systematically outperformed dyslexic learners in accurately answering questions relying on either local or global coherence inferencing, and their performance was less influenced by reading in a foreign language. **Gloria Cappelli and Sabrina Noccetti's** article represents an expansion of this research. It offers a retrospective analysis of data collected from additional reading comprehension activities proposed to the two groups of English foreign language learners with the aim to verify whether vocabulary knowledge contributes to the task outcome. More specifically, the authors' analysis explores the contribution of vocabulary depth to the level of accuracy in answering factual and inferential questions in the two groups. Cappelli and Noccetti's initial hypothesis that vocabulary depth would be associated with better comprehension in both dyslexic and non-dyslexic readers was, however, only confirmed for words which corresponded to the deepest vocabulary knowledge according to an adapted Word Associates Test. A qualitative analysis of the unexpected results was carried out and several factors hindering text comprehension by dyslexic readers were identified, including a difficulty in selecting the relevant sense of focus words in contexts in which competing elements coexist and a negative interaction between lexical and pragmatic-inferential processing.

The last two articles in the volume deal with the teaching of pragmatic aspects in the foreign language classroom. **Denise Filmer** reports on action research carried out within an EFL course for post-graduate students of an International Studies programme at the University of Pisa in which the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis was exploited to develop reading comprehension skills. More specifically, Filmer focuses on English newspaper headlines as an example of authentic teaching materials characterized by non-standard morpho-syntactical and lexical features as well as the presence of culturemes and ideological stances potentially capable of hindering comprehension, even for native speakers. Filmer shows that the research-oriented classroom practice encouraged students to critically engage with news texts by learning to unpack and infer meanings from news headlines, to apply the tools of critical discourse analysis to the construal of news discourse and to reflect on and discuss the content of selected news articles presented in class. **Matteo Migliorelli** analyses reading comprehension activities in Portuguese as a Foreign Language (PFL) teaching materials, with special attention on the promotion of inferential processes. The author examines six PFL teaching coursebooks through a

qualitative approach based on Applegate *et al.*'s (2002) model which suggests a change of perspective in the elaboration of reading proposals and sets new goals that would lead the readers to a profound reflection on what they read and on the use of the information in the text to formulate their interpretation. Migliorelli's article concludes that materials for PFL teaching should be rethought in light of the central role played by inferential processes in reading comprehension. Finally, **Rosa María García Jiménez** reflects on the importance of teaching evidential mechanisms to intermediate and advanced learners of Spanish as a foreign language (SFL), with the aim of improving the understanding of the non-prototypical meanings conveyed by the past imperfect tense, the future tense and the conditional in European Spanish. The author discusses the way in which these contents are presented in teaching materials and makes suggestions for SFL teaching practice.

**Bionotes:** Gloria Cappelli, PhD, is Associate Professor of English Language and Linguistics at the University of Pisa. Her research focuses on semantics and pragmatics, and second and foreign language acquisition in learners with and without dyslexia. She has published in national and international journals and in edited volumes and has authored and edited books on English verbs of cognitive attitude, lexical semantics and tourism communication ('I reckon I know how Leonardo da Vinci must have felt': Epistemicity, *Evidentiality and English Verbs of Cognitive Attitude*, Pari Publishing, 2007). Her most recent publications include the co-edited volume *A Linguistic Approach to the Study of Dyslexia* (2022; with Sabrina Noccetti, Multilingual Matters), which also includes her chapters on "The Impact of Dyslexia on Lexico-Semantic Abilities: An Overview" and "Dyslexia and Pragmatic Skills" (with S. Noccetti, N. Simi, G. Arcara and V. Bambini). She is a member of the Italian Association of English Studies and of the European Society for the Study of English.

Sabrina Noccetti, PhD, is Assistant Professor of English Language and Linguistics at the University of Pisa. Her research focuses on the emergence of first languages, and second and foreign language acquisition in learners with and without dyslexia. She has authored the monographs on the acquisition of Italian as a first language ("*Pre- and Proto-morphology in Language Acquisition: An Italian case study*", Edizioni Plus), and on the acquisition of English as a Foreign Language ("*Morfologia dell'Inglese. Errori nel processo di apprendimento di L2*", Edizioni ETS). She has co-edited the volume *Semantics and morphology of early adjectives in first language acquisition* (with E. Tribushinina and M. Voeikova, Cambridge Scholar) and published in the journal *Dyslexia* (with G. Cappelli, G. Arcara and V. Bambini). Recently, she has co-edited the volume *A Linguistic Approach to the Study of Dyslexia* (2022; with G. Cappelli, Multilingual Matters), which also includes her chapter on "*Visual and Auditory Stimuli for Teaching EFL Vocabulary to Learners with Dyslexia*" and "*Dyslexia and Pragmatic Skills*" (with G. Cappelli, N. Simi, G. Arcara and V. Bambini).

Nicoletta Simi, PhD, is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Department of Psychology of the University of Tuebingen, Germany. She holds a PhD in English linguistics from the Department of Philology, Literature and Linguistics at the University of Pisa. During her PhD studies, her interests involved the development of a comprehensive understanding of key phenomena that are at stake in reading comprehension processes. Her PhD research

project was centred on the study of these processes in typically-developing young adults and in young adults with dyslexia speaking English as L1 and L2. She gives further attention to the underlying general processes such as cognitive processing speed, working memory and motivational / anxiety aspects of language use. Currently, she investigates how conflicts of linguistic nature are detected, monitored and adapted in L1 speakers of English and German. She deals with lexical ambiguity, negation and world knowledge violations.

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