

**Assessment of Metapragmatic Awareness -  
From Theoretical Perspectives to Clinical Practice:  
The Current Scenario**

**Geethi. S., Ph.D. Research Scholar & Dr. Shyamala. K. Chengappa, Ph.D.**

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**Abstract**

The review offers a brief discussion on the theoretical domains of metapragmatic awareness with reference to its assumptions on current clinical practice and suggests that assessment methodologies should undergo rigorous advancement. This paper sheds light on different experimental practices and retrospective techniques of metapragmatic assessment during the recent years outlining the sparsity of empirical research and different dilemmas in assessment within this field.

**Metapragmatics**

Metapragmatics reflects as the interface between linguistic, social and cognitive abilities which is very crucial for successful communication and social functioning. Though it is through the use of language that we express our opinions, thoughts, emotions and needs, the knowledge of the interlocutors thoughts, emotions and needs are essential to grasp the illocutionary force of the linguistic utterances within a given context.

Metapragmatic awareness (MPA) is the ability to explicitly reflect on pragmatic constituents and pragmatic rules or in broader terms – an ability to reflect upon language by linking language to the context. Tomasello (1999) described MPA as people's ability to identify with others and to work collaboratively towards common goals. Though, it is clearly difficult to define metapragmatics, (Mey, 1993; Verschueren, 2000; 1999; Chen, 1996) or metapragmatic awareness, (Verschueren, 2000, 1999; Nikula, 2000) this concept with different definitions in general points to a meta level to take

about or imply pragmatics which indexes speaker perspective on events and relation between speakers and interlocutors. (Roberts, 1998).

### **Evolutionary Accounts on the Concept of Metapragmatics**

Even before Silverstein coined the term ‘Metapragmatics’ in 1976, the notion of the term ‘Metapragmatics’ had been used by anthropologists in verbal communication literature (Bateson, 1955, 1972; Silverstein, 1973) and it was related in some ways with the description of pragmatic phenomena, such as ‘reported speech’ and ‘indexicality’ .It was later in 1980’s that linguists and semioticians started to join the discussion of metapragmatics (Schiffrin, 1987; Lucy, 1993; Caffi, 1993, 1994; Verschueren, 1999, 2000)

Caffi (1993) defined metapragmatics as a theoretical debate on pragmatics and its central concerns, its epistemological foundations. The author highlighted the conditions which makes speakers use of language possible and effective. Accordingly an utterance is metapragmatic when it describes, accounts for or elaborates on the pragmatics of a speech. The author referred it as the interphase between linguistic and extra linguistics. Silverstein (1976, 1993) defined metapragmatics as the study of metalinguistic dimension of language use.

Though not as the part of the proposition of the speaker, meta pragmatic expressions have an important role in interpreting the messages of the speaker and this would not only help the speaker to understand the meaning of the words, but also the kind of pragmatic act the speaker is performing. The speaker uses these metapragmatic expressions to make the intentions manifest to the addressee. (Lee, 2007).

The topic - metapragmatics of communication has been the focus of research during the recent years which has progressed in two directions. One group of research has focused on looking at the metapragmatic markers holistically in varying settings or environments. (Aijmer, 1996; Anderson, Fister, Lee, Tardia, Wang, 2004; Aukurust, 2001; Blumkulka, Sheffer, 1993; Jacquemet, 1994; Karmiloff - Smith, 1986; Kecsker, 2006; Silverstein, 1993; Tanskannen, 2007; Wortham, Locher 1996)

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In the second direction of research, one particular metapragmatic structure is chosen and subsequently examined in different situations or settings. (Aijmer, 1985; Aoski, 2001, Clift, 2006; Fillmore, Kay, O' Conner, 1988; Maynard, 1997, Overstreet, 1999; Overstreet; Yule, 2001, 2002; Suzuki, 2006, 2007; Ward, Birner, 1993)

Arguments prevail in the literature that 'metapragmatics' specifically studies the conditions under which pragmatic rules are supposed to hold and these conditions include general constraints, presuppositions, speech act, discourse and the environment surrounding the language users. (Mey, 1993). In this way, Jacquemet (1994) argues that interlocutors deploy strategies of metapragmatic awareness that focus on specific use of linguistic mechanisms that refer to the interaction at hand.

Metapragmatics is also viewed as the pragmatics of actually performed meta utterances which serves as a means of commenting on and inferring with the ongoing discourse or text. (Bublitz & Hubler, 2007).

Further, the authors' Typology of Metapragmatic functions (Bublitz & Hubler, 2007) has won much attention where the authors attempt to illustrate the different metapragmatic functions a single utterance can serve. Quoting a simple example phrase 'You are repeating yourself', the authors describe the functional taxonomy of metapragmatic acts. Accordingly, the utterance could be evaluative, communication oriented or even instrumental. While being communication oriented, the same utterance could be (inter-)personal, conflictual (face threatening), affiliative, expressive, means related, organizing, negotiating linguistic meaning and/or even deciding on the best expression (establishing the best code). This typology can be considered as a major step towards clarifying the different functions and distinctive features of metapragmatic expressions.

Very recently, while attempting to characterize the distinctive features of metapragmatic expressions, Caffi (2017) conducted a case study of an Italian Parliamentary debate where metapragmatic expressions were detected and analysed at three different interlinked layers. The first sequential layer - the Meta Discourse layer - explicitly focused on controlling and organizing the exchange of debate which is depicted through the expressions 'So to speak', 'please go ahead,' 'I

suggest, we continue” etc. The second- Meta Relational layer focuses on the relation between speaker and the hearer and it is monitored through multimodal cues through expressions such as “I would ask you to show respect towards the institution, please!” At the third - Topical Meta Textual layer - the metapragmatic expressions come to play at the linearity of a sequence of acts and form a vertical perspective-the hierarchy of acts. Eg. The phrases “Last, but not the least...”.

The author further comments that the utterances at this meta textual layer can be further subdivided into groups based on (a) Topical hierarchization (Eg. Utterances like “First and foremost”) (b) Topical focalization (Eg. “I would furthermore like to add something”) (c) Defining topics at hand (Eg. “We try somewhat to express the feeling...” (d) Topical exclusion (Eg. “A topic I don’t intend to discuss...” (e) Topical resetting (Eg. “What are we talking about?” - an utterance which represents a closure of a phase of discourse, a restart at a beginning of a conclusion thereby marking a beautiful boundary from a stylistic point of view). The author also makes an important remark that quotation usages can be considered as metapragmatic only if they are meant as elements that organize an ongoing discourse.

The author also discusses the concept of Meta-pragmeme where he describes that a number of parameters should be at play for an expression to be a ‘meta-pragmeme’. Accordingly an expression can be termed meta-pragmeme when it has an endophoric reference (i.e., a reference and a predication of an act in the preceding context) in which linguistic, prosodic and kinesic aspects converge. He also comments that the gesture accompanying the expression should confirm the ironic key of the meta-pragmeme as a whole.

This paper reviews in depth, the views on metapragmatics by Verschueren (2000) where the author points out that though the awareness of the meta level of language is not measurable, the notion of MPA lends itself to easy speculation. The metapragmatic markers such as the quotation usages, the introduction of modalities in language, the explicit inter textual links, the overall self referential use of language and even a discourse itself ( a metapragmatic condition referring to all the immediate context of a conversation comprising the hidden conditions that govern the situations of languages) - All these implies some degree of consciousness and linguistic choice making. The author points out that while some choices openly reflect upon themselves or upon other choices, the reflexive

awareness of language is a central phenomenon and all verbal communication is self referential to a certain degree and there is no language use with out a constant calibration between pragmatic and metapragmatic functioning.

The authors of this review agree to Verschueren’s view that it is this phenomenon which forms the appropriate domain of metapragmatics. Verschueren’s research has also looked for distinction between explicit and implicit forms of metalanguage. The implicit forms include deictic expressions such as pronouns, tenses etc, contextualization cues such as prosodic patterns, codeswitching tendencies, moods and modalities in language, implicit ‘voices’ etc. The explicit meta language forms distinguished by Verschueren were the usage of metapragmatic descriptions such as speech act verbs, self-referential expressions, pragmatic markers, hedges, adverbs, explicit intertextual links, quoted and reported speech, contextualisation cues, shifters etc. Developmental research (Hickmann, 1993) suggests that there are age differences in the relative use of more explicit versus more implicit forms of metalanguage.

While pragmatic ability refers to the use and understanding of language in context at the discourse level, (Bishop, 1997), MPA refers to explicit reflection upon the pragmatic rules that govern discourse such as reciprocity, verbosity and proximity (Collins, 2014). This includes pragmatic rules that apply to broad forms of communication such as narrations and conversations. Thus, it is this ‘reflexive awareness’ or this ability to reflect on the conventions of language which may be the one factor that assist in the transition to self-monitoring of language and generalization. This is thought to support the child’s learning about effective pragmatics in social communication thereby further increasing the awareness of pragmatic rules in the child. i.e., the rules governing the use of language in context which has the potential to enhance generalizability of gains in speech language interventions. Current clinical practice assumes that children with developmental pragmatic difficulties will benefit from speech language interventions aimed at improving MPA. Hence developing language intervention strategies that incorporate metapragmatic activities can raise awareness of their own use of pragmatic rules. (Adams, Gaile, Earl, Lockton & Fred, 2012, Anderson – Wood & Smith, 1997).

Language pathologists use general methods based on metacognitive knowledge to work with children with several developmental disorders and though working on developing MPA is a key activity with children with pragmatic impairments, there is relatively very little information regarding the typical development of MPA, to prioritize therapy or to identify sub skills.

### **Lacunae Observed in Assessment Practices**

Experimental tasks that have been previously used to assess metapragmatic abilities include identification of pragmatic rules and pragmatic violations, judgments of appropriacy of pragmatic behaviour, suggesting modifications to pragmatic behaviours, etc. (Axia, Baroni, 1985, Baroni & Axia, 1981, Bernicot, Laval, 1996; Bernicot, Laval & Chaminaud, 2007; Creaghead, 1990). Sampling techniques include spontaneous conversation recording, (Becker, 1988), Production tasks (Sachs et al, 1991; Wilkinson & Milosky, 1987), narrative completion tasks such as those used by Bernicot et al (2007) & Laval (2003). Recent researches exploring MPA have also used measures such as discourse completion tasks, (DCT's) role-plays or questionnaires where the subjects were asked to opine or chose what they would say or think in each specific situation (Yuka,2012). However, the subjects were not questioned about the reasons why they used those specific phrases or strategies. A few studies added retrospective reports to get information about the subjects' reasons for their choice of answers. In such cases, the subjects were asked only about the answers they already gave and not about the ones they did not choose. Further, a very few studies over the past years have also focused on the production of various kinds speech acts for exploring metapragmatic awareness (Suh,2000; Mahboub, 2015;Yuka, 2012, Ishihara, 2010; Maeda,2011; Hassaskhah, Ebrahimi, 2015).

Here the authors believe that the whole usable pragmatic knowledge with in the subjects does not appear in the results or in better words, it is difficult get hold of the extent and depths of subjects' pragmatic knowledge just with these methods. Accordingly this paper addresses the need to design a theoretically grounded instrument capable of assessing MPA by means of linguistic, extra linguistic and paralinguistic means of communication.

The recent research by Collins, Lockton & Adams (2014) on the development and Assessment of Metapragmatic Awareness (AMP) is the single most published research in English on assessment

of MPA with normative data on the development of MPA. In AMP, an explicit knowledge of a set of pragmatic rules is elicited in children by targeting the ability to identify, describe and reflect on pragmatic errors in natural social communications through video presentations depicting a sense of social scenarios.

Thus, the majority of metapragmatic assessment research practices exhibited limitations in terms of their pragmatic measurements done in contrived settings, over ratings and under-ratings. Further, high level language processing subtests from standardised language tools such as Right Hemisphere language Battery (RHLB) have been used to assess atypical children's pragmatic competence (Griffiths,2007). Though attempts of such sort have been made, this paper addresses the issue that these reported measures are not sensitive enough to measure the subtleness of the 'Reflexive awareness' of language.

Further, despite the use of existing assessment measures, research underpinning metapragmatic therapy is very limited. Precise definitions of the nature of metapragmatic therapy and techniques have not been forthcoming. Precise relation between MPA and pragmatic behavior is not well understood. Further, the field of language testing has not conducted a great deal of research on the assessment of MPA. Moreover, very little is known about MPA in clinical population. The dearth of data regarding the emergency and development of MPA in typical children is due to the lack of tools to asses MPA.

### **Metapragmatic Research in India**

There are no published clinical tools for assessing MPA in India and hardly any research reported on MPA in clinical population within the country due to the unavailability of typical developmental norms in Indian population. This is also due to the lack of tools to assess metapragmatic awareness. Only with sufficient normative data, speech language pathologists shall be able to ascertain if a child with a clinical communicative impairment or a learning disorder had developmentally appropriate levels of MPA. (Meline & Brackin, 1987). It is proposed that there is an emerging need for the development of a clinical tool for metapragmatic assessment in an Indian

language with reliable norms with which MPA can be assessed by monitoring participant's descriptive and reflexive awareness for contextual language usage.

### **Future Directions**

The authors view at this point that the research on the stages of explicit MPA in children is inconclusive and there is insufficient research to support a valid progression of emergence of MPA such that it can be applied to clinical communicative practice. The nature of developmental progression from implicit MPA to explicit MPA should be further researched in depth to develop specific measurable constructs to assess MPA and to treat language deficits.

Being inspired by a need for innovative methodologies that are most conducive for MPA assessment, the authors postulate that consciousness raising into video prompts which can simulate real life situations more effectively and which may have the potential to contextualize metapragmatic assessment may be devised. Such tests may be scored by human raters which would however have the negative effects of increased costs. Interactive roleplay tasks may be one of the most effective ways to assess MPA among the various types of measures such as written discourse completion tasks, (WDCT), oral discourse completion tasks (ODCT) & discourse role play tasks (DRPT) for assessing MPA as they elicit interactive extended discourse, combine external and internal discourse contexts and allow considerable degree of standardization through designing role play situation. (Brown, Ahn, 2011). However, the authors firmly believe that such researchers using role play should be able to scrutinize implicit and explicit stages of developmental progression of MPA. Using audio recording is a powerful means of exposing children to many aspects of the target culture (F.S. Tsutagawa 2012). Though MPA is a complex phenomenon, computer assisted technologies shall now provide us with a means to create rich recreations of the real world pragmatic situations which can be simultaneously recorded for formal analysis later. Developing firm metapragmatic coding schemes for coding metapragmatic data will allow comparisons of different metapragmatic coding models which shall be an another milestone in metapragmatic assessment research.

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