2026, vol. 13, issue 1, pp. 350-359
RESEARCH ARTICLE https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21036239

READING BETWEEN DIGITAL LINES: TOWARD A PRAGMATICS OF AMBIGUITY AND DISCURSIVE RESPONSIBILITY ONLINE

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Abstract

This research examines how, in ordinary digital interactions, a completely banal message can suddenly drift, slip, and multiply. One may begin with a simple request or question and end up facing a cascade of comments, divergent readings, and rapid judgments. Based on a corpus composed of public threads from social networks, the study shows how users attempt to reconstruct context with very limited resources: a blurred photo, an emoji, an exclamation mark. Intentions are inferred, identities are assumed, and group norms are reaffirmed or contested. Misunderstandings are no longer accidental; they become the ordinary engine of exchange, prompting escalation, positioning, and the sudden formation of coalitions. Compensatory strategies—such as swift apologies, reformulations, and brief disclaimers—reveal an ongoing effort to maintain face within an unstable interactional space. On the basis of these observations, the article proposes a simple yet urgent pedagogical orientation: training learners to read, reread, and anticipate possible interpretations in order to develop genuine digital pragmatic literacy—more cautious, more aware, and more responsible.

Keywords: digital pragmatics, poly-interpretability, online interaction, discursive responsibility, pragmatic literacy

1. Introduction

In the digital age, even posting a brief message—something as apparently trivial as "Is this product really worth the price?"—can be enough to set off a cascade of highly varied reactions: advice, reproach, judgment, sometimes even outright mockery. This kind of interpretive proliferation is not merely incidental; it points, more fundamentally, to a form of structural pragmatic instability. Herring (1999), in her analysis of coherence within online exchanges, observes that text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC) is marked by a significant degree of disrupted adjacency, overlapping contributions, and a tendency for topics to be quickly abandoned. Put differently, a message no longer functions as a discrete act; it becomes a micro-event, exposed to ongoing processes of rereading, redirection, and reinterpretation. More recent research in digital pragmatics tends to reinforce this view, highlighting the extent to which online discourse is shaped by the multiplicity of audiences and by constantly shifting interpretive frames (Eisenlauer, 2023; Ivanyan, 2026).

This situation raises a major epistemological and pedagogical problem. Pragmatic competence, that capacity to use language according to the social context, is no longer sufficient if one confines oneself to its traditional definition. Kasper and Rose (2002) assert that pragmatic competence cannot be reduced to formal linguistic mastery; it requires a sociopragmatic understanding, that is to say the ability to anticipate the norms, expectations, and sensitivities of the social context. This dual grounding becomes absolutely crucial in environments where digital recipients are often indistinct, multiple, silent, sometimes even imagined. This dispersion of the audience mechanically amplifies pragmatic fragility: a technically correct utterance can, at any moment, tip into social inappropriateness, aggressive interpretation, or polemical drift, thereby revealing the structural vulnerability of language online.

Moreover, computer-mediated communication removes essential interactional cues such as prosody, tone, and gesture. Fracchiolla (2019) explains that online communication often involves a contextual shift resulting from the absence or modification of cues that are normally present in face-to-face interaction. This deficit turns every message into a gamble: the sender must anticipate interpretations that cannot be fully controlled, while the receiver must reconstruct meaning with far fewer resources than in co-present interaction.

The question that follows is therefore straightforward: how can learners be trained in a form of pragmatic competence that is suited to unstable and partially decontextualized digital environments? This issue concerns not only learners, but anyone who participates in public online spaces where discursive responsibility becomes central.

This study pursues two complementary objectives. First, it aims to analyze a set of ordinary digital interactions in order to examine how users interpret, react to, and adjust their utterances in response to unexpected

comments. Second, it seeks to propose a didactic orientation designed to strengthen digital pragmatic literacy—that is, an awareness of discursive responsibility in which speakers consider not only what they say, but also how it may be read.

To this end, we adopt an interpretive qualitative methodology, which is particularly suited to capturing the subtle movements of digital interaction. We compile a corpus of public discussion threads drawn from social networks (Facebook, open forums, etc.) and collected over several weeks. Their diversity in tone, participants, and interactional dynamics makes them a fertile empirical field for identifying, at a fine-grained level, unexpected reformulations, emerging misunderstandings, abrupt disengagements, and moments of discursive escalation.

The analysis draws on a multidimensional pragmatic grid, informed by speech act theory (Searle, 1969) as well as by models of politeness, and adjusted to the particular constraints that shape online exchanges. Within this framework, particular attention is given to reformulation strategies, markers of face-work, contextual adjustments, and those moments where pragmatic escalation becomes especially salient.

This approach makes explicit a phenomenon that is often only intuitively perceived: digital communication destabilizes language, increases interpretive vulnerability, and turns every message into a pragmatic gamble. This observation opens the way toward the design of pedagogical tools—such as metapragmatic activities, scenarios of interpretive drift, and simulations of concurrent readings—capable of making the instability of digital exchanges visible. By gradually exposing learners to this constitutive fragility, the objective is not to shape or restrict their speech; rather, it is to sharpen their discursive lucidity—a way of expressing themselves that becomes more aware, less driven by immediacy, and more ethically responsive to the plurality of possible interpretations.

2. Methodology

Our methodological approach directly extends the observations outlined in the introduction. Since digital interactions are fragmented, unstable, and continuously recontextualized, the corpus itself must reflect this dynamic while remaining analytically manageable. We therefore adopted an interpretive qualitative methodology, based on a reduced yet dense corpus composed exclusively of authentic public data. This choice is consistent with the position articulated by Mays and Pope (1995), who emphasize that the aim of qualitative research is to develop concepts that help us understand social phenomena in natural (rather than experimental) settings, emphasizing the meanings, experiences, and perspectives of all participants.

We compiled a corpus of ten discussion threads drawn from fully open Facebook pages (consumer reviews, local mutual aid groups, public debates). The selection deliberately focused on posts containing a minimal triggering element, such as a short request like *"Is this product worth the price?"*, since it is precisely these apparently simple utterances that most frequently generate the interpretive drifts described by Herring (1999). Each selected thread contains between 20 and 80 comments, allowing observation of initial interpretations, thematic deviation, escalation, and repair attempts.

In order to preserve the sequential integrity of the exchanges, screenshots were used and mobilized as a methodological tool, notably for the collection of examples and for the description of discursive practices and native online language behaviors (Djilé, 2021). This procedure was essential to maintaining the interactional coherence of the data.

The analysis is based on an inductive thematic coding approach, inspired by the model proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79), who define this approach as a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting recurring patterns within data. The coding process is organized around several dimensions: speech acts (Searle, 1969), shifts in meaning, face-management strategies, compensatory signals (emoticons, capital letters, tags), as well as emerging misunderstandings and unexpected perlocutionary effects.

A sociopragmatic perspective complemented this framework by examining how participants reconstruct context in an environment devoid of prosodic cues. Each thread was systematically re-examined in its entirety in order to avoid artificially segmenting sequences that, in online interaction, are intrinsically interdependent.

Finally, only public posts were used; all names were anonymized; screenshots were stored locally and not redistributed. This methodology does not seek to neutralize the instability of digital exchanges. On the contrary, it treats this instability as a scientific resource that is essential for understanding—and ultimately teaching—digital pragmatic competence.

3. Results and discussion

The results extracted from the corpus highlight a set of interactional mechanisms which, far from being anecdotal, deeply structure digital exchanges. Across the nine analytical dimensions examined—ranging from

recurrent misunderstandings to poly-interpretability, from repair strategies to spontaneous coalitions, and from identity tensions to sociopragmatic variation—the corpus reveals an unstable discursive dynamic that is often unpredictable, yet remarkably regular. These phenomena, amplified by the absence of contextual cues, show how users negotiate meaning, manage face, position themselves, and sometimes openly challenge one another. The analysis thus makes it possible to observe how discursive micro-cultures, forms of shared responsibility, and continuous adaptive practices emerge online. These nine axes—each shedding light on a specific facet of this digital "pragmatic ecology"—are presented and discussed in the sections that follow.

3.1. Initial observations: forms of pragmatic instability in digital interactions

The preliminary exploration of the corpus immediately reveals a dominant feature: the strong pragmatic instability of online exchanges. In the very first threads analyzed, the same initial message—often extremely brief, sometimes reduced to a simple request for advice or evaluation—generates an interpretive diversity that far exceeds what its author appears to anticipate. A question such as *"Is this product worth it?"* (P11) rapidly becomes a site for projections, improvised inferences, implicit judgments, and identity repositionings. This interpretive dispersion is not incidental; it constitutes the ordinary dynamic of screen-mediated communication.

Several observed mechanisms confirm what Herring (1999, p. 1) describes as "exchanges with disrupted adjacency and topic decay," that is, exchanges whose sequential coherence weakens as soon as multiple readers appropriate a message and reinterpret it through their own expectations. In the corpus, this thematic degradation takes the form of abrupt bifurcations: an informative comment triggers a joke; the joke provokes a hostile reaction; an external intervention attempts to defuse the situation but is, in turn, interpreted as a stance. Threads therefore do not develop linearly. They branch out, proliferate into parallel micro-debates, and sometimes give rise to latent conflicts.

This instability is also visible in the fluctuating status of participants. Some present themselves as experts before being challenged; others intervene "to help" but unintentionally ignite controversy. Pragmatic competence is never homogeneous: it varies according to time of day, mood, perceived group norms, or the way each participant imagines their audience. As noted in the *Handbook of Pragmatics of Computer-Mediated Communication* (Herring, Stein & Virtanen, 2013), the absence of paraverbal cues forces individuals to reconstruct minimal context, thereby increasing the likelihood of interpretive error.

Finally, analysis of these initial exchanges shows that instability does not merely produce disorder; it also reveals attempts at adjustment, negotiation, and temporary stabilization of meaning. Some participants reformulate their remarks, others add an emoji to clarify intent, while others explicitly explain the misunderstanding. These gestures, although often insufficient, demonstrate a diffuse awareness of the interactional fragility specific to digital environments. They represent early manifestations of an "expanded" form of pragmatic competence, close to what Kasper and Rose (2002) describe as the articulation between linguistic and sociopragmatic dimensions.

3.2. Poly-interpretability of short messages

One of the most striking phenomena observed in the corpus is the capacity of short messages to generate multiple interpretations. A minimal utterance—often fewer than ten words—becomes a genuine inferential space in which each user projects expectations, relational norms, or fragments of personal experience. This interpretive openness is not a side effect; it constitutes a fundamental condition of digital reception. By condensing information, short messages leave implicit zones that readers spontaneously fill.

In several threads, what appears to be an entirely innocuous request—such as "*Has anyone tried it?*" (P17)—actually generates a striking dispersion of responses: ranging from factual advice and moral warnings to subtle irony, or even suspicions of covert advertising. This heterogeneity seems to confirm Crystal's (2001) observation that the shorter a message is, the more it opens itself to divergent readings, insofar as each participant tends to project their own interpretive framework onto it. More recent studies also suggest that meaning-making in digital environments depends heavily on implicature and on processes of contextual reconstruction, which, in turn, frequently give rise to competing interpretations (Shakoor et al., 2026).

This diversity can be explained in part by the relative weakness of contextual anchoring online. As Develotte and Paveau (2017, p. 207) argue, "any utterance is liable to be recirculated in contexts other than its original one, and to be de-linearized or augmented." The message thus detaches from its initial anchoring, circulates, and transforms. It is precisely this movement that produces competing interpretations: a sincere request becomes a reproach, or a neutral remark is read as provocation, depending on the presumed identity of the writer and the prevailing discursive climate.

Emojis appear as regulatory attempts, yet their interpretive value remains unstable. A simple 🙂may oscillate between cordiality and irony, and a wink 😉, intended to soften a remark, can be interpreted as arrogance.

Marcoccia (2007) has shown that such cues of connivance do not guarantee a univocal reading; the corpus confirms that they sometimes introduce an additional layer of ambiguity.

This variability also affects speech acts themselves: a question shifts into a directive, a suggestion into criticism, or a justification into attack. Deprived of interactional cues, users reconstruct context through successive approximations—and these reconstructions frequently diverge.

Poly-interpretability is therefore not a marginal phenomenon; it structures the very functioning of short messages and accounts for the frequency of tensions observed. It thus constitutes a central issue for training in digital pragmatic competence, where the challenge is not only to formulate clearly, but to anticipate a plurality of possible readings in a space where meaning is co-constructed—and at times dispersed.

3.3. Misunderstandings as drivers of interaction

The corpus shows that misunderstandings are not merely interactional "accidents"; they play a structuring role in the dynamics of online exchanges. Rather than slowing interaction down, they fuel it, extend it, and often reactivate it. Misunderstanding thus becomes a driving force—an almost productive mechanism. This observation aligns, to a certain extent, with the conclusions of recent empirical studies, which show that misunderstanding contributes to the structuring of online interaction, rather than being limited to a simple failure of communication (Shakoor et al., 2026).

In several threads, an initially neutral comment such as *"I think it's fine"* (P51) is immediately reread as an implicit judgment. Participants then intervene to correct, express outrage, or resort to irony. Gradually, the discussion shifts away from the original question and becomes centered on what the speaker "meant." This shift echoes Goffman's (1991) notion of frames: users constantly reconstruct interactional frames that come into conflict, thereby generating misunderstanding.

This phenomenon is reinforced by the "disrupted adjacency" described by Herring (1999). A reply may target an initial message, but in the meantime several other interventions have been interwoven. The response is thus addressed to a context that has already changed. In such cases, misunderstanding arises less from a linguistic error than from a temporal gap: meaning evolves before the reply even appears.

Misunderstandings also function as identity markers. In several threads, participants deliberately interpret a comment in a "deviant" way in order to assert a stance—through humor, provocation, escalation, or pedagogical correction. In these cases, misunderstanding is not a failure but a resource. Interpretive misalignment can therefore serve to reposition speakers within a discursive community, since, as Marcoccia (2016, p. 152) notes, a speaker's digital identity is not defined solely by themselves; it is also defined by others. The corpus confirms this strategic dimension: some users exploit interpretive tension to gain visibility.

At the same time, these misunderstandings frequently give rise to micro-repair sequences. Participants explain, justify, or reformulate: *"that's not what I meant"* (P44), *"let me clarify"* (P38), *"just to be clear"* (P60). These reformulations are analytically significant because they reveal what speakers perceive as face-threatening or socially sensitive. They also show that users do not simply resign themselves to instability; they attempt to regulate interpretation, even if such regulation remains partial and fragile.

The misunderstandings observed in the corpus are therefore not minor disturbances. They structure the rhythm of exchange, shift tonalities, and sometimes provoke thematic turns. More broadly, they reveal that online communication rests on constant negotiation of meaning. From an educational perspective, this suggests that digital pragmatic competence should not be limited to the ability to avoid misunderstanding, but should also include the capacity to manage, interpret, and understand its social functions in online interaction.

3.4. Compensatory strategies used by participants

The analysis shows that participants resort to a variety of strategies to manage the frequent misunderstandings that arise in online exchanges. When a message appears too direct, too vague, or likely to generate conflict, users attempt to reorient the interaction in order to prevent excessive interpretive drift. The most common strategy is reformulation. For instance, one participant writes: *"I meant that the product is expensive, not to criticize your choice"* (P35), in order to clarify their intention. This practice echoes Herring's (2013) observation that digital exchanges often require repair sequences to restore coherence when contextual cues are lacking.

Other strategies are more subtle, such as the use of emojis to soften potentially face-threatening remarks. After writing *"This price is ridiculous"* (P7) and triggering negative reactions, a participant adds: *"I was joking* 🤣*"* (P19). The emoji functions as a signal of light-hearted intent. However, as Darics (2013) notes, such visual cues are not always interpreted uniformly: in some cases, they defuse tension, while in others they reinforce perceptions of irony or detachment.

Participants also rely on preventive formulations such as *"I don't mean to be rude, but"* (P22) or *"Not to judge*

you.” Marcoccia (2016, p. 133) refers to *modal, temporal, and personal de-actualizers* that mitigate the face-threatening nature of a speech act and help frame message reception. Recent pragmatic analyses devoted to online discourse highlight comparable adaptation strategies, in particular the use of emojis as well as reformulations, mobilized in an attempt to stabilize interpretation (AlMamoory & Al-Khazaali, 2024). Their effectiveness, however, remains limited. In one example, *“I’m not judging, just giving my opinion”* (P72) introduces a comment that is perceived as condescending and immediately provokes an escalating response: *“If that’s not criticism, then what is it?”* (P73).

In some cases, participants even delete their messages. In a tense thread, one user removes a comment and subsequently writes: *“Message withdrawn, misinterpretation”* (P81). This constitutes a meta-enunciative act (Authier-Revuz, 1995) aimed at regaining control over a problematic utterance. But this does not solve everything: Other participants may continue responding to the original comment, which remains visible in notifications. Withdrawal, therefore, does not erase the perlocutionary effect and may even amplify it.

These observations show that compensatory strategies do not always function as intended. While some effectively reduce tension, others generate further misunderstanding. The absence of paraverbal cues forces users to insist on their intentions, but these markers remain open to interpretation and therefore fragile. This fragility reinforces a point emphasized by several scholars: in digital communication, every message may be reread, displaced, amplified, or interpreted against its author. As Herring, Stein, and Virtanen (2013) note, digital written traces persist and remain open to reinterpretation.

Ultimately, reformulations, emoticons, hedging devices, and even deletions testify to a genuine effort to manage misunderstandings. They also reveal, indirectly, their limits: in a space where each sign is liable to carry multiple meanings, “repairing” very often amounts to opening, almost inadvertently, a new series of interpretations.

3.5. Construction and deconstruction of context in a cue-poor environment

The data drawn from the corpus show that, faced with the absence of prosodic, gestural, or situational cues, users compensate by reconstructing context themselves, often in an intuitive and speculative manner. In one of the most representative threads, the interaction begins with a minimal message: *“Is this store reliable?”* (P65). Within minutes, several participants attribute an imagined identity to the author—*“you must be new to the group”* (P66), *“clearly you don’t shop online much”* (P68)—despite the fact that nothing in the initial question supports such inferences. This pattern reflects what Sperber and Wilson (2006) describe as pragmatic enrichment guided more by expectations than by available evidence, whereby meaning is filled through hypotheses projected onto the utterance rather than through explicit cues.

In other exchanges, context is reconstructed on the basis of very weak signals. One participant replies, *“It depends—are you looking for something durable or just cheap?”* (P71). This reformulation assumes that the person prioritizes price—an inference that is plausible but never explicitly stated. This type of projection clearly highlights the limits of inferential reasoning in digital environments. As Sperber and Wilson (1995) emphasize, communication in impoverished contexts relies heavily on assumptions—“guesses”—which give rise not only to interpretations strongly supported by the context, but also to weaker implicatures: more diffuse, less determined inferences that the utterance makes possible without necessarily imposing them. In our corpus, these “guesses” occupy a central place in the unfolding of exchanges; they constitute both an essential driving force and, at the same time, a significant source of misunderstandings.

The lack of paraverbal cues also encourages emotional interpretations that are often far removed from the speaker’s actual intention. In one thread, the remark *“Your opinion isn’t very clear”* (P105) is immediately perceived as aggressive (*“Why are you talking badly to people?”* (P106)). The author responds: *“I’m not angry, I was just asking a question”* (P111). Despite this clarification, the tension persists. Context is therefore not only reconstructed but also contested, negotiated, and sometimes overturned.

In a particularly tense exchange, one participant writes: *“In this group, we help without judging”* (P30). A few minutes later, another responds: *“That’s not true—here everyone judges everyone else”* (P33). This disagreement over the “spirit of the group” shows that collective context is never stable. As Marwick and Boyd (2011) argue through the notion of *context collapse*, digital spaces bring together multiple audiences whose expectations and norms do not necessarily align, generating conflicting interpretations of what counts as appropriate behavior.

Finally, the analysis reveals frequent cases of weak contextual anchoring. In two threads, a participant responds to a comment while believing they are replying to the initial post, thereby triggering a chain of misunderstandings. This phenomenon is reinforced by platform design. The chronological and visual linearity of mediated exchanges (Herring, 1999; Marcoccia, 2003) complicates addressivity. Messages are not always displayed next to their intended recipients, and intervening posts can disrupt the logic of the thread, making it

difficult to determine "who is replying to whom."

Thus, in an environment where cues remain scarce, context appears as a construction that is simultaneously fragile, shifting, and closely dependent on interpretation. Users construct it, negotiate it, and at times even deconstruct it, in a process that remains continuous and almost inherently unstable. These practices show that the digital does not make context disappear; rather, it tends to render it more blurred, more uncertain, and arguably more risky to interpret than in face-to-face interaction.Such observations, in many respects, echo recent dialogic approaches to digital discourse, which emphasize the co-construction of meaning in contexts permeated by a certain form of uncertainty (Sadigzade et al., 2025).

3.6. Amplified reactions: when a small message produces large effects

The data show that very simple messages can provoke reactions far stronger than their authors anticipate. For instance, a participant writes *"I don't recommend it"* (P94). Very quickly, others respond irritably: *"There are always people who criticize"* (P96), followed by *"You can never give your opinion here"* (P97). The initial comment disappears, and a minor crisis emerges. As Searle (1969) already noted, perlocutionary effects often escape the speaker's control and may, depending on interpretation, far exceed the speaker's initial intention—a phenomenon that becomes even more pronounced in online environments.

In other exchanges, this amplification forces participants to shift their interactional roles. A user writes *"Honestly, not great"* (P131) in reference to a service, only to be accused of *"ruining the mood."* They then defend themselves: *"I just wanted to share my experience"* (P144). Here, users move unintentionally from the position of simple witness to that of "troublemaker." As Goffman (1981) reminds us, interactants must constantly adapt to the interactional frame; online, however, that frame is itself unstable and continuously shifting.

The corpus also reveals the rapid formation of opposing "camps." In response to a straightforward question such as *"Does this store deliver quickly?"* (P163), two participants offer divergent opinions. Almost immediately, others align themselves with one side or the other: *"I support X," "No, Y is right."* These coalitions appear less driven by firm conviction than by visibility effects: participants react to what is immediately present on the screen, often under conditions of temporal pressure.

Another recurrent phenomenon is the snowball effect. A simple question about a delayed order receives an ironic response such as *"Welcome to real life"* (P120). This remark is perceived as aggressive, and within minutes the discussion shifts away from the delivery issue toward broader accusations concerning the "toxic nature of the group." As Herring (1999) observes, the structure of online conversations encourages thematic drift, notably due to disrupted adjacency pairs and multitasking—observations that are clearly borne out by the data.

Finally, this amplification also affects perceptions of responsibility. Several users later return to write: *"Sorry, I didn't mean to start a conflict"* (P127). They discover that their initial statement has triggered a much larger debate than anticipated. In digital interactions, messages circulate rapidly, remain visible, and may reshape social relations between participants.

In sum, digital conversations amplify the effects of individual messages: positions harden, groups form, unexpected debates emerge, and participants are compelled to monitor the social consequences of their words. This dynamic is not merely an individual issue; it is a structural characteristic of digital communication. More broadly, recent studies highlight the complexity of online sharing practices, as well as their role in structuring interactional dynamics across different platforms (Ren, 2024).

3.7. Sociopragmatic variation: tone, style, norms, and conflicting identities

Analysis of the three digital spaces represented in the corpus immediately reveals significant variation in online ways of speaking. On a local page dedicated to the city of Tébessa, for instance, a sentence such as *"Honestly, around here we don't respect anything"* (P205) functions not merely as an opinion, but as a presupposition of shared local identity. This formulation implicitly assumes that readers recognize and endorse the same sociocultural frame, confirming that certain online communities rely on tacit cultural references and shared background knowledge.

By contrast, review forums operate according to more cautious communicative norms. When a participant writes *"I don't want to sound aggressive, but the service was really slow"* (P188), the formulation already reflects an effort to manage face while expressing criticism. Such phrasing exemplifies what Locher and Watts (2008) describe as relational work, namely the continuous effort to maintain social relationships and avoid open conflict.

The contrast appears even more pronounced in the education group. Here, identities and positions confront each other in a fairly direct, sometimes even frontal manne. When one participant states, "*As a teacher with 20 years of experience, I am telling you that*" (P233), and another replies, "*That's exactly why our children are not progressing!*" (P237), it becomes clear that the assertion of professional authority does not necessarily soothe the exchange; on the contrary, it often tends to produce the opposite effect. This type of dynamic relates to what

Marwick and boyd (2011) describe as "context collapse," that is, a situation in which multiple audiences overlap without sharing either the same expectations or the same interactional norms.

Ultimately, each digital space in the corpus can be understood as a *Discourse* in Gee's (2005) sense: a way of being, speaking, acting, and valuing shared by a group—a form of discursive culture with its own styles, tacit rules, and tensions. Participants constantly oscillate between adapting to group norms and asserting their own identities. Moments of friction—irony, criticism, pragmatic missteps—are therefore not accidental; they signal ongoing negotiation among styles, values, and social expectations.

Sociopragmatic variation does not appear as peripheral "noise" surrounding interaction; rather, it constitutes its driving force. It structures online communities as genuine social worlds, shaped by norms, styles, and persistent interpretive disagreement.

3.8. Didactic implications: toward digital pragmatic literacy

All the phenomena observed in the corpus—recurrent misunderstandings, multiple reformulations, improvised coalitions, and rapid decontextualizations—point to a central regularity: digital interactions operate as a space in which any message can become something other than what it initially appears to be. When a participant simply writes *"It's fine, I got it."* (P56), the utterance is immediately reread from multiple perspectives: irony, fatigue, provocation. The resulting reactions—*"So now we can't say anything"* (P57) or *"Wallah, I didn't say anything to you!"* (P59)—illustrate how interpretation becomes a collective and potentially risky task. This observation aligns with Herring's (2013) claim that, in computer-mediated communication, the lack of contextualization cues generates interpretive gaps that participants constantly attempt to fill.

From these observations, didactic implications emerge quite naturally. If pragmatic instability is structural, then instruction must aim to develop digital pragmatic literacy—a competence that extends beyond the ability to "say" something appropriately, and includes the capacity to anticipate how one's message may be read. Recent research in language didactics, in a broadly convergent manner, emphasizes the need to integrate digital environments into the development of pragmatic competence, particularly in contexts where interpretation remains unstable and where the representation of the audience continues, in part, to elude full control (Qi & Chen, 2025; Kaur & Fanani, 2024). Another didactic avenue emerges directly from the corpus. When P36 writes, *"Just to clarify, I wasn't criticizing anyone,"* followed by a neutral emoji, the participant is engaging in a repair strategy. Such examples can be productively mobilized in the classroom by asking learners to propose alternative formulations—more explicit, more neutral, or, conversely, more risky—in order to develop awareness of online face-management practices.

Finally, the divergent readings documented in the corpus provide a rich basis for pedagogical simulation. Learners may be asked to rewrite the same comment for three different audiences, or to anticipate three possible interpretations of an ambiguous utterance. This practice falls within the perspective defended by Thorne et al. (2021, p. 108), who emphasize the need to rewild language education by reconnecting pedagogy with the complex, unpredictable ecology of digital communication.

In this way, empirical findings and didactic applications reinforce one another. What the corpus reveals—fragility, overinterpretation, continuous adjustment—becomes pedagogical material for training speakers who are able not only to produce messages, but also to assume the discursive responsibility required by contemporary digital environments.

3.9. Limits, scope, and research perspectives

The analysis conducted is based on a small corpus: only ten public discussion threads, drawn mainly from local pages and open Facebook groups. This limited size is evidently a constraint, since with so little data it is impossible to draw general conclusions or findings applicable to all situations. Moreover, some of the phenomena identified may be specific to the observed community. In one exchange, for instance, when P12 writes *"It's expensive, but everyone does what they want,"* the responses—*"See, you're judging again"* (P14) and *"You speak badly to people"* (P18)—reveal a heightened sensitivity to judgment and conflict. This type of reaction may not be representative of other online groups. As Blanchet and Bulot note in their course *Méthodologie de recherche sociolinguistique et sociodidactique du plurilinguisme*, there is no objectively representative corpus, no truly objective data, and no deterministic generalization that can legitimately be drawn from a closed dataset.

Another important limitation lies in the exclusive focus on public interactions. Entire dimensions of digital communication were therefore left aside, including private messages, closed-group discussions, and exchanges conducted via platforms such as WhatsApp or Messenger, which tend to be more spontaneous and less exposed. As Androutsopoulos (2008) observes, discursive practices vary considerably depending on whether interaction takes place in public or private digital spaces. Politeness strategies, humor, tension, and the negotiation of

agreement or disagreement may take very different forms. This distinction calls for caution when extending the present findings to other digital environments, even though the phenomena observed—rapid misunderstandings, multiple interpretations, and identity negotiation—are well documented in the international literature (Herring, 2013; Marcoccia, 2003).

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the study offers a valuable perspective and helps identify dynamics that are often intuitively known by users but rarely analyzed in detail. This thread, for example—"He's right, you're the one provoking people" (P41); "Exactly, we all know you" (P43)—illustrates the sudden clustering of participants against another participant. This configuration reflects what Ghorbanzadeh (2021) calls the mob or harassment effect in online discussions. This phenomenon shows the extent to which digital interactions can intensify quickly. It provides a useful empirical anchor for understanding what we earlier called discursive responsibility.

Finally, this work opens several avenues for future research. Expanding the corpus to other platforms—such as TikTok, WhatsApp, or Telegram—would make it possible to examine environments in which communicative practices rely on different semiotic resources, including short videos, voice messages, or instant reactions. Another direction would involve the use of automated analytical tools to identify markers of irony, tension, or reformulation. A further avenue would consist in having multiple analysts annotate the same interactions in order to compare interpretations and better understand which features of a message contribute most directly to ambiguity.

In sum, the corpus limitations do not diminish the value of this work; instead, they redraw its contours—sometimes with greater precision than expected. The study does not claim to encompass the entire digital sphere, far from it, but positions itself as a modest yet necessary step within a much broader exploration of online interactional dynamics. Above all, it draws attention to an often overlooked reality: micro-level details—those easily dismissed as trivial, such as a hastily written sentence, a poorly chosen emoji, or a slightly tense reformulation—constitute powerful indicators for understanding how meaning circulates, how positions are negotiated, and how the didactic stakes of contemporary digital environments quietly take shape.

Conclusion

The exploration of ordinary digital interactions conducted in this study has made it possible to highlight an increasingly inescapable reality: online communication is not merely a written transposition of spoken exchange, but a profoundly unstable discursive space, continually reshaped by participants' interpretations, reactions, misunderstandings, and repositionings. The discussion threads analyzed show that, behind often very short messages, complex pragmatic dynamics unfold, in which poly-interpretability, thematic drift, improvised coalitions, and polemical escalation become interactional regularities rather than isolated incidents.

This instability should not be understood as a deficiency of digital environments; it constitutes their very condition. As shown by Herring (2013), Marcoccia (2003), and Sperber and Wilson, the absence of paraverbal cues compels interactants to reconstruct context—often through rapid, fragile, and sometimes erroneous inferences. The data in the corpus confirm that such contextual reconstruction is both indispensable and risky. A simple *"I'm just asking"* may be read as provocation, an emoticon as irony, or a reformulation as a clumsy justification. Participants therefore navigate a space in which even minimal signs may generate disproportionate perlocutionary effects.

Within this framework, the notion of discursive responsibility, mobilized throughout the analysis, takes on particular importance. Digital environments render the ethical dimension of language visible, and at times brutally so. Every message, even an apparently innocuous one, may follow an unexpected interpretive trajectory, escalate, be reinterpreted, diverted, or instrumentalized. Preparing learners for this reality entails developing a genuine form of digital pragmatic literacy: the capacity to anticipate, interpret, adjust, and reformulate while taking into account the plurality of possible readings.

The didactic perspective that emerges from this work is therefore not one of normalization or strict control of interaction, but one of reflective learning. Learners are invited to observe what actually happens in exchanges: how misunderstandings arise and spread, how they are repaired or intensified; how coalitions form; how groups construct implicit norms; and how meaning circulates, is lost, or is reconstructed. Working with real, accessible, and contextualized micro-discursive events makes it possible to develop a fine-grained awareness of the interpretive mechanisms that structure digital communication.

This research does not claim to close the debate; rather, it opens a field. The perspectives outlined—corpus expansion, tool-assisted analysis, and collaborative annotation—suggest that digital pragmatics remains a developing domain in which modest yet rigorous contributions can meaningfully inform collective reflection. Ultimately, understanding online interaction is not only a scientific challenge, but also a social and pedagogical

necessity. In a world where a growing proportion of exchanges take place through public, rapid, and highly interpretable written messages, learning to "speak appropriately" increasingly means learning to read others—and to read oneself.

4. References

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