

Why Pragma-rhetoric? An Interview with Professor Hou Guojin

Hou Guojin, Lin Xiaopei

Abstract: The following is Xiaopei Lin's interview with Guojin Hou about his new book *Pragma-rhetoric: Pragma-rhetorical Competence vs. Failures* and the new discipline of pragma-rhetoric. Hou has 26 years of experience in pragmatics and over ten in rhetoric. This interview focuses on the new discipline of pragma-rhetoric as well as the new book: the advent of the discipline, the essence, the principle, and the framework of pragma-rhetoric, and how to improve pragma-rhetorical competence and avoid pragma-rhetorical failures in verbal and nonverbal communication.

Keywords: pragma-rhetoric; pragmatics; rhetoric; pragma-rhetorical competence; pragma-rhetorical failure

Lin Xiaopei: Professor Hou, thank you for the gift, your new book: *Pragma-rhetoric: Competence vs Failures*. How long did it take to write and publish it?

Hou Guojin: You are welcome. Hope you like it. Well, that is a long story. I started my learning of pragmatics in 2000. About ten years ago I noticed that rhetoric was fun. Rhetoric has a lot in common with pragmatics. So I wrote some papers about rhetorical devices like zeugma, syllepsis, pun, metaphor, Tom Swifty, parody, garden path, more or less from the perspective of pragmatics. I don't think I could have done otherwise. Then in 2020, I thought and wrote about the "puzzles for pragmatics and rhetoric and advent of pragma-rhetoric," which I believe paves the way for my new book and the new discipline (Hou 2020a).

Lin Xiaopei: What is pragma-rhetoric?

Hou Guojin: Pragma-rhetoric is a new discipline that either incorporates pragmatics and rhetoric, or studies rhetorical problems pragmatically or studies pragmatic problems rhetorically. Let me say it in another way. Pragma-rhetoric studies pragma-rhetorical phenomena, or pragma-rhetorical acts. Any utterance, act or phenomenon that contains pragmatic and/or rhetorical elements, could be considered pragma-rhetorical. Meeting a friend at the airport is pragma-rhetorical, because it is a pragmatic and rhetorical act, facing a pragma-rhetorical situation or problem to solve, saying and doing things to be pragma-rhetorically effective.

Lin Xiaopei: Can you show me an example?

Hou Guojin: Sure. To the best of my knowledge of the novel "Romance of the Three Kingdoms," Cao Zhi's "七步诗" (*qī bù shī*, The Quatrain of Seven Steps), his being forced to composed a poem about brotherhood at seven paces (about one minute) without mentioning "brother" or "family," made a difficult pragma-rhetorical situation:

煮豆燃豆萁, (*zhǔ dòu rán dòu qí*)
 豆在釜中泣。 (*dòu zài fǔ zhōng qì*)
 本是同根生, (*běn shì tóng gēn shēng*)
 相煎何太急? (*xiāng jiān hé tài jí*)

My translation goes like this (Hou 2020b: 6):

The beans, cooked in the hot pot,
 By the beanstalk, noisily, stalk by stalk.
 The beans cry inside wondering why
 The beanstalk and the beans' bros should meet
 In an angry fire and not like friends talk.

Cao's source text poem outcome made a perfect face-saving and life-saving pragma-rhetorical act, which achieved a great pragma-rhetorical effect, to be remembered for ever.

Lin Xiaopei: Is pragma-rhetoric a combination of pragmatics and rhetoric?

Hou Guojin: Yes, but not a simple combination. As I introduced in my new book *Pragma-rhetoric: Competence vs Failures* (Hou 2024a: 132–133), research in pragma-rhetoric can be approached through three paradigms: 1) studies in which pragmatics and rhetoric are both present and equally significant, making them difficult to distinguish; 2) rhetorical studies that apply pragmatics; and 3) pragmatic studies that apply rhetoric. We consider the first paradigm to be the most important. The emergence of pragmatic rhetoric does not mean that pragmatics and rhetoric cease to exist independently.

Lin Xiaopei: Both pragmatics and rhetoric have their own principles. Does pragma-rhetoric have a principle?

Hou Guojin: Yes, it does. It is known as “Pragma-rhetoric Principle,” which consists of eight maxims:

Maxim 1: In a pragma-rhetorical event, use discourse that is relevant to the context and pragma-rhetorical purpose, prioritizing the communicative goal of achieving intended meaning and purpose.

Maxim 2: The informational content of the discourse should meet the needs of the information gap—neither exceeding nor falling short of the requirements of the pragma-rhetorical event, unless there is a specific pragma-rhetorical purpose—subject to relevance-based expectations and understanding.

Maxim 3: The information conveyed in the discourse should be truthful and credible, not falling below one's own beliefs and knowledge, unless there is a specific pragma-rhetorical purpose—subject to relevance-based expectations and understanding.

Maxim 4: The discourse should be relevant to contextual factors, especially the identities, relationships, statuses, seniority, distance, needs of the interlocutors, and the purpose of the pragma-rhetorical event, unless there is a specific pragma-rhetorical purpose—subject to relevance-based expectations and understanding.

Maxim 5: Use clear, concise, and well-structured discourse, unless there is a specific pragma-rhetorical purpose—subject to relevance-based expectations and understanding.

Maxim 6: The discourse should embody civilized and polite values—such as generosity, praise, modesty, agreement, or sympathy—in a manner and degree appropriate to the needs of the pragma-rhetorical event, unless one's positive or negative face is seriously threatened, or unless there is a specific pragma-rhetorical purpose—subject to relevance-based expectations and understanding.

Maxim 7: In general interpersonal communication, strive to be civilized, optimistic, humorous, vivid, and expressive in a manner and degree appropriate to the needs of the

pragma-rhetorical event, unless there is a specific pragma-rhetorical purpose—subject to relevance-based expectations and understanding.

Maxim 8: Perform an adequate number of speech/pragmatic acts—(e.g., representative, directive, commissive, expressive, declarative, interrogative)—in accordance with the constitutive rules and behavioral norms of the relevant cultural (or cross-cultural) context, fulfilling the appropriate felicity conditions, unless there is a specific pragma-rhetorical purpose—subject to relevance-based expectations and understanding.

I formulated this principle on pages 135–136 of the book “Pragma-Rhetoric: Competence and Failures.”

Lin Xiaopei: These eight maxims seem to be related or similar to some principles in pragmatics, right?

Hou Guojin: Exactly. The “Pragma-rhetoric Principle” inherits and integrates principles from both pragmatics and rhetoric. For example, they draw from Grice’s Cooperative Principle, Sperber & Wilson’s Relevance Principle, Leech’s Politeness Principle, and the rhetorical principles proposed by Li Yunhan and Sheng Yongsheng (2010: 69–130). The rhetorical principles mentioned actually consist of seven principles: Principles 1–4 and Principle 7 focus on expression, emphasizing contextual adaptation, appropriateness, and effectiveness, while Principles 5–6 focus on reception, stressing the unity of language with context, reality, the speaker, action, and ethics.

In our Pragma-rhetoric Principle: Maxims 2–5 are derived from Grice’s maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. Maxim 6 is an adaptation of the Politeness Principle. Maxim 7 develops principles such as the Humor Principle, the Optimism Principle, and the Vividness Principle. Maxim 8 incorporates the fundamental ideas of Austin’s and Searle’s Speech Act Theory and Habermas’s “Universal Pragmatics” (Hou 2024a: 136–137).

Lin Xiaopei: Is your “Pragma-rhetoric Principle” descriptive or normative?

Hou Guojin: Both. The principle describes normal or unmarked language behavior (including both verbal and nonverbal acts), while also serving to correct abnormal or marked (often erroneous or pragma-rhetorically flawed) language behavior. In my view, other pragmatic and rhetorical principles similarly integrate both descriptive and prescriptive dimensions (Hou 2024a: 137–139).

Lin Xiaopei: What is the pragma-rhetorical model? Why are there three types of markedness? And how does this model assist in the practical analysis using the aforementioned principle?

Hou Guojin: All linguistic behaviors (or utterances) can be categorized as either unmarked or marked. Unmarked forms employ unmarked means, resulting in unmarked meanings or effects. For example, saying “I’m hungry” is an unmarked linguistic form, paired with an unmarked meaning and pragmatic effect. However, saying “I’m starving. I could eat a cow.” is a marked form (using two exaggerations), expressing a marked meaning and pragma-rhetorical effect (i.e., exaggerating the sense of hunger and the urgency to eat).

So, to assist Pragma-rhetoric Principle in actual analysis, we develop the pragma-rhetorical model. This model sees all linguistic behaviors (or utterances) in terms of markedness. Markedness (i.e., unmarked or marked) may manifest at the pragma-cognitive level, the social-pragmatic level, or the rhetoric-pragmatic level. Of course, it may involve two or even all three levels. For ease of explanation, let’s assume here that a linguistic behavior or utterance belongs to either an unmarked or marked category at a specific level. In

analysis, we generally focus on marked forms while largely ignoring unmarked ones (Hou 2024a: 142).

Lin Xiaopei: Could you provide an example to illustrate pragma-cognitive markedness?

Hou Guojin: Any instance that presents a challenge at the cognitive-pragmatic level—such as difficulty in pronunciation, writing, comprehension, memorization, processing, translation, or dissemination—constitutes cognitive pragmatic markedness. For example, if the contextualized sound, form, meaning, or effect of lexical-constructural components is marked, it falls under pragma-cognitive markedness. For instance, when someone asks an elderly man in Chinese about the secret to longevity, and the old man writes the Chinese character “谜” (*mí*, riddle). This is an expression of pragma-cognitive markedness, requiring the listener to exert marked cognitive effort (including seeking clarification) to interpret it. Its intended meaning and effect are “walk a bit, climb a bit, sing a song, talk a bit—at least live to eighty-eight,” along with the sense of mystery and the “aha” effect elicited by deciphering the riddle. The Chinese character “谜” consists of three parts: the speech radical on the left, the walking radical in the middle, and the character “米” (*mǐ*, rice) on the right. These components respectively imply walking, speaking, and “米寿” (*mǐ shòu*, longevity like 88)—where the shape of “米” resembles “八十八” (*bā shí bā*, eighty-eight), referring to the age of eighty-eight. Thus, the humor of this character riddle would constitute a pragma-rhetorical failure for an audience unfamiliar with the Chinese language.

Lin Xiaopei: Thank you. Could you provide an example to illustrate socio-pragmatic markedness?

Hou Guojin: Socio-pragmatic markedness (whether unmarked or marked) means that a linguistic act or utterance is constrained and/or suppressed by socio-cultural pragma-rhetorical factors. Case 10 in our book discusses an international student at a Chinese university contacting his supervisor on the WeChat: “Sir, I want to have a talk with you.” This is a prominent example of socio-pragmatic markedness, characterized by lexical misuse and impoliteness. The phrase “have a talk” typically implies a superior addressing a subordinate. “I want to...” also sounds rude. The student’s use of “I want to have a talk with you” violates the cultural norm of showing respect to superiors. This expression breaches Maxim 5 (Clarity) and Maxim 6 (Modesty) of Pragma-rhetoric Principle. “Hello, Professor. If you have some time this weekend, I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss my research progress with you. Thank you!” or less formally, “Sir, may I come to your office this afternoon about my proposal?” would be much better (see Hou 2024a: 268–269).

Lin Xiaopei: What is rhetoric-pragmatic markedness?

Hou Guojin: Similar to the discussions above, when a speech act or utterance is constrained and/or coerced by pragma-rhetorical factors in terms of rhetoric, regardless of correctness or appropriateness, it exhibits either unmarkedness or markedness. Here, rhetoric, according to Chen Wangdao (2015: 52–66), is divided into negative rhetoric and positive rhetoric. Mind the diction. Here “active” or “passive” is a part of the term, having nothing to do with good or bad qualities. Negative rhetoric primarily aims to make expressions or utterances clear, coherent, balanced, and precise—simply put, to make them easily understandable for the audience. It is also referred to as “normative rhetoric” or “general rhetoric.” Positive rhetoric, also known as “artistic rhetoric,” generally refers to specific rhetorical devices. Tan et al. (2010), in “A Comprehensive Dictionary of Chinese Rhetorical Devices,” list 287 types of active rhetoric or devices. I think 108 are relatively important, to be discussed one by one in

my future book. The most commonly used ones, typically covered in general Chinese rhetoric textbooks, number around thirty to forty, such as metaphor, metonymy, simile, hyperbole, personification, zoomorphism, apostrophe, synecdoche, pun, Tom Swifty, allegory, oxymoron, irony, paradox, litotes, antithesis, garden path, alliteration, rhyme, consonance, assonance, onomatopoeia, anaphora, epistrophe, repetition, parallelism, euphemism, chiasmus, rhetorical question, ellipsis, asyndeton, polysyndeton. Whether at the level of negative or positive rhetoric, if a saying or utterance exhibits markedness, it can be expected to produce marked pragma-rhetorical effects—positive effects indicate high pragma-rhetorical efficiency or pragma-rhetorical competence, while negative effects indicate low pragma-rhetorical efficiency or pragma-rhetorical failure. Examples include precise wording or poor expression (falling under negative rhetoric), as well as vivid and appropriate use of rhetorical devices.

Lin Xiaopei: Thank you. Can you illustrate this by an example?

Hou Guojin: All right. In terms of passive rhetoric, a well-formed business letter of complaint is supposed to be composed of several moves or elements, like letter-head, date, inside address, salutation, (main) body, complimentary close, signature, enclosure or CC. And the (main) body should contain introduction, statement of a problem (details), explanation of inconvenience, request for resolution, and closing. With all this, a business letter of complaint is unmarked, and acceptable. Otherwise, it is marked, and usually unacceptable. It is also made marked (if not unacceptable) if a certain move or part is too short or too long, grammatical or ungrammatical.

In terms of active rhetoric, uses of rhetorical devices certainly contribute marked pragma-rhetorical acts. Let me show you an example. A man's straightforward confession of love to a woman is considered unmarked, whereas the use of rhetorical devices or figurative language makes it marked. For example, saying "You are very important to me" is unmarked, while "You are my everything" is marked due to its taken-for-granted exaggeration. It is said that an elderly woman once complained to her husband, "You lied to me all these years, saying you were wealthy, and that's why I married you. I never expected to live in poverty my whole life." The man retorted, "I didn't lie to you. When I proposed, I said, 'You are my everything.'" The man's response, which involves romantic allusion and quotation, along with an unexpected and deliberate reinterpretation of the exaggerated confession, is also marked. Of course, whether spoken by the man himself or recounted by an outsider, his words are perceived as humorous.

Lin Xiaopei: If Pragma-rhetoric Principle and analytical model are suitable for analyzing words or sentences, do you think they are also applicable to discourse analysis?

Hou Guojin: Yes. Since they are suitable for words and sentences, they are naturally applicable to discourse composed of words and sentences by and large. Where there is pragma-rhetoric, there should also be pragma-rhetorical criticism. In my view, pragma-rhetorical criticism should primarily employ Pragma-rhetoric Principle and the corresponding analytical framework, along with some relevant methods from the various rhetorical analytical paradigms mentioned in the 2004 book. These include Paradigm 2: "Micro-rhetoric within a Macro-linguistic Perspective," Paradigm 3: "Genre Rhetoric," Paradigm 9: "Reception Rhetoric," Paradigm 10: "Semantic Harmony Principles," Paradigm 11: "Linguistic Information Structure," Paradigm 12: "Macro-Micro Structure," Paradigm 13: "Theme-Rheme Information," Paradigm 14: "Negative Entropy Flow Information," Paradigm 15: "Quantification of Linguistic Structural Effects," Paradigm 16: "Cognitive Rhetoric and Discourse Narrative," Paradigm 17: "Unity of Language, Thought, Emotion, and Form," Paradigm 18: "Burkean New Rhetoric," and Paradigm 19: "Speech Act Theory"—provided

they are relevant and efficient. Of course, paradigms are not limited in number, and methodologies remain open-ended (Hou 2024a: 351–362).

Lin Xiaopei: Thank you. Could you give me an example?

Hou Guojin: Certainly. Case 108 in the book is as follows: In the 2021 Spring Festival Gala crosstalk performance, Jin Fei and Chen Xi were discussing topics such as children’s parenting, and homework tutoring. Jin Fei said that he dared not mention tutoring homework. Chen Xi asked for details. The two performers played the roles of son and father, respectively. Suppose one day after school, the father was helping his son with a math subtraction problem: 100 minus 70 equals what? The father explained that the tens digit was zero, which was smaller than 7, so borrowing was needed—borrow from the hundreds digit. The child still didn’t understand because he kept thinking about borrowing from his grandfather, as in his memory, his father always borrowed money from his grandfather and never paid it back. The father had no choice but to tell him the answer was 30. Later, the father turned the same problem into a word problem: Uncle Wang had 100 kilograms of seafood and sold 70 kilograms. How much was left? “It’s the same problem as before, just with the word ‘seafood’ added. Why can’t you do it?” The child kept thinking that his own grandparents also sold seafood. If it were his grandfather, selling 70 kilograms would definitely leave 50 kilograms left; if it were his grandmother, even more would remain. As a result, the tutoring failed. The father felt dejected and complained that his own father (the child’s grandfather) cheated on the scale when selling goods.

Our pragma-rhetorical analysis is as follows: It is a case of prominent socio-pragmatic markedness, with satire as the key. Here, how the math tutoring issue evolved into a problem of professional ethics is worthy of attention. The social implication is that if parents fail as individuals, they will also fail in tutoring their children. In the performance, Jin Fei perfectly portrayed a young child: innocent, fearful, and incompetent, while Chen Xi convincingly acted the part of the child’s father: serious, engaged, helpless and distressed. By empathetic role-playing, they evoked resonance with the audience’s experiences, enabling the audience to “identify” with the father and son roles. This naturally and logically led the audience to infer a socially implicit theme: “Those who teach must themselves be upright.” The discourse structure of this crosstalk is pragma-rhetorically efficient. Its thematic idea is subtly embedded in the “father-son” dynamic, requiring the audience to calmly reflect and reason amidst the laughter. Ultimately, the success of this crosstalk lies not so much in its substance (ideas, language, grammar, phonetics, etc.) as in its distinctive style and emotional quality—sympathy for the father and son in their predicament, and satire and critique of the act of cheating on the scale (greed and deceit). If cheating on the scale represents a pragma-rhetorical failure, then Jin Fei’s and Chen Xi’s performance exemplifies pragma-rhetorical efficiency, adhering to Maxim 1 (Achieving Meaning and Effect) and Maxim 7 (Humor and Vividness) of Pragma-rhetoric Principle (Hou 2024a: 361–362).

Lin Xiaopei: If Pragma-rhetoric Principle and the analytical model are suitable for analyzing words or sentences, do you think they are also applicable to translation?

Hou Guojin: Based on the aforementioned principle, we have formulated the following Pragma-rhetoric Translatology Principle (also eight maxims, see Hou 2024a: 318):

Maxim 1: Discern whether the pragma-rhetorical act in the source text is contextually relevant and aligned with its pragma-rhetorical purpose, whether it effectively conveys meaning and intent, and strive to preserve these in translation.

Maxim 2: Discern whether the information quantity in the pragma-rhetorical act of the source text meets the needs, and strive to preserve this in translation.

Maxim 3: Discern whether the information value of the pragma-rhetorical act in the source text is truthful and credible, and strive to preserve this in translation.

Maxim 4: Discern whether the pragma-rhetorical act in the source text is relevant to contextual factors, especially the identities, relationships, statuses, seniority, social distance, needs of the interlocutors, and the purpose of the pragma-rhetorical event, and strive to preserve these in translation.

Maxim 5: Discern whether the pragma-rhetorical act in the source text is clear, concise, coherent, and well-structured, and strive to preserve these qualities in translation.

Maxim 6: Discern whether the pragma-rhetorical act in the source text embodies values of civility and politeness, such as generosity, praise, humility, agreement, or sympathy, and whether these are expressed appropriately in degree and manner, and strive to preserve them in translation.

Maxim 7: Discern whether the pragma-rhetorical act in the source text is civilized, optimistic, humorous, vivid, and distinctive, and whether these qualities are expressed appropriately in degree and manner, and strive to preserve them in translation.

Maxim 8: Discern whether the source text constitutes sufficient speech/pragmatic acts (e.g., representative, directive), whether they comply with the corresponding constitutive rules and behavioral norms of the relevant cultural (or cross-cultural) context, and whether they fulfil the appropriate felicity conditions, and strive to preserve these in translation.

Lin Xiaopei: Thank you. Could you provide an example to illustrate?

Hou Guojin: For instance, L. G. Alexander's *New Concept English*, the bilingual textbook published jointly by Longman and Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press in Beijing, includes the following English titles:

(1) A Puma at Large (一只逍遥的山猫)

(2) An Unknown Goddess (一位不知名的女神)

Pragma-cognitive markers are highlighted here, with grammar and idiomaticity as key factors. For example (1), the translation would be improved by omitting “一只” (*yī zhī*, one) and “的” (*de*, of) and alternatives such as “山猫也逍遥” (*shān māo yě xiāo yáo*), or “法外美洲狮” (*fǎ wài měi zhōu shī*) could be considered. For example (2), “一位” could be omitted. The above inappropriate translations deviate from Maxim 2 (Equivalent Information Quantity), Maxim 3 (Equivalent Information Value), and Maxim 7 (Equivalent Degree and Manner) of Pragma-rhetoric Translatology Principle (Hou 2024a: 325–326). It should be noted that in natural Chinese speaking or writing, such quantifiers occur not as frequently as appears here. But when it comes to English-Chinese translation, translationese often lets the quantifier “cat” out of the bag.

Lin Xiaopei: Thank you. Could you illustrate the application of Pragma-rhetoric Translatology Principle and the analytical model with an example from literary translation?

Hou Guojin: Case 99 in the book is Ma Zhiyuan's poem “秋思” (*qiū sī*, The Thoughts I Thought in Autumn):

枯藤老树昏鸦, (*kū téng lǎo shù hūn yā*)

小桥流水人家, (*xiǎo qiáo liú shuǐ rén jiā*)

古道西风瘦马。 (*gǔ dào xī fēng shòu mǎ*)

夕阳西下, (*xī yáng xī xià*)

断肠人在天涯。 (*duàn cháng rén zài tiān yá*)

This is a case of prominent rhetoric-pragmatic markedness, with 列锦/*liejin* (a series of noun phrases) as the key feature. Written by the Yuan dynasty poet Ma Zhiyuan (c. 1251–c. 1321),

the first three lines consist of a sequence of noun phrases—*liejin*—which possess their own internal logic and offer ample room for interpretation. Recognizing the pragma-rhetorical value of *liejin*, I once translated this *liejin* poem into English using the same technique:

Here is my translation (Hou 2020b: 44):
 Those poor dry branches' tails
 With aged tendrils that are blue
 And crows thereon towards nightfall;
 A tiny wood bridge o'er a stream small
 Ever going, by a country home so crude;
 An ancient path, beaten by the northwestern gales,
 Less traveled by men than a lean nag—
 At sunset, how far the unlucky with a bag!

Only the last line of the translation is an unmarked sentence. The above translation aligns with Maxim 7 (Humor and Vividness, Equivalent Degree and Manner) of Pragma-rhetoric Translatology Principle (Hou 2024a: 336).

In my book and papers, I have analyzed translations of other poems in greater detail or depth, such as Helen Chasin's "The Word *Plum*," E.E. Cummings' poem "l(a)," and Li Bai's "We Three Go On in the Cups." Feel free to take a look at this: Hou 2016, 2025; Wang & Hou, 2022: 225–237—if you are interested.

Lin Xiaopei: Thank you. What is pragma-rhetorical competence? What is pragma-rhetorical failure?

Hou Guojin: The subtitle of my book, "Competence and Failure", actually refers to "pragma-rhetorical competence and pragma-rhetorical failure." The publisher simplified it to "Competence vs Failure" because the main title already includes the term "Pragma-rhetoric." Besides establishing pragma-rhetoric as a discipline, another aim of this book is to enhance readers' pragma-rhetorical competence or, conversely, to reduce and avoid their pragma-rhetorical failures. Chapter 6 of the book (Hou 2024a: 221–230) specifically addresses this issue.

Within the fields of pragmatics, rhetoric, and the broader linguistic community, various "pre-competences" and their corresponding "pre-failures" have long existed, such as: communicative competence, language competence, strategic competence, organizational competence, lexical competence, metaphor competence, grammatical competence, textual competence, illocutionary competence, sociolinguistic competence, rhetorical competence, and their corresponding "failures/deficiencies." Notably, Jenny Thomas (1983) introduced the concepts of pragmatic competence and pragmatic failure.

Pragma-rhetorical competence encompasses: 1) all aspects of pragmatic competence, 2) all aspects of rhetorical competence, 3) most grammatical, communicative, discursive, adaptive, and humorous competences, 4) the effectiveness of expression through verbal and non-verbal means, 5) the effectiveness of comprehension through verbal and non-verbal means, 6) adherence to the core principles (maxims) of pragma-rhetoric, 7) minimizing or avoiding various pragma-rhetorical failures (roughly equivalent to or greater than the sum of pragmatic failures and rhetorical failures).

"Pragma-rhetorical competence," I think, refers to the pragma-rhetorical effectiveness demonstrated when equipped with this competence, while its opposite is "pragma-rhetorical failure." Therefore, the term "pragma-rhetorical effectiveness" is sometimes used in my book to contrast with its opposite, "pragma-rhetorical ineffectiveness."

Lin Xiaopei: Thank you. Are there any criteria for determining whether an act constitutes pragma-rhetorical competence or failure?

Hou Guojin: Yes. By definition, we can derive eight criteria for pragma-rhetorical competence from the eight maxims of Pragma-rhetoric Principle. Pragma-rhetorical competence is

1) the ability, in a given pragma-rhetorical event, to use discourse relevant to the context and pragma-rhetorical purpose, with the primary communicative goal of achieving intended meaning and purpose (based on Maxim 1);

2) the ability to ensure that the information quantity in discourse meets the needs of the information gap—neither exceeding nor falling short of the requirements of the pragma-rhetorical event (based on Maxim 2);

3) the ability to ensure that the information value in discourse is truthful and credible, not falling below one's own beliefs and knowledge (based on Maxim 3);

4) the ability to make discourse relevant to contextual factors, especially the identities, relationships, statuses, generational positions, distances, needs of the interlocutors, and the purpose of the pragma-rhetorical event (based on Maxim 4);

5) the ability to use clear, concise, and well-structured discourse (based on Maxim 5);

6) the ability to ensure that the discourse embodies values of civility and politeness—such as generosity, praise, humility, agreement, or empathy—in a manner and degree appropriate to the pragma-rhetorical event (based on Maxim 6);

7) the ability, in general interpersonal interactions, to demonstrate civility, optimism, humor, vividness, and the expression or maintenance of personal characteristics in a manner and degree appropriate to the pragma-rhetorical event (based on Maxim 7);

8) the ability to perform an adequate number of speech/pragmatic acts in accordance with the constitutive rules and behavioral norms of the relevant cultural or cross-cultural context, fulfilling the appropriate felicity conditions as required by the pragma-rhetorical event (based on Maxim 8).

In other words, demonstrating competence in each of these aspects indicates pragma-rhetorical competence and a reduced likelihood of pragma-rhetorical failures. If all eight aspects are combined, it signifies a high level of pragma-rhetorical competence across the board. Please see the 2024 book (Hou 2024a: 229–230).

Lin Xiaopei: Thank you. Could you provide examples to illustrate different levels of pragma-rhetorical competence?

Hou Guojin: The book contains numerous case studies, such as those from the recent Chinese TV series “Empresses in the Palace” and the story of Yang Xiu in “Romance of the Three Kingdoms” (novel and TV series alike, Hou 2024a: 235–265; 305–313). These can be seen as collections of narratives showcasing either high or low pragma-rhetorical competence. Without delving into the various characters from the TV series or related novels—whose words and actions all exhibit varying degrees of pragma-rhetorical effectiveness—let's focus specifically on Zhen Huan the heroine and Yang Xiu our “hero.”

Although Zhen Huan occasionally committed pragma-rhetorical failures, she more frequently demonstrated exceptional pragma-rhetorical competence/effectiveness, which was precisely why she gradually rose in status to eventually become the Empress Dowager. In contrast, Yang Xiu from “Romance of the Three Kingdoms” (whether in the novel or TV adaptation) was widely recognized as exceptionally intelligent, yet what he primarily displayed was a show of petty cleverness—essentially false intelligence. In other words, it is not his master Cao Cao who caused his demise, but rather his own series of pragma-rhetorical failures. I wrote about this not only in the book but also in greater detail in a paper (Hou 2024b).

Regarding the aforementioned criteria for judging pragma-rhetorical competence: According to Criterion 1, if you aim to borrow or secure a loan of two million from an individual or a bank and succeed or fail, your acts or utterances or their final result reflect whether you have achieved your intended meaning and purpose, indicating either high or low pragma-rhetorical effectiveness. According to Criterion 2, given the same purpose and context of borrowing or securing a loan, if the information in your discourse is either excessive or insufficient, it reflects high or low pragma-rhetorical effectiveness.

According to Criterion 3, if what you say consists entirely of truths or falsehoods, it respectively indicates high or low pragma-rhetorical effectiveness. According to Criterion 4, if your discourse is either entirely appropriate or inappropriate to the identities, relationships, statuses, generational positions, distances, needs of the interlocutors, and the purpose of the pragma-rhetorical event, it respectively indicates high or low pragma-rhetorical competence. According to Criterion 5, if your discourse is clear, concise, and well-structured, it demonstrates high pragma-rhetorical effectiveness; otherwise, it indicates low effectiveness. According to Criterion 6, if your words and actions (attitude) are civil and polite, and you either meet or fail to meet expectations of generosity, praise, humility, agreement, or empathy, it respectively indicates higher or lower pragma-rhetorical competence.

According to Criterion 7, if you either achieve or fail to achieve civility, optimism, humor, vividness, and the expression or maintenance of personal characteristics in an appropriate manner and degree, it respectively indicates high or low pragma-rhetorical competence. Finally, according to Criterion 8, if you perform an adequate number of speech/pragmatic acts—such as directive, expressive—in accordance with the constitutive rules and behavioral norms of the relevant cultural context, all appropriately executed, then your pragma-rhetorical competence is high; otherwise, it is low.

Among these eight criteria, the first is the most essential, much like how Leech's Politeness Principle prioritizes its first maxim. As long as the intended meaning and purpose are achieved, it essentially constitutes high pragma-rhetorical effectiveness.

Lin Xiaopei: What is a pragma-rhetorical act?

Hou Guojin: Sure. Doing anything is an act, whether using language or not, e.g., a daily complaint. Therefore, it is also a pragma-rhetorical act. By definition, a pragma-rhetorical act is a self-aware verbal or nonverbal behavior oriented toward a certain purpose or goal, namely, to solve a problem. The need to greet is a problem. The need to repay a bank loan when broke is a problem. I use the word “problem” in its neutral sense. Any need is a problem, big or small. Remember the classic example of a business complaint letter? The entire letter constitutes a pragma-rhetorical act—the pragma-rhetorical act of complaining. If we examine it closely, we find it is actually a chain or series of pragma-rhetorical acts, right? Further, each sentence, if composed of several clauses, represents one act, such as explanation, suggestion, or request; each clause can be termed an acteme, or even better, “acteme” or “practeme,” analogous to terms like “phoneme,” “lexeme,” and “sememe.” Once we understand this, we may see that the overall pragma-rhetorical act of complaint (in the aforementioned business letter) appears unmarked and unproblematic, whereas certain parts may contain misspellings, poor word choice, stylistic flaws, etc. In other words, some acts/practs or actemes/practemes may appear marked and erroneous. These two scenarios respectively reflect the pragma-rhetorical competence and failures on the part of the letter writer.

Lin Xiaopei: Thank you. Professor, we have now entered the era of AI. Everyone uses it. Now, with the rise of AI, which also generates language, a new question emerges. Do you

think AI empowers users like us in terms of pragma-rhetoric, or does it lead to “pragma-rhetorical disability”?

Hou Guojin: Indeed, AI or artificial intelligence is ubiquitous. In many dimensions AI beats human intelligence, for instance, in memory, in speed and efficiency of data processing, in numerical calculation. The various software APPs on our phones and computers are already highly AI-driven, and it is impossible for us not to use it. AI APPs like ChatGPT and DeepSeek can generate grammatically correct and stylistically rich texts, seemingly possessing “pragma-rhetorical competence.” However, ultimately, AI’s pragma-rhetorical competence is not high, or at least not ideally so. Moreover, while it is acceptable for humans to borrow or reference partial ideas or thoughts from AI for their own purposes, appropriating parts or the entirety of AI-generated content carries risks—both in terms of quality-related pragma-rhetorical failures and academic ethics-related pragma-rhetorical failures.

The key issue is that if users are creators, contributors, or students, reviewers or readers expect to see works that reflect the users’ own intellectual effort and demonstrate high pragma-rhetorical effectiveness. If what they encounter is a work heavily reliant on AI, it not only lacks integrity but also affects the readers’ judgment. Therefore, if used appropriately within certain limits, it is acceptable and even beneficial. Conversely, unrestricted and excessive use is inappropriate, erroneous, and even criminal. Regarding the warnings about AI usage, it is worth considering the relevant perspectives of Chomsky et al. (2023), who believes that it is “basically high-tech plagiarism” and “a way of avoiding learning.”

Lin Xiaopei: If in the future AI can perfectly imitate an individual’s writing style, will this diminish the value of “personal pragma-rhetorical style”?

Hou Guojin: That’s a good question. Every language and culture has its own writers and literature, right? Literature is largely an emotional expression or narrative of some universal grand themes in human life—such as life and death, war and peace, quality, justice, fairness, environmental protection, friendship, love, marriage, happiness, success and failure, who am I, where do I come from, where am I going, and so on. If different AI programs were commissioned to write, say, a romantic comedy or tragedy centered on fictional characters John and Eva, they would likely produce pseudo-literary works that are largely similar with minor variations.

I believe that what gives each writer in the world’s literature his unique value is not the aforementioned universal themes, but rather his distinctive insights and more importantly perhaps, his “personal pragma-rhetorical style.” Hence, as the French say, “Le style, c’est l’homme même,” “The style is the man himself,” and the Chinese say, “The writing mirrors the person.” I am also aware that different users can incorporate specific parameter requirements into their instructions to AI based on their preferences, thereby generating slightly varied “literature.” However, this is insufficient—it is not authentic literature.

For a considerable period in the future, literary creation and literary translation (especially in the realm of poetry) should remain domains where AI struggles to freely intervene. In other words, humans will continue to excel uniquely in these areas, with their pragma-rhetorical competence far surpassing that of AI. Therefore, publishers will reject any “pseudo-literary” works produced by AI programs.

Lin Xiaopei: Thank you. That’s a profound look at the future of literary creation. Shifting focus back to our daily life, I’ve noticed a common modern phenomenon that also raises pragma-rhetorical concerns. When family members are on their phones during a meal or family get-together, what is the most fundamental pragmatic issue? Is it a violation of the “Cooperative Principle,” or is it a neglect of “face-maintaining behavior”?

Hou Guojin: Regardless of the context, when acquaintances or family members gather together, they should engage in a light conversation. Sociolinguistic works from the 1970s already stated that failing to do so indicates poor social skills and low sociolinguistic competence. Even strangers on long train journeys are expected to exchange a few words with their seatmates; otherwise, it would be considered impolite. Nowadays, everyone has a phone, and on trains, people just keep their heads down, smartphone zombies, engrossed in their devices. While not talking to strangers might be acceptable, the issue is that people also barely converse with acquaintances and family members. This phenomenon is not limited to public spaces: even in a family get-together, people are often each absorbed in their own phones.

I believe that in such situations, phones have already led to the “dehumanization” or “brutalization” of people—meaning we are increasingly losing our humanity. This is a very dangerous sign. The best and default form of communication is face-to-face interaction between two people. Although today we don’t need to travel thousands of miles to discuss an issue with someone—a phone can solve many problems—when two people meet in person, they should still communicate without relying on their phones, and not limit themselves to greetings like “hello.” We cannot stand by and watch as technology advances while humanity declines, or as AI rises while our human intelligence (HI) falls, or as material life improves while spiritual life deteriorates.

Lin Xiaopei: Students using AI to ghostwrite papers not only evade research but also avoid the process of “constructing an academic discourse identity.” Please analyze the long-term harm of this behavior.

Hou Guojin: Our previous discussions have already touched upon the misuse or abuse of AI in writing by some individuals, correct? An author, from the very beginning of his career—whether during graduate studies or upon graduation with a master’s or doctoral degree—must engage in decades or even a lifetime of research, reading, reflection, and writing to construct his own academic discourse system within a specific field. Through this process, he gains relevant discourse authority and establishes his corresponding discourse identity. When future generations read and cite his works, both the author and his arguments (in books and papers) become indispensable references and foundational sources in that field, much like Noam Chomsky for Generative Grammar, Michael Halliday for Systemic Functional Grammar, Jacob Mey for “pragmatic acts” or “practs,” and so on.

If we allow students and authors (including researchers) to indiscriminately use AI for writing—whether genuine or deceptive—in the near future, we will have no true writers, literature, scholars, or science (or any scientific discipline or sub-discipline). This would represent a major regression and catastrophe for human civilization.

Lin Xiaopei: Thank you. Under the pressure of high school and college entrance exams, it is difficult to specifically implement pragma-rhetoric teaching in secondary school foreign language education. What subtle and gradual methods do you think could enhance students’ pragma-rhetorical awareness?

Hou Guojin: Indeed, it is challenging to offer a dedicated course on pragma-rhetoric for middle school students or even for general undergraduate majors. However, teachers should familiarize themselves with relevant literature and apply what they learn, integrating knowledge with practice—embodying Confucius’s idea that “Is it not a joy to learn and to practice from time to time?” Imagine if teachers improved their own pragma-rhetoric literacy and avoided or minimized pragma-rhetorical failures in their teaching, work, guidance, and

daily lives. This would have a positive and subtle influence on students. For example, if a teacher is half a minute late for class and fails to acknowledge it, that constitutes a serious pragma-rhetorical failure. If they also fail to apologize or explain the cause for the delay, the failure becomes even more severe. Over time, students may either conclude that the teacher is rude and lacking in virtue, or they may imitate the teacher's social-pragmatic failures, leading to difficulties in society later on. Conversely, if the teacher appropriately acknowledges the delay, apologizes, and explains, they leave a positive impression of courtesy on the students, who will then learn to respond similarly in comparable situations. This aligns with the old Chinese sayings: "If the upper beam is crooked, the lower ones will be askew," and "Example is better than precept." If teachers demonstrate high pragma-rhetorical competence in their interactions with students—across pragma-cognitive, socio-pragmatic, and rhetoric-pragmatic dimensions—this competence will subtly and gradually shape the students' speech and behavior.

Lin Xiaopei: Thank you. Looking back at the history of linguistics, we find pragmatics and rhetoric have experienced periods of both separation and integration. How do you view their future relationship?

Hou Guojin: The future of linguistics will involve, on the one hand, significant advancements in its various sub-disciplines, and on the other hand, collaborative or interdisciplinary research between these sub-disciplines and other related fields. This will lead to the emergence of interdisciplinary studies or hybrid disciplines, such as syntactic pragmatics or pragma-syntax, and stylistic pragmatics or pragma-stylistics. The issues explored in pragmatics and rhetoric, whether major or minor, will increasingly overlap in the work of more researchers. Studying rhetorical issues from a pragmatic perspective, or examining pragmatic issues through the lens of rhetoric, essentially constitutes the study of pragma-rhetoric. As for whether the focus leans more toward pragmatics or rhetoric, or which perspective is primarily adopted, it depends on the researcher's style and preference. If pragma-rhetoric becomes widely understood, recognized, and accepted, the integration of pragmatics and rhetoric, along with the field of pragma-rhetoric itself, will gain greater prominence and play an increasingly significant role. Of course, this does not mean that pragmatics or rhetoric as individual disciplines will regress.

Lin Xiaopei: For young scholars aspiring to engage in pragma-rhetoric research, what suggestions do you have? What are some new directions worth exploring?

Hou Guojin: First, such scholars should possess a foundational understanding of both pragmatics and rhetoric. Second, they should familiarize themselves with relevant discussions concerning the integration of these two disciplines. Third, they should read and study works related to pragma-rhetoric, such as my book "Pragma-rhetoric: Competence and Failures." Fourth, they can apply the principle and analytical framework of pragma-rhetoric to reflect on the effectiveness—whether high or low—of their own or others' verbal and non-verbal behaviors at the pragma-cognitive level, socio-pragmatic level, and/or rhetoric-pragmatic level. If the verbal or nonverbal behavior demonstrates high pragma-rhetoric effectiveness, it should be maintained and further developed. Conversely, if it shows low effectiveness, it should be avoided and serve as a cautionary example.

As for research, they may focus on the linguistic behavior of specific human groups, examining whether it violates Pragma-rhetoric Principle or assessing its level of pragma-rhetorical effectiveness. Analyzing the linguistic behavior in a particular work or of a specific character within a work is also a viable approach. Additionally, conducting pragma-rhetorical analyses of certain types of discourse or engaging in translation criticism

can be valuable, as long as the research questions hold academic or social significance. Scholars may also draw inspiration from relevant chapters in my book.

Lin Xiaopei: Thank you very much, Professor Hou.

Funding

Supported by Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China "Interdisciplinary Decoding and Communication Efficiency of TCM Terminology Translation: An Empirical Study Based on the 'WHO International Standard Terminologies on Traditional Chinese Medicine'" (25YJA740008).

Works Cited

- Chen Wangdao. *An Introduction to Rhetoric and a Brief Treatise on Grammar*. Edited. by Tinghu Zong et al., Fudan University Press, 2015.
- Chomsky, Noam, et al. "The False Promise of ChatGPT." *The New York Times*, 8 Mar. 2023, www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_22196380
- Hou Guojin. *Hou's Translation of Pretty Poetry*. Wuhan Publishing House, 2020b.
- . *Pragma-rhetoric: Pragma-rhetorical Competence vs Failure*. Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press, 2024a.
- . "'Principle of Relevance, Economy and Effect' for Translation of Titles of Works—A Case Study of Helen Chasin's Poem 'The Word Plum'". *Journal of the PLA University of Foreign Languages*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2016, pp. 106–114.
- . "Puzzles for pragmatics and rhetoric and advent of pragma-rhetoric." *International Review of Pragmatics*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2020a, pp. 246–271.
- . "Revisiting the Active Rhetorical Values in the Four Versions of Li Bai's 'We Three Go On in the Cups.'" *Translation Studies and Teaching*, no.2, 2025, pp. 9–20.
- . "Yang Xiu Who Kills Himself by Catenating Pragma-Rhetorical Failures." *Journal of Putian University*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2024b, pp. 75–81.
- Li Yunhan, and Sheng Yongsheng eds. *Chinese Rhetoric: A Comprehensive Study*. Guangdong Education Publishing House, 2006/2010.
- Tan Xuechun, et al. *A Comprehensive Dictionary of Chinese Rhetorical Devices*. Shanghai Century Publishing Group and Shanghai Lexicographical Publishing House, 2010.
- Wang Caiying, and Hou Guojin. *Pragmatic Adaptation in Literary Translation*. Guangming Daily Press, 2022.

The Authors

Hou Guojin, Ph.D., Professor of linguistics, pragmatics and translation in School of Foreign Languages of Putian University, one of the editors of *Translating China*, a lecturer for the "Lujiang Forum" in Xiamen City, and a part-time researcher at the South China Semiotics Research Center. He was a postdoctoral fellow studying Chinese linguistics at Fudan University, secretary-general of the World Chinese Rhetoric Society, and an academic advisor at the Confucius Institute of University of Novi Sad, Serbia.

Email: nationelf@126.com

Lin Xiaopei, an MA student of linguistics and English teaching in School of Foreign Languages of Putian University.

Email: 964431857@qq.com