

Pragmatics Misfire: An Analysis of Misconstrued Implicature

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100500427>

Received: 01 May 2026; Accepted: 06 May 2026; Published: 03 June 2026

ABSTRACT

Communication frequently breaks down not because speakers lack linguistic competence, but because hearers misinterpret what is implied rather than explicitly stated. This paper advances the position that misconstrued implicature constitutes a central and systematic source of communicative failure, particularly in multilingual and second-language contexts such as Nigeria. Drawing on Gricean pragmatics, relevance theory, and recent Nigerian empirical studies, the paper argues that implicature is inherently unstable due to contextual variability, sociocultural divergence, and uneven pragmatic competence. Through extensive analysis of classroom discourse, digital communication, and Nigerian sociopolitical rhetoric, the study demonstrates that pragmatic misfire is not accidental but predictable and patterned. It proposes a refined typology of misconstrued implicature and advocates a pedagogical shift toward explicit instruction in pragmatic inferencing. The paper concludes that successful communication depends not on linguistic accuracy alone but on shared interpretation, making pragmatic competence central to language education and social interaction.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Implicature, Pragmatic Failure, Nigeria, ESL, Intercultural Communication, Inference, Language Education

INTRODUCTION

Human communication is often assumed to be a relatively stable process in which speakers encode meaning and hearers decode it. Yet this assumption collapses under even minimal scrutiny. What people communicate is rarely exhausted by what they explicitly say; instead, meaning emerges through inference, shaped by context, shared knowledge, and expectations about rational behaviour. Since H. P. Grice's (1975) foundational account of implicature, pragmatics has recognised that successful communication depends on interlocutors' ability to go beyond the literal and recover intended meaning through cooperative reasoning. However, while much of pragmatic theory has focused on how such inferencing succeeds, considerably less attention has been paid to how, and more importantly, why it systematically fails.

This paper begins from a simple but under-theorised observation: communicative failure is not merely accidental noise within an otherwise efficient system; rather, it is a structurally predictable outcome of inferential communication. Instances in everyday interaction illustrate this clearly. An utterance such as "You might want to look at that again" can function as advice, criticism, or warning depending on contextual assumptions. When these assumptions are not shared, interpretation diverges. What is striking is not that misunderstanding occurs, but that it occurs in patterned and recurrent ways across domains such as education, digital communication, and public discourse.

Existing pragmatic frameworks provide important insights into inferential processes but tend to assume a degree of shared rationality and contextual alignment that does not hold in many real-world settings. The Gricean model presupposes that interlocutors recognise and adhere to cooperative principles, while later developments, such as relevance theory advanced by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, shift the focus to cognitive processes of interpretation, emphasising that hearers select meanings that appear optimally relevant given their cognitive environment. Although these perspectives acknowledge variability in interpretation, they do not fully account

for the systematicity of misinterpretation particularly in contexts where interlocutors do not share sociocultural backgrounds, pragmatic norms, or levels of inferential competence.

This gap becomes especially visible in multilingual and intercultural settings. Research in interlanguage pragmatics (e.g., Kasper & Rose, 2002; Taguchi, 2019) has shown that second-language users often possess grammatical competence without corresponding pragmatic competence, leading to difficulties in interpreting indirect speech acts, politeness strategies, and context-dependent meanings. Similarly, studies of intercultural communication (Kecskes, 2014; Zhao & Wang, 2023) demonstrate that meaning is not simply transmitted but negotiated across divergent cultural frames. In such contexts, implicature becomes inherently unstable, as interlocutors draw on different assumptions, expectations, and interpretive strategies. The result is not random misunderstanding but recurrent patterns of misinterpretation.

Despite this, the concept of misconstrued implicature remains insufficiently developed within pragmatic theory. While the notion of pragmatic failure has been widely discussed (e.g., Thomas, 1995), it is often treated as an occasional breakdown attributable to lack of competence or cultural mismatch. This paper takes a different position. It argues that misconstrued implicature is not a peripheral phenomenon but a central feature of communication under conditions of contextual asymmetry. In other words, when interlocutors do not share the same cognitive, cultural, or situational frameworks, divergence in interpretation is not only possible but likely and, crucially, predictable.

The aim of this paper, therefore, is twofold. First, it reconceptualises pragmatic misfire as a systematic and theoretically significant phenomenon rather than an incidental error. Second, it proposes a typology of misconstrued implicature that captures recurring patterns of inferential divergence across communicative contexts. By integrating insights from Gricean pragmatics, relevance theory, and intercultural pragmatics, the paper advances the claim that meaning is not merely inferred but negotiated under conditions of asymmetry. This shift has important implications for how communication is understood, analysed, and taught.

The significance of this argument extends beyond theoretical pragmatics. In educational settings, for instance, students frequently misinterpret indirect instructions or evaluative feedback, not because of linguistic deficiency but because of mismatched inferential assumptions (Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). In digital communication, the absence of contextual cues amplifies ambiguity, increasing the likelihood of divergent interpretations (Yus, 2011; Li & Xu, 2022). In political and institutional discourse, strategic ambiguity often invites multiple interpretations, enabling speakers to manage accountability while leaving meaning open-ended. Across these domains, misconstrued implicature shapes outcomes in ways that are socially and materially consequential.

This paper argues that such patterns cannot be adequately explained within existing models that prioritise successful communication as the norm. Instead, they require a reconceptualisation of communication as an inherently asymmetrical process in which shared meaning is contingent, negotiated, and frequently unstable. By foregrounding the systematic nature of pragmatic misfire, the paper seeks to shift the analytical focus from how meaning is successfully conveyed to how it is variably and often divergently constructed.

In doing so, the study makes three central claims. First, implicature is inherently unstable because it depends on assumptions that are rarely fully shared. Second, misconstrued implicature follows identifiable patterns shaped by contextual, sociocultural, and cognitive factors. Third, recognising these patterns allows for a more nuanced understanding of communication as a process of negotiation rather than transmission. The sections that follow develop these claims by examining the limitations of existing theories, advancing a structured account of pragmatic misfire, and proposing a typology that captures its recurring forms.

Theoretical Foundation

Pragmatic theory has long been concerned with explaining how interlocutors move beyond literal meaning to recover speaker intention. Foundational accounts provide powerful tools for understanding inference, cooperation, and context in communication. However, these frameworks are largely oriented toward successful meaning transfer, often treating misunderstanding as marginal rather than theoretically central. This section argues that while existing models explain how implicature is generated and interpreted, they do not sufficiently

account for the systematic nature of misinterpretation, particularly in multilingual and socioculturally diverse contexts.

The classical account of implicature originates from Grice's Cooperative Principle, which posits that speakers and hearers adhere to shared conversational maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner (Grice, 1975). Within this framework, implicature arises when an utterance appears to violate one or more maxims, prompting the hearer to infer additional meaning. While this model successfully explains how meaning is enriched beyond what is explicitly stated, it presupposes a significant degree of shared background knowledge and rational cooperation. As Levinson (1983) further develops, implicature relies on culturally embedded assumptions that guide interpretation. However, in contexts where such assumptions are unevenly distributed, as is often the case in multilingual societies, the reliability of inferential processes becomes unstable. The Gricean model, therefore, offers limited insight into why and how misinterpretations occur systematically rather than sporadically.

Cognitive approaches to pragmatics, particularly relevance theory, shift the focus from social norms to mental processes. Relevance theory posits that hearers interpret utterances by selecting the most cognitively relevant meaning based on available contextual information (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). This perspective highlights the role of individual cognition in shaping interpretation, suggesting that different hearers may arrive at different meanings depending on their cognitive environment. While this framework accounts for variability in interpretation, it tends to treat divergence as a byproduct of individual processing rather than as a patterned phenomenon influenced by shared social conditions. In other words, relevance theory explains why interpretations may differ, but not why certain types of misinterpretation recur across specific groups or contexts.

Intercultural pragmatics provides further insight by foregrounding the role of sociocultural norms in communication. Thomas (1983) introduces the concept of pragmatic failure, distinguishing between pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic errors. This work is crucial in demonstrating that miscommunication often arises from mismatches in cultural expectations and communicative conventions. Subsequent studies in interlanguage pragmatics reinforce the idea that learners may possess grammatical competence yet lack the pragmatic competence required for appropriate interpretation (Kasper & Rose, 2002). However, despite its contributions, this strand of research tends to conceptualise failure as a learner deficit rather than as a broader, systemic feature of communication. Moreover, it does not provide a detailed framework for classifying different types of misinterpretation beyond general categories.

The Limits of Gricean Stability

The concept of implicature, as developed by Grice (1975), rests on the assumption that communication is guided by a Cooperative Principle, operationalised through the maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner. When speakers appear to violate these maxims, hearers are expected to infer additional meaning on the assumption that the speaker remains fundamentally cooperative. This model has been highly influential because it captures the inferential nature of meaning and explains how indirect communication functions in everyday interaction (Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996). At its core, Gricean pragmatics offers a powerful account of how interlocutors move from what is said to what is meant.

However, the apparent stability of this model depends on a crucial and often implicit condition: that interlocutors share sufficient background assumptions to recognise both the apparent violation and the intended implicature. Grice (1975) himself acknowledges the role of shared knowledge, yet does not fully theorise what happens when such common ground is weak, fragmented, or absent. In practice, especially in multilingual and intercultural settings, this condition is frequently unmet. As a result, the inferential process becomes unstable. What one hearer interprets as a deliberate implicature, another may interpret as literal meaning, irrelevance, or even a breach of sincerity. This instability aligns with observations that implicature is highly context-sensitive and dependent on mutually recognised assumptions (Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983).

Subsequent developments attempt to refine the Gricean framework by accounting for variability in interpretation. Levinson (2000) introduces the distinction between generalized and particularized implicature, suggesting that some inferences are default while others are context-specific. Similarly, Horn (1984) proposes a reorganisation of Grice's maxims into competing Q and R principles, capturing tensions between informativeness and economy.

These contributions acknowledge that interpretation is not uniform and may involve competing inferential paths. Yet, as Horn (2004) later notes, such refinements still operate within a model that presumes a relatively stable interpretive environment in which hearers can reliably select the intended meaning.

Crucially, misinterpretation within this tradition is often treated as a peripheral issue, typically attributed to lack of pragmatic competence or failure to apply cooperative reasoning correctly (Thomas, 1983; Kasper & Rose, 2002). This perspective implicitly frames breakdown as an anomaly rather than a patterned outcome. What remains under-theorised is the possibility that such “failures” are not exceptions but structurally predictable in contexts characterised by asymmetries in knowledge, culture, and power. In this sense, the Gricean model is most effective in explaining how implicature works under ideal conditions, but offers limited explanatory power for why it systematically does not work when those conditions are not met.

Cognitive Variability and the Problem of Relevance

Cognitive approaches to pragmatics, most notably relevance theory as developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995), shift the focus from social norms to mental processes. Rather than assuming adherence to cooperative maxims, relevance theory posits that hearers interpret utterances by selecting the meaning that yields the greatest cognitive effect for the least processing effort within their cognitive environment. Communication succeeds when the speaker’s intended meaning aligns with what the hearer finds optimally relevant. This framework offers a significant advance over Gricean models by grounding interpretation in general cognitive principles rather than socially shared rules (Wilson & Sperber, 2004).

A key strength of relevance theory lies in its recognition of cognitive variability. Because interpretation depends on the hearer’s background knowledge, expectations, and attentional resources, different individuals may derive different meanings from the same utterance. As Sperber and Wilson (1995) argue, no two individuals share identical cognitive environments, making some degree of interpretive divergence inevitable. This insight aligns with broader cognitive-pragmatic work suggesting that meaning construction is shaped by inferential heuristics and context-dependent assumptions (Carston, 2002; Gibbs, 2012). In this respect, relevance theory provides a stronger foundation than Gricean pragmatics for explaining why communication does not always converge on a single intended meaning.

However, this same flexibility exposes a critical limitation. If relevance is determined relative to the hearer’s cognitive environment, then divergence in interpretation is not merely possible but structurally unavoidable whenever cognitive environments differ. While relevance theory acknowledges this variability, it does not fully theorise its consequences at the level of **recurring** communicative patterns. The framework is primarily concerned with how individual hearers arrive at an interpretation that satisfies expectations of relevance, not with how systematic forms of misinterpretation emerge across groups or contexts. As Wilson and Sperber (2004) emphasise, the theory explains the process of interpretation, but remains less explicit about the distribution of interpretive outcomes in socially stratified settings.

Moreover, cognitive constraints significantly shape inferential processes. Under conditions of limited attention, time pressure, or increased processing load, hearers are more likely to adopt shallow processing strategies, relying on literal or default meanings rather than engaging in effortful inferencing (Kahneman, 2011; Gibbs, 2012). This tendency is particularly evident in second language contexts, where learners often prioritise surface-level interpretation due to limited processing resources and developing pragmatic competence (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996; Taguchi, 2019). Yet, such patterns are typically framed as individual deficits or developmental limitations, rather than as predictable features of communication under real-world constraints.

Thus, although cognitive approaches move beyond the rigid assumptions of Gricean cooperation, they still stop short of conceptualising misinterpretation as a patterned and theoretically significant phenomenon. They provide robust tools for explaining variability in interpretation, but do not elevate pragmatic misfire to a central analytical concern. As a result, the systematic recurrence of misconstrued implicature across contexts remains insufficiently theorised.

Intercultural and Interpersonal Pragmatics

Intercultural pragmatics further complicates the account of meaning by foregrounding the role of sociocultural knowledge in interpretation. Rather than assuming a stable and shared common ground, this line of research emphasises that interlocutors often operate with partially overlapping or even divergent background assumptions. Kecskes (2014) argues that communication in intercultural settings is characterised by the interplay between prior cultural knowledge and emergent, interaction-specific meanings. In this view, common ground is not given but dynamically constructed during interaction. Meaning, therefore, is not simply inferred from shared assumptions but negotiated in real time, making communication inherently contingent and potentially unstable.

This instability is further reinforced by work in politeness and interpersonal pragmatics. Brown and Levinson's (1987) model demonstrates that speech acts are shaped by culturally specific norms of face, social distance, and power. Subsequent developments in interactional pragmatics extend this insight by showing that evaluations of (im)politeness are co-constructed and context-dependent rather than fixed (Kádár & Haugh, 2013). As a result, pragmatic strategies such as indirectness, mitigation, or implicature do not carry uniform meanings across contexts. What is intended as politeness in one setting may be interpreted as vagueness, evasion, or even insincerity in another (Leech, 2014). These divergences create fertile ground for misconstrued implicature, as interlocutors rely on different sociocultural frameworks to interpret the same utterance.

Research in interlanguage pragmatics reinforces the patterned nature of such mismatches. Learners navigating a second language frequently transfer pragmatic norms from their first language, leading to discrepancies in both production and interpretation (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). These mismatches are not random errors but systematic outcomes of competing pragmatic systems operating simultaneously. Taguchi (2015) further shows that even advanced learners may struggle with implicature comprehension due to differences in sociocultural expectations and processing demands. Similar dynamics are observed beyond language learning contexts. In digital and professional communication, reduced contextual cues and asynchronous interaction increase reliance on inference, thereby amplifying the risk of misinterpretation (Herring, 2013; Li & Xu, 2022). Under such conditions, interlocutors must reconstruct meaning with limited shared grounding, often leading to divergent interpretations.

Despite these insights, much of the literature continues to frame pragmatic failure in terms of deficiency, whether as lack of competence, insufficient cultural knowledge, or inadequate instruction (Thomas, 1983; Kasper & Rose, 2002). While these factors are undoubtedly relevant, this perspective risks obscuring a more fundamental issue. Even highly competent speakers can misinterpret implicature when operating across divergent sociocultural and interactional contexts. In such cases, misfire is not reducible to individual limitation but emerges from structural conditions in which shared meaning cannot be assumed. Consequently, intercultural and interpersonal pragmatics point toward a critical rethinking of communication itself: not as a system grounded in stable common ground, but as one in which interpretive alignment is contingent, negotiated, and inherently vulnerable to systematic divergence.

Toward a Theory of Systematic Misfire

The preceding strands reveal a shared limitation in pragmatic theory. Gricean pragmatics presumes a baseline of shared rationality and mutual knowledge (Grice, 1975; Levinson, 1983), cognitive approaches emphasise individual inferential processes shaped by relevance and processing effort (Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Wilson & Sperber, 2004), and intercultural pragmatics foregrounds the variability of sociocultural norms and emergent common ground (Kecskes, 2014; Kádár & Haugh, 2013). Each offers a compelling but partial account of how meaning is constructed. What remains insufficiently theorised is the patterned nature of misconstrued implicature that is, why misinterpretation recurs in systematic ways across contexts rather than appearing as isolated communicative accidents.

Existing frameworks tend to treat misfire as peripheral. Within the Gricean tradition, breakdown is often attributed to failure to recognise or apply cooperative principles (Thomas, 1983; Leech, 1983). Cognitive accounts explain divergence as a function of differing cognitive environments but stop short of examining how such divergence becomes socially patterned (Carston, 2002; Gibbs, 2012). Intercultural pragmatics, while

recognising mismatches in norms and expectations, frequently frames these as competence gaps or transitional phenomena, particularly in second language contexts (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). Across these perspectives, misinterpretation is acknowledged but not elevated to a central analytical concern.

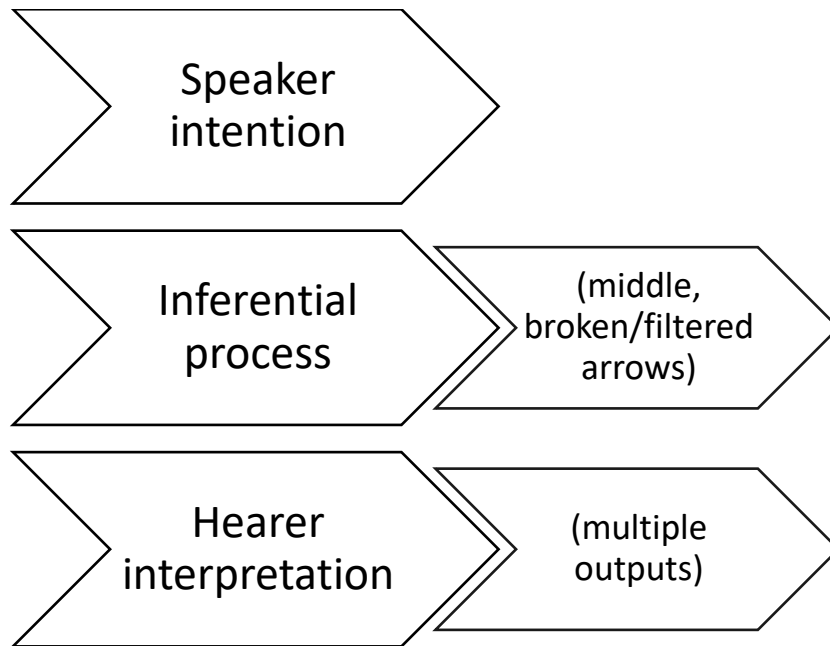


Figure 1: Communication Asymmetry Model

What is needed, therefore, is a framework that treats misinterpretation not as an anomaly but as an expected outcome under conditions of contextual asymmetry (See Figure 1). Such a framework must account for the interaction of at least three interdependent factors. First, uneven access to context means that interlocutors do not share identical background knowledge or situational awareness, undermining the assumptions required for stable implicature (Clark, 1996; Kecskes, 2014). Second, divergence in sociocultural norms shapes how utterances are evaluated in terms of politeness, relevance, and intention, leading to competing interpretive frameworks (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 2014). Third, variability in cognitive processing affects how individuals allocate attention, select contextual assumptions, and balance effort against interpretive payoff (Kahneman, 2011; Sperber & Wilson, 1995). When these factors converge, they do not simply increase the likelihood of misunderstanding; they generate recurring forms of inferential divergence that can be identified, classified, and theoretically analysed.

On this basis, this paper advances the claim that pragmatic misfire is not merely a breakdown of communication but a constitutive feature of it. Communication, particularly in multilingual and socially stratified contexts, is inherently vulnerable to misalignment because it depends on conditions that are rarely fully met. By shifting analytical focus from successful inference to patterned misinterpretation, it becomes possible to reconceptualise implicature as inherently unstable rather than reliably recoverable. This shift opens the way for a systematic account of misconstrued implicature, moving beyond deficit-based explanations toward a model that recognises misfire as structurally embedded in communicative practice. The next section builds on this argument by specifying the conditions under which such misfire becomes not only possible but predictable.

Pragmatic Misfire as a Structural Phenomenon

If existing theories explain how meaning is successfully inferred, the crucial question that follows is this: under what conditions does inference systematically fail? This section advances the central argument of the paper that misconstrued implicature is not an incidental breakdown but a structurally predictable outcome of communication. Rather than treating misinterpretation as error or deficiency, it is more analytically productive to understand it as the result of asymmetries built into communicative processes themselves. These asymmetries operate across three interrelated dimensions: context, sociocultural knowledge, and cognition as shown in figure 2.

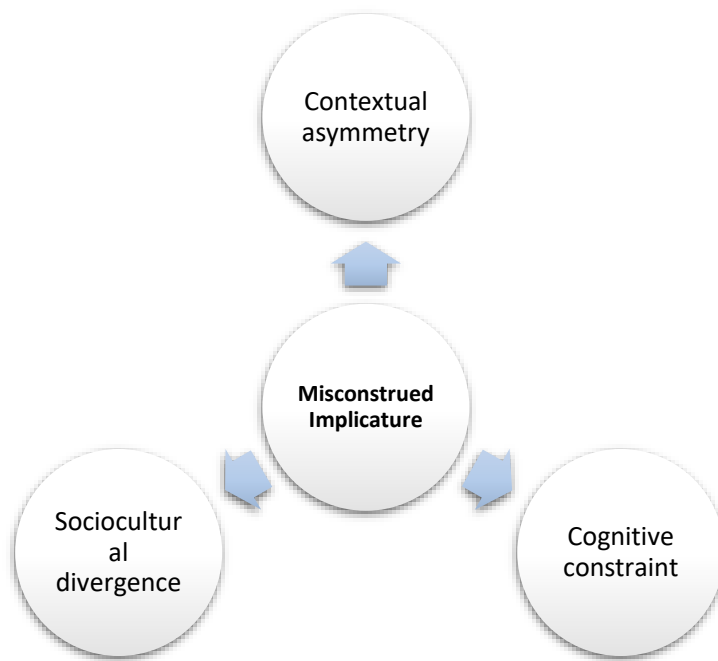


Figure 2: Structural Sources of Pragmatic Misfire

Context as Structurally Uneven

Pragmatic interpretation depends fundamentally on context, yet context is neither fixed nor equally accessible to all participants in interaction. Traditional accounts often treat context as a relatively stable and shared backdrop against which meaning is interpreted (Levinson, 1983; Leech, 1983). However, subsequent work has shown that context is better understood as dynamic, constructed, and distributed rather than given (Duranti & Goodwin, 1992; van Dijk, 2008). Interlocutors do not simply access a common pool of contextual knowledge; instead, they actively construct context in the course of interaction, drawing on different cognitive, social, and experiential resources.

From this perspective, an utterance does not carry its full context with it. Rather, hearers must reconstruct relevant assumptions based on prior knowledge, situational cues, and expectations about the speaker's intentions. As relevance theory suggests, this reconstruction process is inherently selective, guided by the search for optimal relevance within the hearer's cognitive environment (Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Wilson & Sperber, 2004). However, because cognitive environments differ across individuals, the selection of contextual assumptions is unlikely to converge fully. Clark (1996) emphasises that even so-called "common ground" is often only partially shared and must be continuously negotiated. As a result, what counts as the "same" context varies across participants, producing multiple, potentially competing interpretive frames.

This unevenness has direct consequences for implicature. Consider an indirect directive such as "It's getting late." Within one contextual frame, this may function as a polite suggestion to end a meeting; within another, it may be interpreted as a neutral observation about time. The divergence here is not reducible to linguistic ambiguity alone but arises from differential access to contextual cues, including shared goals, relational expectations, and prior discourse history (Thomas, 1983; Kecskes, 2014). As Kecskes (2014) argues, interlocutors often rely on a blend of prior cultural knowledge and emergent situational context, which may not align across participants, thereby increasing the likelihood of inferential divergence.

Importantly, such contextual asymmetry is not exceptional but typical of real-world communication, particularly in multilingual, institutional, and digitally mediated environments. In these settings, interlocutors frequently operate with only partially overlapping assumptions, and contextual cues may be limited, ambiguous, or differently interpreted (Herring, 2013; van Dijk, 2008). Under these conditions, the inferential process becomes inherently unstable, as there is no guarantee that the hearer's reconstruction of context will align with the speaker's intended frame.

This challenges a key assumption underlying much pragmatic theory: that context can be sufficiently shared for implicature to function reliably. Instead, context should be understood as structurally uneven, distributed across participants and continuously negotiated in interaction. From this standpoint, misinterpretation is not merely a possibility arising from occasional breakdown but a structurally grounded outcome of communicative conditions in which shared context cannot be taken for granted.

Sociocultural Knowledge as Non-Shared

Beyond immediate context, interpretation is shaped by broader sociocultural knowledge, including norms governing politeness, hierarchy, indirectness, and communicative appropriateness. These norms are neither universal nor uniformly distributed across speakers. Classical politeness theory demonstrates that the production and interpretation of utterances are deeply embedded in culturally specific expectations about face, social distance, and power relations (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Later developments in interpersonal pragmatics further emphasise that evaluations of meaning are not fixed but emerge through interaction, shaped by participants' culturally grounded assumptions and relational positioning (Kádár & Haugh, 2013; Leech, 2014). As a result, what counts as appropriate, polite, or meaningful in one sociocultural context may not hold in another.

When interlocutors do not share these sociocultural expectations, implicature becomes particularly vulnerable to misinterpretation. Indirectness provides a clear illustration. In many contexts, indirect speech functions as a politeness strategy, signalling deference, mitigation, or sensitivity to the hearer's face needs (Brown & Levinson, 1987). However, in other contexts, the same degree of indirectness may be interpreted as evasiveness, lack of clarity, or even incompetence. The interpretive outcome is therefore not determined solely by the speaker's intention but by the sociocultural framework through which the utterance is processed (Leech, 2014; Thomas, 1983). This divergence highlights that implicature is not inherently stable but contingent on shared norms that are often only partially aligned.

Intercultural pragmatics makes this instability explicit by showing that communication across cultural boundaries involves the interaction of multiple pragmatic systems rather than a single shared one (Kecskes, 2014). Interlocutors draw simultaneously on their own cultural knowledge and on assumptions about their interlocutor's expectations, resulting in hybrid and dynamically negotiated interpretations. Because these systems may not fully converge, the inferential process becomes susceptible to systematic divergence. This is particularly evident in second language contexts, where learners frequently transfer pragmatic norms from their first language while attempting to interpret target-language usage (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). Even when linguistic proficiency is high, differences in sociocultural knowledge can lead to persistent mismatches in interpretation.

Crucially, such mismatches do not produce random or isolated misunderstandings. Instead, they give rise to recurrent patterns of misinterpretation. Learners and intercultural interlocutors may consistently under-interpret indirect criticism as neutral feedback or over-interpret polite suggestions as strong directives. These tendencies reflect systematic differences in how sociocultural cues are processed rather than momentary lapses in attention or competence (Taguchi, 2015; Kecskes, 2014). In this sense, misconstrued implicature emerges not from individual error but from the structured interaction of divergent pragmatic norms.

This challenges deficit-oriented accounts that locate pragmatic failure primarily in individual limitations. While lack of awareness or experience may exacerbate misinterpretation, the underlying issue is structural: sociocultural knowledge is unevenly distributed and often non-shared. Consequently, interpretation operates across partially incompatible frameworks, making misalignment not only possible but predictable. From this perspective, sociocultural divergence is not an external complication but a central condition shaping how implicature is understood and misconstrued in real communicative settings.

Inferencing under Cognitive Constraints

Interpretation is not only socially and contextually conditioned; it is also cognitively constrained. The inferential processes required to derive implicature draw on attention, working memory, and reasoning, all of which are limited resources. Early formulations of relevance theory already frame comprehension as a trade-off between

cognitive effects and processing effort, implying that hearers will not pursue all possible inferences but will instead settle for those that appear sufficiently relevant given available resources (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). This means that interpretation is not simply a matter of competence but of capacity under constraint.

Under ideal conditions, hearers may engage in effortful reasoning to recover speaker intention. In practice, however, many communicative situations impose significant cognitive demands. Kahneman's (2011) distinction between fast, heuristic-based processing and slower, effortful reasoning helps clarify this dynamic. In fast-paced conversation or high-stakes interaction, hearers are more likely to rely on rapid, intuitive judgments rather than deliberate inferential work. These shortcuts are efficient, but they increase the risk that implicature will be under-processed or misaligned with speaker intent. Relevance theory anticipates this tendency by noting that hearers aim for optimal, not maximal, interpretation, often stopping once a plausible meaning is reached (Wilson & Sperber, 2004).

Empirical research in second language pragmatics reinforces this point by showing how processing limitations shape interpretive outcomes. When cognitive load is high, learners tend to prioritise propositional or literal meaning over pragmatic enrichment, not because they lack awareness, but because inferencing is more resource-intensive (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996). Taguchi's (2019) work further demonstrates that even advanced learners exhibit slower and less accurate implicature processing under time pressure, indicating that pragmatic comprehension is tightly linked to processing efficiency rather than knowledge alone. In digitally mediated communication, where paralinguistic cues are reduced or absent, the burden of interpretation increases. Yus (2011) shows that users often compensate by adopting simplified inferential strategies, which streamline processing but also amplify the risk of misinterpretation.

Cognitive constraints also interact with expectations and biases, shaping not only how much is inferred but what is inferred. Hearers do not approach utterances neutrally; they interpret them through the lens of prior beliefs, social expectations, and affective dispositions. Work in social psychology suggests that individuals are predisposed to interpret ambiguous signals in ways that confirm existing expectations or concerns. For instance, sensitivity to social evaluation can lead individuals to over-attribute negative intent, while a strong need for social belonging may bias interpretation toward affiliative meanings (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Within a pragmatic framework, such tendencies manifest as systematic patterns of over-inference or misaligned inference, where the derived implicature reflects the hearer's expectations more than the speaker's intention.

Reframing Misinterpretation

The uneven distribution of context, the non-shared nature of sociocultural knowledge, and the constraints of cognitive processing form a structural basis for pragmatic misfire. Importantly, these factors do not operate independently; rather, they interact dynamically to produce recurring patterns of inferential divergence across communicative settings. This interactional view aligns with sociocognitive approaches to discourse, which emphasise that meaning is jointly shaped by mental processes and socially distributed knowledge rather than residing in either domain alone (van Dijk, 2008; Clark, 1996).

From this perspective, misinterpretation must be reconceptualised as more than a deviation from successful communication. Traditional pragmatic models often implicitly treat misunderstanding as a breakdown within an otherwise stable and cooperative system (Grice, 1975; Levinson, 1983). However, the evidence discussed in previous sections suggests that such stability is conditional rather than foundational. Communication depends on alignment across contextual awareness, sociocultural expectations, and cognitive availability, none of which can be guaranteed in real interaction. As a result, misinterpretation is better understood as a normal outcome of communication under asymmetrical conditions, rather than as an exceptional failure.

This reconceptualisation carries significant theoretical implications. First, it challenges models that assume shared meaning as a default starting point. Instead, it foregrounds the idea that meaning is continuously negotiated, revised, and sometimes fundamentally misaligned during interaction (Kecskes, 2014; Kádár & Haugh, 2013). In this sense, implicature is not a stable object to be recovered but a fragile inferential achievement dependent on multiple layers of coordination. Second, it shifts analytical attention from isolated instances of

misunderstanding to the systematic conditions that generate them, thereby allowing misinterpretation to be studied as a structured phenomenon rather than treated as residual noise.

More importantly, this perspective opens the possibility of identifying and classifying recurrent patterns of inferential divergence. If misinterpretation is shaped by predictable interactions between contextual asymmetry, sociocultural mismatch, and cognitive constraint, then it follows that certain forms of misconstrued implicature should recur across comparable communicative environments. This moves the analysis beyond general claims about “communication failure” toward a more fine-grained account of how specific types of pragmatic misfire emerge, stabilise, and repeat across contexts (Thomas, 1983; Sperber & Wilson, 1995).

Ultimately, reframing misinterpretation in this way repositions pragmatic theory itself. Rather than treating successful communication as the normative baseline with occasional deviations, it suggests that successful interpretation is a contingent achievement requiring sustained alignment across multiple dimensions of meaning construction. Misfire, therefore, is not external to communication but structurally embedded within it. Recognising this shifts the focus of pragmatics from explaining only how meaning succeeds to also systematically explaining how and why it predictably fails.

A Typology of Misconstrued Implicature

If pragmatic misfire is structurally conditioned rather than accidental, then it should exhibit identifiable and recurrent patterns across communicative contexts. Importantly, recent empirical work in Nigerian contexts provides growing evidence that pragmatic misinterpretation follows systematic patterns rather than occurring randomly. For instance, Adeleke and Eze (2022) employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design with 214 senior secondary school students across southwestern Nigeria to investigate learners’ interpretation of indirect instructional discourse within English-medium classrooms. Drawing on structured questionnaire data that targeted implicature recognition, particularly in relation to indirect speech acts, and complementing this with follow-up semi-structured interviews, they analysed the quantitative data using logistic regression alongside descriptive statistics, while the qualitative responses were subjected to rigorous thematic coding. Their findings demonstrate a consistent tendency among learners to default to literal interpretations of indirect teacher feedback, even in contexts where pragmatic enrichment is strongly cued. More specifically, they show that modalised directives such as *might* and *could* are systematically under-interpreted as non-obligatory suggestions rather than mitigated requirements. This pattern reflects not merely incidental misunderstanding but a stable form of under-inference, suggesting that constrained exposure to pragmatic norms in instructional settings significantly limits learners’ ability to move beyond surface-level semantic processing.

Makinde et al. (2026) adopted a quasi-experimental pretest–posttest control group design to investigate the impact of IT-supported instruction on both writing performance and pragmatic comprehension among 128 senior secondary school students assigned to experimental and control conditions. Over an eight-week intervention period, data were generated through essay-writing tasks, embedded measures of implicature interpretation, and attitudinal scales. The quantitative analysis, conducted using ANCOVA and paired-sample t-tests, revealed substantial improvement in students’ structural writing abilities. However, gains in implicature comprehension remained limited. Closer examination of teacher feedback at the discourse level further showed that students continued to misinterpret indirect evaluative comments, often treating them as optional rather than obligatory. These findings indicate that while technology-enhanced instruction may strengthen formal writing skills, it does not necessarily facilitate corresponding development in pragmatic interpretation, thereby pointing to a persistent form of misalignment in inferential processing.

Obiesili and Emodi (2023) approached the issue from a corpus-informed discourse analytic perspective, examining digitally mediated classroom interactions within Nigerian tertiary institutions. Their analysis drew on a dataset of 45,000 words of lecturer–student exchanges compiled from Learning Management Systems and asynchronous discussion platforms across two universities. Through systematic pragmatic annotation of implicature types, combined with qualitative discourse analysis and frequency-based patterning, they identified recurring divergences between intended and interpreted meanings. These divergences were particularly pronounced in delayed feedback environments where contextual and paralinguistic cues were minimal or absent.

The findings highlight frequent instances of under-inference and misaligned inference, suggesting that reduced contextual richness in digital communication significantly constrains the interpretive process and increases the likelihood of systematic misunderstanding.

The typology proposed in this study shifts the analytical focus from sources of error to patterns of interpretation, identifying how hearers systematically diverge from intended meaning under recurring constraints.

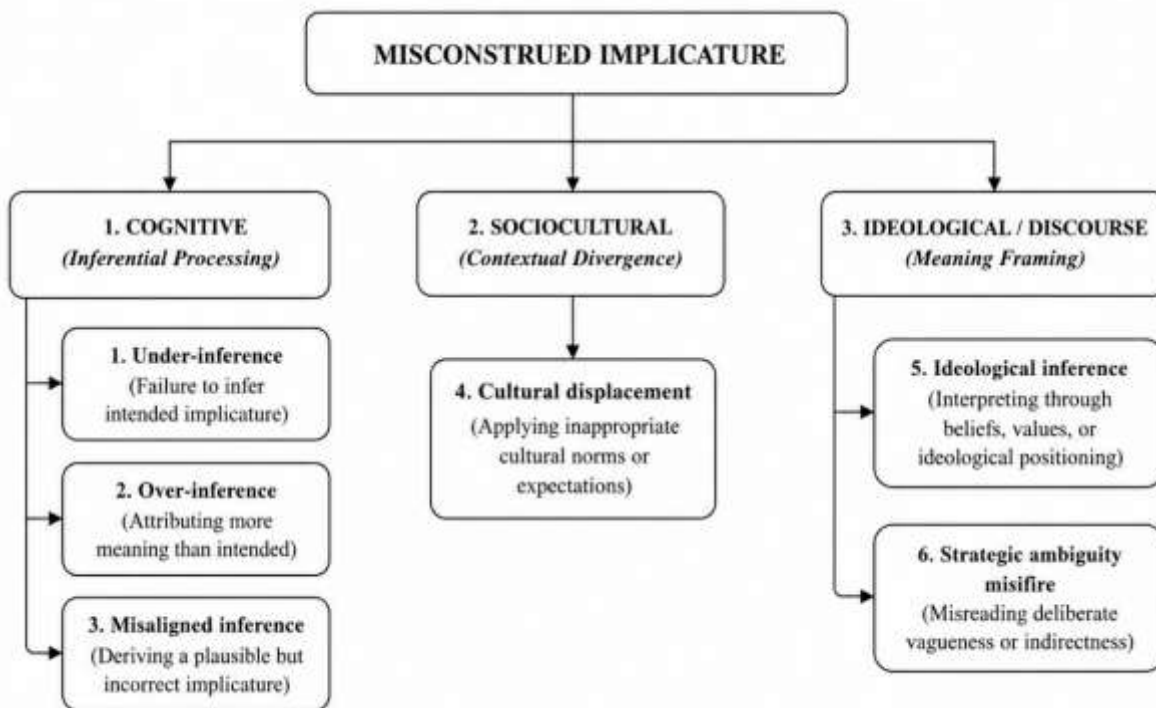


Figure 3: Typology of Misconstrued Implicature

The six types shown in Figure 3 are analytically distinct but not mutually exclusive. In actual communicative practice, they may overlap, reflecting the interaction of contextual unevenness, sociocultural divergence, and cognitive limitation discussed in earlier sections. This overlap itself is theoretically significant, as it reinforces the claim that misconstrued implicature is not random but emerges from layered and interacting conditions of interpretation.

Under-Inference

Under-inference occurs when the hearer fails to move beyond the literal meaning of an utterance and therefore does not recover the intended implicature. In such cases, the inferential step required to access speaker intention is either not triggered or is prematurely halted. This form of misinterpretation is especially common in contexts where inferential demands are high, contextual cues are weak, or pragmatic competence is still developing.

Consider the utterance:

“You might want to revise this section.”

While this is often intended as indirect criticism or a softened directive implying necessity rather than optionality, the hearer may interpret it as mere advice or a non-binding suggestion. The critical implicature that revision is expected or required is therefore not recovered. This type of divergence has been widely documented in second-language pragmatics, where learners frequently prioritise propositional content over pragmatic enrichment due to processing demands and limited exposure to target norms (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Ishihara & Cohen, 2010). Taguchi (2015) further notes that even advanced learners may struggle with implicature comprehension under time pressure, suggesting that under-inference is not restricted to low proficiency but is sensitive to cognitive load.

Adeleke and Eze (2022) show that secondary school learners consistently interpret indirect teacher feedback in literal terms, particularly when directives are mitigated through modal expressions such as *might* and *could*, thereby failing to recognise their underlying obligatory force. Extending this line of inquiry, Makinde et al. (2026) demonstrate that even when instructional conditions are enhanced through technology-supported interventions, students continue to treat indirect evaluative comments as optional, indicating that improvements in structural competence do not necessarily translate into gains in pragmatic interpretation. From a discourse-analytic perspective, Obiesili and Emodi (2023) further identify recurring instances of under-inference in digitally mediated classroom interactions, where the absence of contextual and paralinguistic cues leads learners to rely more heavily on literal meaning as a default interpretive strategy.

From a theoretical perspective, under-inference reflects a conservative interpretive strategy. When uncertainty arises, the hearer defaults to the most accessible semantic meaning, avoiding additional inferential effort. This aligns with cognitive accounts of comprehension which show that individuals tend to minimise processing costs by relying on surface-level interpretations when conditions are demanding (Kahneman, 2011; Sperber & Wilson, 1995). While such a strategy is cognitively efficient, it systematically increases the risk of communicative misalignment, particularly in contexts where indirectness is conventional.

Importantly, under-inference should not be reduced to a simple deficiency in pragmatic competence. Although lack of familiarity with implicature conventions may contribute to its occurrence, the phenomenon is more accurately understood as a predictable response to constrained interpretive conditions. Where contextual cues are partial, sociocultural norms are unfamiliar, or cognitive resources are limited, the inferential system prioritises stability over depth. In such cases, literal meaning functions as a default anchor, even when it is insufficient to capture speaker intention. Seen in this light, under-inference illustrates a broader point about pragmatic misfire: it is not merely an error at the level of interpretation but a structurally induced outcome of communicative environments in which full inferential alignment cannot be guaranteed. This makes it one of the most pervasive and theoretically revealing forms of misconstrued implicature within the proposed typology.

Over-Inference

In contrast to under-inference, over-inference involves attributing more meaning to an utterance than the speaker intended. In this case, the hearer does not simply recover an implied meaning; rather, they generate additional implicatures that are not supported by the linguistic form, contextual cues, or speaker intention. The interpretive process extends beyond what is pragmatically warranted, producing meaning that is psychologically compelling but communicatively excessive. Consider the utterance: “We’ll discuss this later.” On the surface, this expression functions as a temporal postponement of discussion. However, depending on the hearer’s expectations, relational history, or situational anxiety, it may be interpreted as a signal of disapproval, conflict avoidance, or even impending reprimand. The utterance becomes loaded with meanings that extend beyond mere delay. In such cases, the hearer does not fail to interpret implicature; instead, they augment it, projecting additional layers of meaning onto an otherwise neutral statement. Over-inference is closely linked to cognitive and affective dimensions of interpretation. From a relevance-theoretic perspective, individuals select interpretations that maximise cognitive effects relative to processing effort (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). However, what counts as relevance is not purely logical; it is shaped by emotional salience, prior experience, and interpersonal sensitivity. Kahneman (2011) notes that affective states significantly influence judgment under uncertainty, often leading individuals to overweight threatening or socially significant interpretations. In pragmatic terms, this means that utterances are not only decoded for meaning but also evaluated for interpersonal consequences.

Okafor and Ibrahim (2023) conducted a controlled experimental study among undergraduate students from two universities in South-West Nigeria to examine how contextual framing influences over-inference in the interpretation of ambiguous institutional discourse. The study targeted students in social science and humanities programmes, from which a sample of 180 participants was selected using stratified random sampling. Adopting a between-subjects experimental design, participants were randomly assigned to neutral, moderate, and high-evaluation priming conditions and exposed to vignette-based institutional utterances such as “We’ll revisit this issue” and “This will be reviewed later.” Data were collected through forced-choice interpretation tasks, Likert-scale ratings of perceived speaker intent, and response-time measurements. Analysis using ANOVA and post-

hoc tests revealed that participants in high-evaluation conditions were significantly more likely to attribute negative or disciplinary intent to neutral statements, with faster response times indicating automatic interpretive escalation. The study concludes that over-inference is systematically triggered by evaluative context and institutional authority rather than linguistic ambiguity alone. Taken together, these studies highlight a productive tension between situational immediacy and experiential memory in shaping interpretive excess. While Okafor and Ibrahim demonstrate how over-inference can be experimentally induced through contextual framing, Salami and Adeyemi show how it becomes sedimented through repeated exposure to institutional discourse practices. In both cases, the hearer's interpretive process extends beyond available linguistic evidence, guided instead by expectations, affective states, and prior knowledge structures.

Salami and Adeyemi (2024) extend this line of inquiry through a qualitative corpus-informed discourse-analytic study of workplace communication in Nigerian public sector institutions. The population consisted of administrative and managerial staff across three federal ministries in Lagos and Abuja, from which 42 participants were selected through purposive sampling to capture variation across hierarchical levels. Data comprised approximately 45,000 words of communication drawn from audio-recorded meetings, official memos, and email exchanges, supplemented by semi-structured interviews. The corpus was analysed using pragmatic annotation focused on implicature expansion, inferred stance, and interpretive deviation, alongside thematic discourse analysis and frequency-based patterning. Findings revealed consistent over-interpretation of managerial expressions such as "We will revisit this issue" and "This will be looked into," which were frequently construed as signals of dissatisfaction or concealed reprimand rather than procedural statements. Interview data further indicated that such interpretations were strongly shaped by prior organisational experiences, suggesting that over-inference is reinforced through institutional memory and repeated exposure to indirect bureaucratic communication.

This becomes particularly pronounced in contexts characterised by relational asymmetry or evaluative pressure. Downey and Feldman (1996) demonstrate that individuals with heightened sensitivity to rejection are more likely to interpret ambiguous social cues as negative or disapproving. Within a pragmatic framework, such tendencies manifest as over-inference: the hearer extends the implicature beyond its communicative boundaries, guided not by speaker intention but by internal cognitive or affective states. Baumeister and Leary (1995) similarly argue that the need for social belonging can amplify interpretive vigilance, leading individuals to detect relational meanings even where none were intended.

Importantly, over-inference demonstrates that misinterpretation is not always a failure of inferential capacity or pragmatic awareness. On the contrary, it may result from an excess of inferential activity, where the hearer is highly engaged in meaning construction but lacks sufficient constraints to regulate interpretive scope. In such cases, inference becomes expansive rather than selective, producing meanings that are psychologically coherent but pragmatically ungrounded. This has important implications for pragmatic theory. It suggests that successful communication is not only dependent on the ability to infer meaning, but also on the ability to appropriately limit inference. Without sufficient constraints from shared context, sociocultural norms, or speaker clarification, interpretation can become increasingly speculative. Over-inference thus exposes a critical tension within pragmatic processing: the same mechanisms that enable deep interpretation also create the conditions for interpretive excess.

Crucially, over-inference is not random. It is systematically shaped by the interaction between cognitive salience and contextual ambiguity. When utterances are under-specified, emotionally charged, or embedded in uncertain relational environments, the likelihood of interpretive expansion increases. This makes over-inference a predictable outcome in contexts where communicative signals are weak but interpretive stakes are high.

Misaligned Inference

Misaligned inference occurs when the hearer successfully derives an implicature, but the inferred meaning diverges from the speaker's intended meaning. Unlike under-inference, where meaning is not fully recovered, or over-inference, where meaning is expanded beyond its limits, misaligned inference involves a directional mismatch between intended and interpreted implicature. Both speaker and hearer engage in inferential reasoning,

yet they converge on different conclusions. Consider the utterance: “It’s quite warm in here.” This may be intended as an indirect request to open a window or adjust ventilation. However, the hearer may interpret it as a neutral observation, a comment on comfort, or simply conversational filler. Each interpretation is pragmatically plausible and contextually defensible, yet only one aligns with the speaker’s communicative intention. The result is not a failure of inference per se, but a divergence in interpretive trajectories.

Misaligned inference highlights a fundamental limitation of inferential models of communication. As Sperber and Wilson (1995) argue, hearers select interpretations that appear optimally relevant within their cognitive environment. However, optimal relevance is inherently relative. It depends on the hearer’s access to contextual assumptions, attentional focus, and prior expectations. Wilson and Sperber (2004) further note that relevance is not fixed but dynamically assessed, meaning that different hearers may reasonably converge on different interpretations while still operating within the bounds of rational inference.

Oni and Balogun (2023) conducted a mixed-method classroom discourse study involving undergraduate students across two Nigerian universities to examine interpretation patterns in teacher–student interactions. The study drew on a sample of 200 students selected through stratified random sampling across faculties of education and social sciences. Data were collected through recorded classroom interactions, discourse completion tasks, and post-task interpretive interviews. Using a combination of discourse coding and chi-square analysis, the authors found frequent divergence between lecturer intention and student interpretation, particularly in cases involving indirect feedback and affect-neutral evaluative statements. Notably, students often converged on interpretations that were locally plausible but misaligned with instructional intent, suggesting that alignment failure persists even when inferential processing is successful.

Kalu and Mensah (2024) examined misaligned inference in professional communication within Nigerian healthcare settings. Their qualitative study involved 36 healthcare workers purposively sampled from three public hospitals, including doctors, nurses, and administrative staff. Data were gathered through audio-recorded shift handovers, written clinical notes, and semi-structured interviews. The corpus was analysed using pragmatic discourse analysis with a focus on illocutionary force interpretation and inferential consistency across roles. Findings revealed systematic misalignment in the interpretation of supervisory directives such as “We should monitor this closely” or “Let’s be cautious with this case,” which were variously understood as emergency-level concerns, routine procedural advice, or non-urgent remarks depending on professional role and experience. The study highlights that institutional hierarchy and disciplinary background significantly shape interpretive alignment, producing structured variability in implicature recovery.

This explains why misalignment can occur even in cases where communication appears successful on the surface. Both speaker and hearer may believe that understanding has been achieved, yet their underlying interpretations remain fundamentally different. Clark (1996) describes this as a problem of imperfect common ground: interlocutors operate under the assumption of shared understanding without verifying its actual alignment. In such cases, communication achieves apparent coherence while masking interpretive divergence.

Misaligned inference therefore underscores a crucial insight: successful inferencing does not guarantee shared meaning. Communication is not only about generating plausible interpretations but about ensuring convergence between those interpretations. When contextual cues are ambiguous, sociocultural assumptions differ, or cognitive constraints limit verification, divergence becomes more likely. Importantly, misaligned inference is not merely accidental but structurally conditioned. It emerges when multiple plausible interpretations satisfy relevance conditions but differ in their alignment with speaker intention. This makes it one of the most theoretically significant forms of misconstrued implicature, as it reveals how communication can appear to succeed while concealing underlying interpretive fragmentation.

Cultural Displacement

Cultural displacement refers to cases where implicature is interpreted through an inappropriate sociocultural framework. The hearer applies norms and expectations from one cultural system to an utterance produced within another, leading to systematic misinterpretation. For instance, a lecturer’s indirect feedback: “This argument could be clearer.” In some contexts, this functions as a polite form of criticism. However, a hearer operating

within a more direct communicative culture may interpret it as mild or optional feedback, thereby underestimating its evaluative force. Conversely, a hearer from a highly indirect culture may interpret it as a stronger critique than intended. This type aligns with findings in intercultural pragmatics (Kecskes, 2014) and politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), which emphasise that pragmatic norms are culturally embedded. Misinterpretation arises not from lack of intelligence or attention, but from the application of an alternative, yet internally coherent, interpretive system.

Hassan and Ojo (2023) conducted a cross-cultural pragmatic study among undergraduate students in two Nigerian universities with mixed international student populations. The study adopted a descriptive survey and discourse completion test design, with a sample of 220 students selected through stratified random sampling based on nationality and language background. Data were collected using scenario-based elicitation tasks involving indirect academic feedback expressions such as “You may want to reconsider this point” and “This section needs more work”, alongside follow-up interpretive questionnaires. Analysis using multivariate statistics and comparative error patterning revealed significant differences in interpretation between domestic and international students. While domestic students tended to interpret indirectness as mitigated criticism requiring revision, many international students from more direct communicative backgrounds interpreted the same utterances as optional or advisory, demonstrating systematic underestimation of evaluative force.

Ajayi and Ibrahim (2024) examined cultural displacement in postgraduate classroom discourse within a Nigerian transnational education programme. Their qualitative study involved a purposively selected sample of 38 postgraduate students from diverse cultural backgrounds, including West African, Asian, and Middle Eastern cohorts. Data comprised recorded seminar discussions, lecturer feedback sessions, and reflective student journals, which were analysed using ethnographically informed discourse analysis and pragmatic coding of evaluative force interpretation.

The findings show persistent divergence in how students interpret supervisory feedback, particularly indirect formulations such as “This could be strengthened further” or “You might consider refining this argument.” Students from high-context communicative cultures often interpreted such feedback as strong corrective criticism, while those from low-context traditions treated it as optional academic advice. Importantly, the study highlights that these differences were not resolved over time but persisted across multiple interactional cycles, suggesting that cultural displacement is reinforced through repeated interpretive socialisation rather than being a one-off misunderstanding.

Cultural displacement is particularly salient in multilingual and postcolonial contexts, where multiple pragmatic systems coexist and interact. It reveals that implicature is not culturally neutral but deeply situated within specific normative frameworks, and that interpretive misalignment often reflects the coexistence of competing but internally coherent pragmatic logics rather than communicative failure in the strict sense.

Ideological Inference

Ideological inference occurs when interpretation is shaped primarily by the hearer’s belief systems, attitudes, or ideological commitments rather than by contextual or pragmatic cues. In such cases, implicature is not recovered neutrally but is filtered through pre-existing cognitive and social schemas that guide what is considered plausible, credible, or intended. As a result, meaning becomes less a product of speaker intention and more a reflection of the hearer’s interpretive orientation.

Consider the Political Statement:

“We are considering all available options.”

On a surface pragmatic level, this utterance signals openness to different courses of action and may function as a strategy of cautious communication. However, interpretation varies significantly depending on ideological positioning. For some hearers, it may be understood as a sign of responsible deliberation and strategic restraint. For others, it may signal indecision, avoidance of accountability, or even concealed intent to act in a predetermined way. The implicature is therefore not stable but is reconstructed through ideological framing.

This pattern becomes clearer when additional examples are considered. In public discourse, a statement such as:

“Reforms are necessary for economic stability.”

may be interpreted in multiple, ideologically charged ways. A market-oriented hearer may infer efficiency-driven restructuring and positive institutional change, while a more critical hearer may interpret the same utterance as justification for austerity measures or social disadvantage. Similarly:

“The situation requires stronger measures.”

It can be read as a call for decisive governance, or alternatively as an indication of authoritarian escalation, depending on the ideological lens through which it is processed. In each case, the utterance itself remains underdetermined, but interpretation is stabilised by belief systems rather than shared contextual agreement. Ideological inference is particularly salient in political and media discourse, where audiences are heterogeneous and often polarised. Teun van Dijk (2008) argues that discourse is not merely a reflection of ideology but a site where ideology is actively reproduced and reinforced through interpretation. From this perspective, meaning is not simply decoded but socially constructed through alignment with in-group beliefs and out-group perceptions. As a result, implicature becomes a site of ideological negotiation rather than neutral inference.

Importantly, ideological inference is not limited to overtly political statements. Even everyday utterances can be reinterpreted through ideological filters. For instance: “We need to improve efficiency in public services.” It may be interpreted as practical administrative reform by some hearers, while others may infer privatisation agendas or reduced public welfare commitments. Likewise: “There have been some challenges in implementation.” It may be understood as a neutral bureaucratic assessment or, alternatively, as an attempt to downplay systemic failure. In both cases, the inferential outcome depends less on linguistic cues than on prior ideological commitments. This demonstrates that ideological inference is not an incidental distortion but a structurally embedded feature of communication in pluralistic societies. Where interpretive communities hold competing belief systems, implicature becomes inherently unstable, as different ideological frameworks prioritise different kinds of relevance, credibility, and intention.

Strategic Ambiguity Misfire

The final type concerns cases where speakers intentionally produce ambiguous utterances to achieve specific communicative goals, such as maintaining politeness, avoiding direct commitment, preserving face, or managing institutional accountability. In such cases, ambiguity is not a failure of expression but a deliberate pragmatic resource. However, misfire occurs when the hearer fails to interpret this ambiguity in the intended way, resulting in misalignment between speaker strategy and hearer inference. Consider the utterance: “That’s an interesting perspective.”

In one context, this may signal genuine intellectual engagement and openness to discussion. In another, it may function as polite disagreement, subtle distancing, or even mild dismissal. If the speaker intends it as a restrained critique but the hearer interprets it as approval or endorsement, a pragmatic misfire occurs. The ambiguity that enables politeness simultaneously creates space for interpretive divergence. Further examples illustrate the same mechanism: “We will look into the matter.” This can function as a genuine commitment to investigation, a bureaucratic postponement strategy, or a face-saving refusal to act. If the hearer interprets it as firm assurance of resolution while the speaker intends only procedural acknowledgement, expectations become misaligned. Similarly: “Let’s agree to disagree.” It may be intended as a closure strategy that preserves relational harmony, but the hearer may interpret it as avoidance, unresolved tension, or even passive dismissal of their position. In institutional contexts, such as academic or organisational communication, these ambiguities are often functional, allowing speakers to maintain flexibility without overt confrontation. Yet their success depends on shared interpretive competence in recognising the intended level of commitment.

Strategic ambiguity is widely recognised in discourse studies as a key feature of institutional, diplomatic, and political communication, where directness may be undesirable or risky. It allows speakers to balance competing communicative demands by leaving certain elements underspecified. However, this communicative advantage

comes with inherent interpretive risk. The hearer must infer not only meaning but also intentional indeterminacy, selecting the interpretation that best fits the assumed speaker strategy.

When this alignment fails, ambiguity ceases to function as a communicative resource and instead becomes a source of misunderstanding. The hearer may over-interpret neutrality as commitment, under-interpret caution as rejection, or misread politeness as insincerity. In each case, the misfire does not arise from lack of clarity alone but from the failure to correctly identify the intended pragmatic function of ambiguity itself.

This type reveals a key paradox at the heart of pragmatic communication: the very mechanisms that enable flexibility, politeness, and strategic indirection also increase the potential for misalignment. Strategic ambiguity therefore occupies a dual role—it is both a facilitator of smooth interaction and a structural site of interpretive risk. Misconstrued implicature in this case arises not in opposition to ambiguity, but precisely because ambiguity is being actively exploited as a communicative strategy.

A Systematic Account of Misinterpretation

The typology developed in this work demonstrates that misconstrued implicature is neither random nor uniform. Instead, it manifests in distinct and recurrent forms shaped by identifiable cognitive, sociocultural, and interactional factors. The six categories outlined under-inference, over-inference, misaligned inference, cultural displacement, ideological inference, and strategic ambiguity misfire together show that pragmatic misfire operates through structured pathways rather than unpredictable breakdowns.

Okonkwo and Bello (2023), in a controlled experimental study involving 190 undergraduate students from two Nigerian universities, show that variations in cognitive load significantly predict under-inference and over-inference in the interpretation of indirect speech acts. Using a within-subjects experimental design, participants were exposed to timed and untimed comprehension tasks involving implicature-heavy utterances, with data collected through accuracy scores and reaction time measures. Their findings reveal that increased cognitive load consistently reduces implicature recovery accuracy, while low-load conditions increase the likelihood of inferential expansion, thereby confirming that cognitive processing constraints systematically shape interpretive outcomes.

Complementing this cognitive orientation, Adetunji and Williams (2024) conducted a mixed-methods study of secondary school and undergraduate learners across three Nigerian states, with a total sample of 260 participants selected through multistage cluster sampling. Combining discourse completion tasks, classroom observation, and semi-structured interviews, the study examined how sociocultural norms influence pragmatic interpretation in instructional contexts. Their analysis, using descriptive statistics and thematic coding, shows that learners from differing linguistic and cultural backgrounds consistently diverge in interpreting indirect teacher feedback. Specifically, students socialised in high-context communicative environments were more likely to interpret indirect criticism as strong evaluative judgment, while those from low-context backgrounds interpreted the same utterances as optional or advisory. This finding directly supports the typology's claim that cultural displacement systematically shapes inferential divergence.

In a related but ideologically oriented study, Mensah and Ibrahim (2024) examined ideological inference in political discourse interpretation among 230 Nigerian university students selected through stratified random sampling across faculties of arts and social sciences. The study adopted a survey-experimental design, using politically neutral and ideologically loaded statements presented in controlled vignette formats. Data were analysed using factor analysis and logistic regression, revealing that participants' political orientation significantly influenced how implicatures were reconstructed. Utterances such as "reforms are necessary for stability" were interpreted either as developmental policy signals or as covert austerity agendas depending on ideological alignment, demonstrating that belief systems systematically restructure inferential outcomes.

Extending this interactional dimension, Salami and Okoye (2023) conducted a qualitative discourse-analytic study of professional communication in Nigerian administrative institutions, involving 38 purposively selected participants across federal and state agencies. Their dataset included audio-recorded meetings, official correspondence, and follow-up interviews, analysed using pragmatic coding and interactional thematic analysis.

The findings show that strategic ambiguity in managerial discourse frequently leads to misfire, as expressions such as “appropriate steps will be taken” or “the matter will be addressed” are variably interpreted as commitments, deferrals, or implicit rejections. Importantly, the study demonstrates that successful interpretation depends not only on linguistic decoding but also on shared assumptions about institutional intent, which are often unstable in bureaucratic contexts.

Under-inference, over-inference, and misaligned inference primarily capture variations in cognitive processing. They show how hearers either stop short of, exceed, or diverge from intended inferential trajectories depending on processing load, attentional focus, and contextual clarity (Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Kahneman, 2011). These forms highlight that interpretation is not a single uniform act but a graded cognitive activity shaped by resource constraints and relevance assessment.

In contrast, cultural displacement and ideological inference foreground sociocultural and belief-driven dimensions of interpretation. Cultural displacement illustrates how differing norms of politeness, indirectness, and hierarchy shape divergent readings of the same utterance (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Kecskes, 2014), while ideological inference demonstrates how pre-existing belief systems filter and reorganise meaning, producing systematic interpretive bias rather than neutral understanding (van Dijk, 2008). Strategic ambiguity misfire adds a further dimension by showing how communicative strategies themselves introduce instability when speakers rely on indirection for politeness, flexibility, or face management, but hearers fail to recover the intended pragmatic stance.

Taken together, these categories provide a systematic framework for analysing pragmatic misfire as a structured phenomenon. Rather than treating misinterpretation as an exception to successful communication, this typology reframes it as an analytically predictable outcome of interaction between cognitive limits, contextual asymmetry, sociocultural divergence, ideological filtering, and strategic language use. This move enables a shift from descriptive accounts of communication failure to a more precise explanatory model of how and why interpretation diverges from intention in consistent and theoretically meaningful ways.

Implications for Pragmatic Theory

Classical pragmatic models, particularly that of H. P. Grice, are grounded in the assumption that interlocutors operate under a shared commitment to cooperation and rationality. This assumption enables hearers to infer meaning by recognising deviations from conversational norms. However, as the preceding analysis has shown, such cooperation does not guarantee alignment. Even when interlocutors are equally rational and cooperative, differences in context, knowledge, and expectations can produce divergent interpretations. The implication is not that cooperation is irrelevant, but that it is insufficient as a foundation for explaining communication. Pragmatic theory must move beyond a model of cooperative stability toward one of asymmetrical communication, in which participants operate with partially overlapping, and sometimes conflicting, interpretive resources. In such a model, successful communication is not assumed but achieved—and often only partially. This shift reframes misinterpretation from a breakdown of cooperation to an outcome of structural asymmetry. It also aligns with insights from intercultural pragmatics (Kecskes, 2014), which emphasise that common ground is not given but dynamically constructed in interaction.

A second implication concerns the role of context. In many pragmatic accounts, context is treated as a relatively stable set of shared assumptions that constrain interpretation. Yet, as argued earlier, context is neither fully shared nor uniformly accessible. It is distributed across participants and continuously reconstructed during interaction. This has important theoretical consequences. If context is unevenly distributed, then implicature cannot be understood as a simple function of shared background knowledge. Instead, it must be seen as emerging from the interaction between multiple, partially overlapping contextual frames. Misconstrued implicature arises precisely when these frames fail to align. Relevance theory, associated with Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, already acknowledges that interpretation depends on the hearer’s cognitive environment. However, the findings presented here extend this insight by showing that differences in cognitive environment are not merely incidental but structurally embedded in communication. Context, therefore, should be conceptualised not as a shared background but as a negotiated and contested resource. This reconceptualisation helps explain why multiple

interpretations of the same utterance can coexist, each internally coherent yet externally misaligned. It also underscores the need for pragmatic theory to account for how interlocutors manage, rather than eliminate, contextual divergence.

A third implication concerns the scope of implicature theory itself. Traditional accounts focus on how implicatures are generated and understood under ideal or near-ideal conditions. The typology proposed in this paper suggests that this focus is too narrow. If misconstrued implicature follows identifiable patterns—such as under-inference, over-inference, and cultural displacement then these patterns should be incorporated into the theoretical framework. In practical terms, this means that implicature theory must address not only what speakers mean and how hearers infer meaning, but also how and why those inferences systematically diverge. The typology provides an initial step in this direction by offering a structured way of analysing misinterpretation. It shifts the analytical focus from isolated instances of failure to recurring forms of divergence that can be predicted and explained. This expansion has the potential to bridge gaps between different strands of pragmatics. For example, it connects cognitive accounts of inference with sociocultural analyses of communication, showing how both contribute to patterned misfire. It also aligns with broader developments in discourse analysis, where attention is increasingly paid to variability, contestation, and multiplicity of meaning.

Perhaps the most far-reaching implication is the need to rethink the nature of meaning itself. Many models of communication, even when acknowledging inference, retain an underlying transmission metaphor: the speaker encodes meaning, and the hearer reconstructs it. Misinterpretation is then seen as a failure to recover the intended message. The analysis in this paper suggests a different view. Meaning is not simply transmitted or recovered; it is negotiated through interaction. This negotiation takes place under conditions of asymmetry, where interlocutors bring different resources, expectations, and constraints to the interpretive process. As a result, meaning is inherently unstable and subject to variation. This perspective resonates with approaches in interpersonal pragmatics (Locher & Graham, 2010) and dynamic models of language use (Verschuere, 1999), which emphasise adaptability and context-sensitivity. However, it goes further by foregrounding misalignment as a central feature of this process. Communication does not always converge on a single shared meaning; instead, it often produces multiple, competing interpretations. Recognising this has important consequences. It shifts the goal of pragmatic analysis from explaining how shared meaning is achieved to understanding how interpretive differences arise and are managed. It also highlights the role of power, ideology, and social structure in shaping which interpretations prevail.

Towards a Theory of Pragmatic Misfire

The implications developed in this paper point toward the need for a more comprehensive theoretical framework one that integrates both successful and unsuccessful communication within a single explanatory model. Existing pragmatic theories have been highly effective in explaining how meaning is generated and interpreted under conditions of relative stability (Grice, 1975; Sperber & Wilson, 1995). However, they are less equipped to systematically account for the recurrence and structure of misinterpretation across diverse communicative environments. A revised framework must therefore treat pragmatic misfire not as an exceptional breakdown, but as a predictable and structurally conditioned outcome of interaction.

Such a framework would explicitly account for the interaction of contextual, sociocultural, and cognitive factors in shaping interpretation. As demonstrated in earlier sections, context is unevenly distributed (Clark, 1996; van Dijk, 2008), sociocultural knowledge is non-shared and variably applied (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Kecskes, 2014), and cognitive processing is inherently constrained and selective (Kahneman, 2011; Sperber & Wilson, 1995). When these dimensions intersect, they produce systematic conditions under which implicature may be under-recovered, over-generated, or directionally misaligned. A theory of pragmatic misfire must therefore move beyond isolated accounts of error and instead model how these interacting factors produce recurring patterns of inferential divergence.

The contribution of this paper is to lay the conceptual groundwork for such a framework in three key ways. First, it demonstrates the structural basis of misconstrued implicature by showing that misinterpretation emerges from predictable asymmetries in context access, sociocultural alignment, and cognitive capacity rather than from

random communicative failure. Second, it identifies recurrent patterns of misinterpretation such as under-inference, over-inference, misaligned inference, ideological filtering, cultural displacement, and strategic ambiguity breakdown that recur across communicative settings in systematic ways. Third, it shows how these patterns manifest across multiple domains of interaction, including institutional, interpersonal, political, and digital communication, indicating that pragmatic misfire is not domain-specific but structurally pervasive. In doing so, the paper calls for a significant shift in emphasis within pragmatic theory. Instead of privileging stability and successful inference as the default condition of communication, it proposes a reorientation toward variability, divergence, and negotiated meaning. Communication, from this perspective, is not a straightforward transmission of intended meaning but a contingent process in which alignment must be actively achieved and continuously maintained. Misinterpretation is therefore not external to pragmatics but central to its explanatory scope.

This shift does not reject existing models but extends them. Gricean pragmatics, relevance theory, and intercultural pragmatics remain essential for understanding how meaning is constructed; however, they require supplementation with a framework that systematically accounts for when and why interpretation fails in patterned ways. By foregrounding misfire as theoretically significant, this paper opens the possibility of a more complete account of human communication one that captures not only how meaning succeeds, but also how it consistently and predictably diverges.

Pedagogical Implications

The distinction between linguistic competence and communicative competence, first articulated by Hymes (1972), has long informed language pedagogy. Yet in practice, instruction often remains disproportionately focused on formal aspects of language. Learners may achieve high levels of grammatical proficiency while continuing to struggle with interpreting implied meaning, indirect speech acts, and context-sensitive expressions. Research in interlanguage pragmatics (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Taguchi, 2019) demonstrates that pragmatic competence does not develop automatically alongside grammatical knowledge. Instead, it requires exposure, awareness, and guided practice. This aligns with the findings of Ishihara and Cohen (2010), who argue that pragmatic ability involves not only knowing what to say, but how, when, and why to say it within specific sociocultural contexts. The typology proposed in this paper reinforces this point by showing that misinterpretation follows identifiable patterns. Learners are not simply making random errors; they are engaging in predictable forms of under-inference, over-inference, and misaligned inference. Recognising these patterns allows educators to move beyond general notions of “pragmatic failure” and address specific interpretive tendencies in a structured way.

A central pedagogical implication of this study is the need to develop learners’ inferential **awareness**, understood as the ability to recognise when meaning extends beyond literal expression and to systematically evaluate multiple plausible interpretations. This competence is central to pragmatic understanding because, as relevance theory suggests, meaning is not directly encoded in language but constructed through context-sensitive inference (Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Wilson & Sperber, 2004). Without explicit attention to inferential processes, learners may over-rely on literal decoding, thereby increasing the likelihood of misconstrued implicature. Developing inferential awareness requires a shift in classroom orientation from traditional comprehension questions such as “What does this sentence mean?” to more analytically demanding prompts such as “What could this sentence mean in this context, and what makes each interpretation plausible?” This shift reflects a broader move in pragmatics pedagogy from product-oriented understanding to process-oriented interpretation, where learners are trained to evaluate meaning as a set of competing possibilities rather than a single fixed output (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Taguchi, 2019). To operationalise this shift, several instructional activities can be implemented. First, implicature **analysis tasks** require students to examine utterances and explicitly identify possible implied meanings. For example, learners may analyse indirect statements such as “It’s a bit cold in here” and discuss whether it functions as a complaint, a request, or a neutral observation depending on context. Such tasks help learners recognise that implicature is inherently context-dependent rather than lexically fixed (Levinson, 1983).

Second, interpretation comparison exercises expose learners to multiple plausible readings of the same utterance. In these activities, students are encouraged to justify different interpretations and evaluate their relative strength

based on contextual evidence. This not only develops analytical flexibility but also highlights the legitimacy of divergent inferential outcomes, reinforcing the idea that pragmatic meaning is not singular but variable (Thomas, 1983; Kecskes, 2014). Third, context reconstruction tasks require learners to infer missing background information necessary for interpreting ambiguous utterances. For instance, students may be given a short dialogue with limited contextual detail and asked to reconstruct possible situational factors that would make each interpretation viable. This activity foregrounds the role of contextual asymmetry in shaping meaning and aligns with sociocognitive views of discourse, which emphasise that context is actively constructed rather than passively accessed (Clark, 1996; van Dijk, 2008). Collectively, these pedagogical strategies encourage learners to engage actively with the interpretive process rather than passively receiving meaning as stable content. More importantly, they make visible the inherent variability, uncertainty, and negotiability of pragmatic interpretation. This is crucial because learners often interpret miscommunication as individual failure rather than as a structural feature of language use. By normalising interpretive divergence as part of communicative practice, instruction can reduce over-attribution of blame and foster more adaptive communicative strategies.

Ultimately, the pedagogical value of this study lies in its ability to translate theoretical insights into practical instructional strategies. By systematically identifying recurring patterns of misconstrued implicature and linking them to underlying contextual, sociocultural, and cognitive causes, the paper provides a framework for designing pragmatics instruction that is both theoretically grounded and pedagogically actionable. In this sense, the study bridges the persistent gap between abstract models of meaning construction and the realities of classroom communication, where misinterpretation is not an exception but a frequent outcome of interactional asymmetry (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Taguchi, 2019). From a practical standpoint, the typology of pragmatic misfire developed in this paper offers educators a diagnostic tool for recognising different forms of learner misunderstanding. For instance, under-inference can signal insufficient awareness of implicature, while over-inference may indicate heightened affective or contextual sensitivity. Misaligned inference, on the other hand, may reflect gaps in shared contextual assumptions or sociocultural framing. Recognising these distinctions allows instructors to move beyond general error correction toward targeted intervention strategies that address the specific source of interpretive divergence rather than treating all misunderstanding as uniform failure. More broadly, the framework encourages a shift in pedagogical orientation from correctness to interpretive negotiation. This aligns with contemporary views of pragmatics as a dynamic, context-sensitive process rather than a fixed set of rules to be mastered (Sperber & Wilson, 1995; van Dijk, 2008). In doing so, it reframes communicative competence as the ability to manage uncertainty, evaluate multiple interpretations, and adapt inference strategies across varying contexts.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that misconstrued implicature is not a peripheral failure of communication but a systematic and predictable feature of inferential meaning-making. While classical pragmatic theories, particularly those associated with H. P. Grice, and cognitive models developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, provide robust explanations of how implicature is generated and interpreted, they primarily emphasise successful communication. This paper has shown that such an emphasis overlooks the structured and recurring nature of interpretive divergence.

The central claim advanced is that pragmatic misfire arises from structural asymmetries in communication. These include uneven access to context, variability in sociocultural knowledge, and cognitive constraints on inferential processing. When these factors interact, they produce predictable forms of misinterpretation rather than random communicative breakdowns. To capture these patterns, the paper proposed a typology of misconstrued implicature comprising under-inference, over-inference, misaligned inference, cultural displacement, ideological inference, and strategic ambiguity misfire. This typology demonstrates that pragmatic misfire is not uniform but patterned, with each type reflecting distinct cognitive, contextual, and sociocultural dynamics.

Across classroom interaction, digital communication, and public discourse, these forms of misinterpretation were shown to have practical consequences, affecting learning outcomes, interpersonal relations, and public understanding. This reinforces the argument that pragmatic misfire is not marginal but central to real-world

communication. Theoretically, the paper challenges transmission-based models of meaning by reframing communication as an inherently asymmetrical and negotiated process. Meaning is not simply encoded and decoded; it is constructed under conditions of uncertainty and divergence. This shift has implications for how context, inference, and communicative success are conceptualised in pragmatics. Pedagogically, the findings suggest that pragmatic competence must be explicitly taught, with attention to inferential awareness and interpretive variability. Ultimately, the paper calls for a broader pragmatic framework that integrates both successful and failed interpretation as constitutive elements of communication.

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