

An Applied Linguistic-Pragmatic Approach to Prophetic Hadith Discourse

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Abstract

This research paper examines the Prophetic Hadith through the analytical apparatus of contemporary applied pragmatics. For centuries, classical Islamic and Arabic linguists have engaged with the noble Hadith as a sacred normative text, developing intricate hermeneutic, rhetorical, and exegetical tools. Building upon this heritage, this study demonstrates how modern pragmatic theories—specifically speech act theory, presupposition, Gricean conversational implicature, and deixis—can be systematically deployed to decode the deep communicative intent, pedagogical precision, and contextual mechanisms of Prophetic discourse. Using an authentic dialogue between the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and a Bedouin inquirer (Dhimam ibn Tha'labah) narrated by Anas ibn Malik in Sahih Muslim, this paper demonstrates how linguistic forms interact with the context of situation (maqām) to produce illocutionary force, establish common ground, and achieve optimal rhetorical persuasion. The study concludes that contemporary pragmatics and classical Arabic rhetorical sciences operate as complementary rather than conflicting frameworks, unlocking multi-layered semantic and functional dimensions within sacred Islamic texts.

Keywords: Prophetic Hadith discourse, applied pragmatics, speech acts, conversational implicature, presupposition, deixis, Gricean maxims, context of situation (maqām).

1. Introduction

For centuries, Arabic linguists, hermeneuts, and legal theorists (usūliyyūn) have dedicated profound scholarly endeavors to the study of the Noble Prophetic Hadith, with a specific focus on its discursive and rhetorical architecture. They examined this sacred text through meticulous exegesis, hermeneutical interpretation, and grammatical exposition across multifaceted domains, thereby enriching the Arabic and Islamic library with an enduring scholarly legacy. Despite this extensive historical corpus, the horizon of inquiry remains vibrantly open. The quest to comprehend divine and prophetic discourse—and specifically to decipher the ultimate Prophetic intent (al-maqṣad al-nabawī al-asmā) to enable the legal subject (al-mukallaḥ) to grasp legislative injunctions—persists as an ongoing scientific enterprise.

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Among contemporary linguistic paradigms, pragmatics (*al-tadāwuliyyah*) stands out as a preeminent framework explicitly concerned with language in actual use (*la langue en usage*). This study endeavors to apply pragmatic procedural mechanisms as a modern methodology for deepening our understanding and unveiling the multi-layered communicative nuances embedded within Prophetic discourse. We proceed from the epistemological conviction that classical Arab-Islamic rhetorical traditions and modern pragmatic mechanisms do not exist in mutual contradiction or conflict; rather, they intersect, cross-fertilize, and complement one another in profound ways.

The core objective of this paper is to bridge theoretical pragmatic concepts with empirical textual analysis. Moving beyond abstract theoretical postulations, we apply pragmatic procedural tools to map the boundaries of Prophetic discourse. We trace the trajectory from explicit lexical articulation (*al-lafz*) and its semantic signification to the realization of functional communicative meaning. This analytical path encompasses speech act theory (including locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts), pragmatic presupposition, conversational implicature, and deictic/indexical reference systems.

As is well established in discourse analysis, the communicative event unfolds through a dynamic trajectory originating from the speaker and their underlying intentionality, mediated through their psychological state, contextual environment, and situational field (*maqām*), to reach the addressee (*al-mutalaqqī*). The receiver subsequently deploys specific cognitive and interpretive mechanisms to decode the linguistic utterance within its non-linguistic circumstances. Rather than claiming an exhaustive survey of all prophetic traditions, this study conducts a targeted, in-depth pragmatic dissection of a canonical Prophetic dialogue, thereby illuminating the dynamic interplay between lexical form and pragmatic signification.

2. The Conceptual Framework of Pragmatics

Formulating a singular, universally accepted definition of pragmatics presents considerable scholarly challenges. This difficulty arises from several well-grounded epistemological and historical factors:

1. **Terminological Variations in Arab Scholarship:** Arab linguists and translators have proposed diverse Arabic renderings for the Western term pragmatics, seeking equivalents that encompass its conceptual root and dimensions—yielding terms such as *al-tadāwuliyyah*, *al-dharā'iyyah* (pragmatism), *al-maqāmiyyah* (situationalism), *al-siyāqiyyah* (contextualism), *al-maqāsidiyyah* (teleology), *'ilm al-takhatub* (discourse science), and *al-balāghah al-jadidah* (new rhetoric) (Blanchet, 2012; Reboul & Moeschler, 2003).
2. **Interdisciplinary Crossings:** Pragmatics sits at the vibrant intersection of linguistics, semiotics, analytic philosophy of language, sociology, cognitive psychology, and communication theory, leading diverse disciplines to conceptualize it through their own ideological and epistemological frameworks.
3. **The Extension to Classical Heritage:** Extensive contemporary efforts to project pragmatic models onto classical Arabic linguistic, grammatical, and *usūlī* heritage have fostered a rich terminological plurality across modern Arabic scholarship.
4. **Paradigm Shift from Structuralism:** Pragmatics emerged as a revolutionary functional alternative to the formalism of Saussurean structural linguistics and early Chomskyan generative-transformational grammar, deliberately shifting focus from abstract syntactic competence to contextualized communicative performance.

Notwithstanding these diverse epistemological trajectories, there exists a broad scholarly consensus that pragmatics is fundamentally the science of language in use. It transcends the examination of isolated syntactic forms and abstract linguistic structures to investigate communicative functions,

context-dependency, speaker meaning, and the internal and external contextual determinants (al-qarā'in al-siyāqīyyah) governing any linguistic performance (Blanchet, 2012).

Historically, the modern semiotic usage of the term pragmatics traces back to the American philosopher and semiotician Charles W. Morris (1938), who integrated it into his tripartite division of semiotics (the general theory of signs):

- Syntax (Syntactics): The formal study of the relations between signs and other signs in accordance with specific combinatorial rules (Morris, 1938).
- Semantics: The study of the relations between signs and the designata/objects to which they refer (Morris, 1938).
- Pragmatics: The study of the relations between signs and their interpreters, examining the origins, uses, and real-world effects of signs (Morris, 1938; Reboul & Moeschler, 2003).

As the contemporary linguist Georges Kleiber observed, pragmatics today constitutes an expansive, dynamic, and exceptionally open domain of inquiry that continuously broadens the horizons of language sciences.

3. Applied Pragmatic Analysis of a Canonical Prophetic Hadith

This section constitutes the empirical core of the study. We operationalize pragmatic procedural mechanisms to unpack the communicative intentions, contextual cues, speaker strategies, and addressee cognitive states in an authentic Prophetic dialogue.

3.1. Text of the Noble Hadith

The foundational text under investigation is recorded in Sahih Muslim (Book of Faith, Chapter on Inquiring About the Pillars of Islam, Hadith No. 12) on the authority of the illustrious Companion Anas ibn Malik (may Allah be pleased with him):

On the authority of Anas ibn Malik, who said: "We were forbidden from asking the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) about anything [unnecessarily]. It therefore used to please us when a rational man from the desert (a Bedouin) would come and question him while we listened. A man from the desert came and said: "O Muhammad! Your envoy came to us and claimed that you claim that Allah has sent you." He [the Prophet] replied: "He spoke the truth." The man said: "Who then created the heaven?" He replied: "Allah." The man said: "Who then created the earth?" He replied: "Allah." The man said: "Who then erected these mountains and placed in them whatever He has placed?" He replied: "Allah." The man said: "Then by the One who created the heaven, created the earth, and erected these mountains, did Allah send you?" He replied: "Yes." The man said: "And your envoy claimed that five prayers are incumbent upon us in our day and night." He replied: "He spoke the truth." The man said: "Then by the One who sent you, did Allah command you with this?" He replied: "Yes." The man said: "And your envoy claimed that Zakat is due upon our wealth." He replied: "He spoke the truth." The man said: "Then by the One who sent you, did Allah command you with this?" He replied: "Yes." The man said: "And your envoy claimed that fasting the month of Ramadan is incumbent upon us in our year." He replied: "He spoke the truth." The man said: "Then by the One who sent you, did Allah command you with this?" He replied: "Yes." The man said: "And your envoy claimed that pilgrimage to the House (Hajj) is incumbent upon whoever among us is able to find a way." He replied: "He spoke the truth." The narrator said: Then the man turned away to leave, saying: "By the One Who sent you with the Truth! I shall neither add anything to these nor shall I subtract anything from them." Whereupon the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "If he has spoken the truth, he shall surely enter Paradise.'" (Sahih Muslim, Hadith 12; Sahih al-Bukhari, Hadith 63; Sunan Abi Dawud, Hadith 476; Sunan al-Tirmidhi, Hadith 619; Sunan al-Nasa'i, Hadith 2091; Sunan Ibn Majah, Hadith 1402).

3.2. Pragmatic Dissection and Discussion

This dialogue represents a multidimensional communicative event directed initially to the immediate audience of the Companions, subsequently to the broader community of legal subjects, and perpetually to the global readership across generations. It carries legislative, pedagogical, and spiritual illocutionary forces. Below is a detailed procedural breakdown across four core pragmatic dimensions:

3.2.1. Speech Act Theory (*Les Actes de Parole*)

Speech act theory, pioneered by J. L. Austin (1962) and systematized by John Searle (1969), categorizes utterances into locutionary acts (the literal phonetic and syntactic utterance), illocutionary acts (the communicative force or performance achieved in uttering, such as asserting, promising, or commanding), and perlocutionary acts (the psychological effects produced on the addressee). In this narration, we observe immediate locutionary markers framing the situational context:

- **Framing Performatives:** The opening locutions—"nuhīnā" (we were forbidden) and "kāna yu'jibunā" (it used to please us)—establish the historical and normative background. Anas ibn Malik employs the plural passive voice to signify a collective community experience, anchoring the event within a specific temporal and spatial matrix. Spatially, the phrase "a man from the desert came" specifies Medina as the physical deictic center (the seat of the Prophetic mission), as confirmed by the mention of the five institutional pillars of Islam, which were codified in the Medinan legislative era rather than in Mecca.
- **Assertive and Commissive Forces:** The Prophet's concise utterances—"sadaqa" (he spoke the truth) and "na'am" (yes)—function as robust assertive speech acts confirming epistemic truth. Concurrently, the Bedouin's closing declaration—"By the One Who sent you with the Truth! I shall neither add anything to these nor subtract from them"—functions as a binding commissive speech act, committing the speaker to an uncompromising ethical and devotional adherence.

3.2.2. Pragmatic Presupposition (*L'Implicite / Le Présupposé*)

Presupposition represents the shared common ground, background assumptions, and mutual knowledge taken for granted by participants in a communicative interaction. The analysis reveals critical presuppositional layers in this discourse:

- **Mutual Institutional Authority:** The Bedouin's arrival directly presupposes the established authority of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as the supreme arbiter, judge, and religious authority capable of resolving epistemic doubts. The Bedouin did not arrive to challenge the existence of God, but to verify the authentic divine authorization of the Prophet's messengers.
- **The Qualified Bedouin (*Al-A'rābī al-Āqil*):** Anas's narrative addition of the qualifying adjective "al-āqil" (the rational/judicious) activates a pragmatic presupposition regarding the sociolinguistic stereotype of desert Bedouins—frequently characterized by bluntness and lack of urban social etiquette due to their distance from urban learning centers. The qualification "al-āqil" presupposes that an intelligent Bedouin possessed the rhetorical acumen to formulate precise, logically sequenced questions that urban Companions hesitated to pose out of profound awe (*haybah*) for the Prophet.
- **Illocutionary Force of *Taz'um*:** The Bedouin's repeated verb "taz'umu" (you claim/assert) carries semantic richness. While the root *za'ama* in Arabic lexicography can denote conjecture (shakk), it also signifies formal commitment, representation, and bearing responsibility (*al-kafālah wal-damān*) (Ibn Faris, *Maqāyīs al-Lughah*). In this communicative context, the Bedouin employs it in the sense of: 'You have guaranteed and taken responsibility for the message delivered by your emissary.' The Prophet confirms this commitment with the definitive assertive "sadaqa" (he spoke the truth).

3.2.3. Conversational Implicature and the Gricean Cooperative Principle

H. P. Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle posits that interlocutors shape their conversational contributions according to four fundamental maxims: Quantity, Quality, Relation (Relevance), and Manner. The Hadith dialogue exemplifies a masterful adherence to these maxims:

Table

1

Application of Gricean Conversational Maxims to the Prophetic Dialogue

Gricean Maxim	Textual Manifestation in the Hadith	Pragmatic Function and Illocutionary Impact
Maxim of Quantity (Informativeness)	The Prophet restricts his answers strictly to monosyllabic/concise assertions: "Allah", "Sadaqa", and "Na'am".	Provides precisely the exact quantum of information required without superfluous verbosity, matching the inquirer's focused query.
Maxim of Quality (Truthfulness)	The Bedouin deploys sacred oaths (Cosmic Creation & Divine Mission); the Prophet validates with "If he spoke the truth..."	Grounds assertions in verifiable theological truth; satisfies epistemic certainty through reciprocal oath confirmation.
Maxim of Relation (Relevance)	Answers directly align with the pedagogical level and immediate cognitive horizon of the Bedouin inquirer.	Ensures total contextual relevance (maqām) without introducing complex metaphysical debates unsuited to the situation.
Maxim of Manner (Clarity & Order)	Strict sequential progression from Creator (Theology) -> Prophethood (Authorization) -> Pillars (Action) -> Paradise (Outcome).	Achieves unambiguous structural clarity, culminating in a promissory verdictive linking truthful practice to salvation.

Note. Synthesized by author based on Grice (1975) and Sahih Muslim Hadith 12.

The concluding Prophetic declaration—"If he has spoken the truth, he shall surely enter Paradise"—generates a profound conversational implicature through conditional promise (commissive speech act). In Islamic legal hermeneutics, this activates the principle of counter-implication (mafḥūm al-mukhālafah): if he fails to uphold these obligatory duties with truthfulness, he forfeits this guarantee of salvation.

3.2.4. Deixis and Indexical Reference Systems (Les Déictiques)

Deixis refers to linguistic elements whose semantic reference depends entirely on the extra-linguistic context of utterance (Levinson, 1983). The Hadith exhibits rich deictic layering:

- **Person and Social Deixis:** The Bedouin's direct vocative "Yā Muhammad!" (O Muhammad!) instead of the honorific "Yā Rasūl Allāh" (O Messenger of Allah) embodies desert egalitarian social deixis. Rather than indicating disrespect, it reflects the uninhibited conversational habitus of desert nomads demanding immediate, transparent engagement.

- **Spatial and Demonstrative Deixis:** The proximal demonstrative in "hadhihi al-jibāl" (these mountains) indexically evokes the physical topography visible in the Arab Peninsula, anchoring the metaphysical argument for divine omnipotence in immediate, observable empirical reality.
- **Exophoric and Endophoric References:** Anas's statement "nuhīnā" (we were forbidden) contains an exophoric reference to an external divine revelation or prophetic injunction, specifically the Quranic revelation: *"O you who have believed! Do not ask about things which, if made plain to you, may cause you harm..."* (Surah Al-Ma'idah 5:101; Al-Qasimi, 1997), and the Prophetic statement: *"Verily, Allah dislikes for you idle talk, wasting wealth, and excessive questioning"* (Sahih al-Bukhari, Hadith 1477). This explains why the resident Companions welcomed the Bedouin's questions as a legitimate exophoric bypass of this prohibition.

Historical biographical records (e.g., Al-Bayhaqi in **Dalā'il al-Nubuwwah**, Vol. 5, p. 376; Ibn Abbas in **Al-Mu'jam al-Kabīr**) identify this inquirer as Dhimmam ibn Tha'labah, the emissary of the Banu Bakr ibn Hawazin tribe. Upon returning to his people, Dhimmam's persuasive transmission of this encounter led his entire tribe to embrace Islam before sunset, proving the immense perlocutionary efficacy of this Prophetic exchange (Al-'Azimi, 2011).

4. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the high methodological fruitfulness of applying contemporary pragmatic models to Prophetic Hadith discourse. Through the procedural deployment of speech act theory, presupposition, conversational implicature, and deictic reference systems, we have unveiled how the Noble Hadith operates as an impeccably engineered communicative system. The analysis established that the Prophetic speech economy—marked by concise verbal output, high contextual relevance, logical gradation, and profound psychological empathy—effectively transcends mere grammatical description to achieve optimal illocutionary force and transformative perlocutionary outcomes.

Ultimately, this pragmatic approach does not seek to displace classical Islamic rhetorical and *usūlī* sciences, but rather to corroborate and expand their insights using contemporary linguistic terminology. Future scholarly inquiries should continue to excavate the pragmatic foundations of the Sunnah, uncovering the sophisticated persuasive and pedagogical strategies that render Prophetic discourse universally resonant across diverse communicative horizons.

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