



Original article

Discursive Pragmatics: A Critical Review

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ABSTRACT

Discursive Pragmatics (DP) is an interdisciplinary approach that studies the role of discourse in constructing and negotiating meaning and how ideological framing may affect interpretation. This qualitative critical review addresses two questions: (1) How has DP developed theoretically and methodologically? and (2) What are its main contributions and limitations in contemporary discourse studies? The review provides a systematic overview of the historical evolution of DP, its key theoretical foundations, methodological inclinations, and major areas of application within discourse studies. Methodologically, the review adopts a qualitative analytical synthesis of key academic literature. The review highlights the role of DP in contextualised meaning-making and examines how identity, positioning, power relations, and evaluative stance are negotiated in interaction. It concludes that, despite the theoretical richness, DP still requires greater methodological pluralism to strengthen its explanatory power in both traditional and digitally mediated forms of communicative practice.

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التداولية الخطابية: مراجعة نقدية

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المُستخلص

تُعدّ التداولية الخطابية مقارنةً متعددة التخصصات تُعنى بدراسة كيفية إسهام الخطاب في بناء المعنى والتفاوض بشأنه، وما قد يترتب على التأطير الإيديولوجي من أثر في توجيه الفهم والتأويل. وتتجه هذه المراجعة النقدية النوعية إلى معالجة سؤالين رئيسيين: (١) كيف تطورت التداولية الخطابية من حيث الأسس النظرية والاختيارات المنهجية؟ و(٢) ما أبرز إسهاماتها وحدودها في سياق دراسات الخطاب المعاصرة؟ وتقدم المراجعة عرضًا منظمًا لمسار التداولية الخطابية تاريخيًا، مع إبراز مرتكزاتها النظرية الرئيسة وتوجهاتها المنهجية ومجالات توظيفها الأساسية داخل حقل دراسات الخطاب. ومن الناحية المنهجية، تعتمد المراجعة على تركيب تحليلي نوعي لأهم الأدبيات الأكاديمية ذات الصلة. كما تُبرز دور التداولية الخطابية في تفسير تشكّل المعنى في سياقات الاستعمال، وتبحث في الكيفية التي تُتجز بها الهوية والتموضع وعلاقات القوة والموقف التقييمي ضمن التفاعل. وتخلص المراجعة إلى أن التداولية الخطابية، على الرغم من غناها النظري، ما تزال بحاجة إلى مزيد من التعددية المنهجية لتعزيز قدرتها التفسيرية في الممارسات التواصلية التقليدية وفي أنماط التواصل الرقمي على حدّ سواء.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التداولية الخطابية، الأيديولوجيا، الانتقالية، التقييم، التفاوض على المعنى

1. Introduction

In his argument, Verschueren (1999) held that discursive pragmatics (DP) became a major interdisciplinary field of study at the nexus of linguistic pragmatics, sociolinguistics, social semiotics, and discourse analysis. Unlike traditional pragmatics, where the principles of cooperation, inference, and intention have been majorly considered, meaning in DP is built in an interactive, ideological, and social manner. The main focus of this theoretical approach is how meaning is negotiated by speakers across extended stretches of discourse, and how linguistic acts are social practices exhibiting stance or positioning, identity, power relations, and ideology.

The frameworks that support contemporary communication need to be in a position to address the challenges of multimodal, technologically mediated, and socially complex discursive environments (Verschueren, 1999; Zienkowski, Östman, & Verschueren, 2011). DP offers analytical methods of the study of political rhetoric, media framing, institutional discourse, interpersonal negotiation, and online interaction. The model offers an effective explanatory framework to comprehend the process of generating social meaning in discourse that combines the application of contextual, cultural, and ideological variables (van Dijk, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

This is a review of the literature available on DP critically assessing its theoretical foundations, methodological orientations as well as key spheres of applicability. It reveals gaps and limitations of current methods and sets out possible paths of future research, thus contributing to the current academic debate in the field of discourse studies. It is guided by the following research questions:

- 1- How has DP developed theoretically and methodologically?
- 2- What are the main contributions and limitations of DP in contemporary discourse studies?

2. Historical and Intellectual Background

The discursive turn of pragmatics marks a turning point from the models based on speaker intention and rationality towards the approaches that conceptualise meaning socially, ideologically, and contextually constructed (Jucker, 2013; Mey, 2001; Verschueren, 1999). This change highlighted the importance of aspects of ideology, identity, cultural norms, social expectations, and power relations in the development of pragmatic behavior. The scholars have now understood discourse as a moving process within which people negotiate positions within the society, form identities, and inscribe ideological meanings instead of perceiving meaning as being the outcome of individual speaker intents (Blommaert, 2005; Fairclough, 2013). This change formed the roots of DP and can be described as an interdisciplinary variant in which linguistic meaning is placed within the framework of wider social and discursive activities.

Interactional linguistics which demonstrated how meaning is generated sequentially also contributed to the paradigm shift. Empirical evidence on turn-taking, repair tactics, alignment and disalignment, and the response design has been used in studies on interactional linguistics to show how these aspects co-create the meaning in talk interaction (Couper-Kuhlen & Selting, 2001; Heritage, 2012). These insights, as proposed by Schegloff (2007), highlighted that discourse is not a fixed product, but rather is an emergent process in nature, shaped by the choices of participants in the interaction in the real time. The emphasis on the sequential organization and interactional contingency turned into one of the most significant factors in the construction of discursive-pragmatic frames.

Sociopragmatics has a significant impact on the evolution of DP, that is why, it is necessary to refer to the fact, that pragmatic behavior is incorporated in cultures and social norms (House, 2010; Leech, 2014; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Sharifian (2011) further invested in this school of thought and indicated that the linguistic preference among the individuals is informed by the culturally based expectations, social relations, and the socialised ideas on the appropriateness of norms. DP takes this perspective further by looking at how the pragmatic forms are influenced by the cultural and relational factors, and how these factors contribute to the identity performance and ideological positioning in discourse.

van Dijk (2001, as cited in Aliwy, 2020, p. 499) defined critical discourse analysis (CDA) as “the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context”. The evaluative aspect that critical discourse studies (CDS) contributed to is the analysis of discourse that creates and reproduces ideologies, power relations, social inequalities, and forms of dominance and resistance (van Dijk, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Fairclough (2013) stated that linguistic features (presupposition, deixis, modality and implicature) act as pragmatic and ideological resources, determining the way social realities are framed. Based on these propositions, DP builds on these insights to examine how pragmatic processes contribute to the encoding and negotiation of ideological meanings.

Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) argued that systemic functional linguistics (SFL) extended the theoretical base of DP by giving a functional account of language as a semiotic resource for constructing experiential, interpersonal, and textual meanings. Specifically, the transitivity system and the appraisal theory play a central role in the study of the assignment of agency, the evaluation of

behaviour, the construction of stance, and the organization of information in discourse. Such tools have been particularly effective in investigations about political rhetoric, media discourse, as well as interpersonal communication, where linguistic structural options directly influence ideological as well as relational meanings (Bednarek, 2008; Martin & White, 2005).

The DP as a research program, according to Östman and Verschueren (2011), was solidified with the release of the book *Pragmatics of Society*, which has put the field of inquiry in a perspective that is more concerned with meaning-making processes that are not only context-dependent, ideologically charged, and socially situated. This school of thought firmly placed pragmatics at the feet of the social and discursive theory and openly encouraged interdisciplinary cooperation.

Since that time, DP has further developed, including multimodal discourse analysis, online and digital communication, corpus-assisted methodology, and cross-cultural studies (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Page, 2014). These trends emphasise the increase of realization that pragmatic meaning cannot exist without discursive, ideological, and social contexts within which it is created and construed.

3. Core Theoretical Foundations of Discursive Pragmatics

DP is not a theory in the strict sense; rather, it serves as an analytical orientation grounded in a number of well-established theoretical traditions that explain meaning as a socially situated, interactionally negotiated, and ideologically mediated (Verschueren, 2012; Zienkowski, Östman, & Verschueren, 2011).

Adaptation theory is broadly accepted as a foundational concept on which the discipline of DP is held. The use of language is represented as a process of continuous adjustment to contextual correlates by Verschueren (1999) and is defined as constituting participants, social norms, institutional contexts, as well as ideological restraint. It is in such a context that linguistic decisions are understood as socially driven and context-dependent as opposed to the mechanical determinism of linguistic decisions. Therefore, this view has had deep influence on the discursive-pragmatic study by focusing on flexibility, reflexivity, and context-dependence in the meaning construction.

In order to reduce conceptual ambiguity in the context of DP research, and to achieve some methodological coherence in this context of the review, two key constructs are clearly operationalised. Context is theorised as a dynamic and layered organisation that includes situational, institutional, interactional, cultural, and intertextual conditions that participants actively orient to and constantly reconstitute during discourse, thus defining the creation of meaning and also its interpretation (Goodwin & Duranti, 1992). Ideology is defined as historical and socially embedded, systems of beliefs as well as systems of evaluation and are carried out and reproduced by discourse (van Dijk, 1998, 2013). Operationalisation of ideology in this review is through pragmatic and linguistic decisions which include presupposition, deixis, modality, stance, evaluation and agency assignment that are used to legitimize certain representations of social reality, identity and power relations (van Dijk, 1998). The operational definitions provided below create a logical basis of synthesis of the reviewed literature and analysis of theoretical frameworks used in discursive-pragmatic research.

One of the most frequently used theoretical frameworks applied in discursive-pragmatic studies is the conceptualisation of language as a social semiotic tool that helps to construct experience, interpersonal, and textual meanings, a paradigm called SFL (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Within the context of DP, SFL has not been deployed in the context of a conventional pragmatic theory; instead, it is an analytical model that allows there to be a systematic investigation of how a discourse encodes the agency, evaluation and ideological positioning. In particular, discursive-pragmatic studies typically use the interpersonal metafunction to interpret the way that speakers perform stance, alignment and evaluative meaning in interaction. In this regard, the appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005) has played a much more decisive role in offering a sophisticated range of analytical instruments to the analysis of affect, judgement, appreciation and evaluative positioning in textual corpora.

DP is based on the findings of Conversation Analysis (CA), which examines the sequential structure of talk-in-interaction, such as turn-taking, repair, and adjacency pairs (Schegloff, 2007; Sidnell & Stivers, 2013). Although CA does not embrace ideological interpretation traditionally, discursive-pragmatic scholarship selectively implements its micro-analytic tools and explains the dynamism of meaning building through interactional practices.

Besides this, Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) offer a clearly ideological description of discursive-pragmatic analysis. As an example, van Dijk (2008) and Wodak and Meyer (2016) explained how power relations, social inequality, and ideological positioning are created by discourse. DP uses CDS to examine how pragmatic resources, including presupposition, modality, deixis and evaluative language, are used as mechanisms of encoding and negotiating ideology in discourse.

These frameworks are most explicitly conjoined in *Pragmatics of Society* (Östman & Verschueren, 2011) in which DP is placed as a methodology that addresses meaning-making as an ideologically-laden practice that is socially embedded. Instead of promoting one theoretical position DP utilises complementary traditions in a bid to present a multidimensional explanation of the functions of language as social action in context.

4. Methodological Orientations in Discursive Pragmatics

The field of DP is both interdisciplinary and concerns itself with meaning being socially and interactionally located, thus reflecting a range of methodological orientations. In this area, one of the most common methodological positions is the qualitative interpretive analysis, which allows for the development of a detailed investigation of stance-taking, identity formation, relational negotiation, and ideological positioning. Because of DP in its focus on contextually based and co-constructed meaning, qualitative methodologies would provide the descriptive flexibility needed to elucidate the fines of the use of discursive strategies in different social contexts (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Jucker, 2013).

Coupled with qualitative methods, corpus-assisted methods have also become more and more overt in discursive-pragmatic research. The frequency analysis, collocation pattern, concordance lines, and semantic prosody are corpus tools that can help researchers in discovering the repetitive pragmatic tendencies of a big dataset (Baker, 2006; Jucker & Taavitsainen, 2014). The approaches make empirical

research sounder and increase the reproducibility of results, especially when qualitative interpretation is used together.

The other important approach to methodology is multimodal DP, whereby modern interaction has gone beyond speaking to encompass the visual, auditory, and embodied tools. The multimodal approach is particularly useful when analysing a digital discourse, media text, or technologically mediated interaction, where complex semiotic configurations and platform-specific affordances create the meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001).

The methodological integration is a relevant property of DP. In reality, mixed-method paradigms frequently combine qualitative and quantitative methods, with examples of one such combination being the combination of SFL with CA, or the merger of appraisal theory and corpus-based techniques of analysis. Such a methodological hybridity enables the process of triangulation, enhances the depth of analysis, and allows considering discourse phenomena within a multifaceted perspective of complementary theoretical perspectives (Jaworski & Coupland, 2014; Titscher et al., 2000).

Lastly, cross-cultural comparative methodologies are also important in expanding the theoretical scope of discourse pragmatics. The cultural difference influences pragmatic norms, stance tactics, affective performances, and ideological framing such that comparative analysis becomes an imperative way to challenge Eurocentric assumptions and create more inclusive ways of making sense (House, 2010; Leech, 2014).

5. Illustrative Applications of Discursive Pragmatics in Previous Research

Previous studies have shown that DP has an analytical flexibility that is applicable to a broad spectrum of discourse types that includes political communication, media discourse, institutional interaction and public argumentation. Based on the discursive turn in pragmatics, the studies have considered the viewpoint of negotiating meanings, as being through contextualised language use, ideological positioning, and interactional norms as opposed to the isolated use of speech acts (Verschuere, 1999; Zienkowski, Östman, & Verschuere, 2011).

In this socially-based perspective of pragmatics, the use of language is conceptualised with the notion of social action incorporated into institutional, cultural and ideological context. In this respect, pragmatic meaning is constructed not solely based on the intent of the speaker, but also through common assumptions, power relations and normative expectations that dominate discourse practices (Mey, 2001). This style has found some critical application especially in the research that compares political rhetoric and mass discourse where meanings are created through strategic framing, evaluative positioning and audience alignment management.

Discursive-pragmatic approaches have also been used to investigate the construction of ideological meanings using lexical options, presuppositions, and framing mechanisms that direct the interpretation of the meaning by the audiences in media discourse analysis. It has also been demonstrated in these studies that media texts frequently employ implicit pragmatic indicators to authorize the specific visions and exclude the other opinions, thus influencing the opinion of the people with the help of discursively mediated meaning-making processes (van Dijk, 2008).

In the same manner, the studies on the institutional and professional interaction have used the DP to investigate how power, responsibility, and social functions are performed as ordinary communicative activities. Through discourse-in-context, these studies have demonstrated that pragmatic decisions play a role in reproduction of institutional power and social hierarchies in contexts like legal discourse, educational interaction and bureaucratic communication (Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

When combined, these exemplary examples signify that DP offers an analytical orientation which can combine pragmatic, discursive and sociocultural aspects of meaning. Instead of being one single unified theory, DP is a research framework, which allows analysts to examine the dynamically constructed, negotiated and ideologically constructed meanings within various fields of communicative action.

6. Areas of Application

DP can be characterised as widely applicable to the areas of meaning, identity, ideology, and interaction (Verschueren, 1999; Östman & Verschueren, 2011; Zienkowski, Östman, & Verschueren, 2011). Conceptualising what discourse is as a mode of social action, DP provides instruments of analysis to study how speakers define identities, socialise relations, and transact with ideological and institutional frameworks at large. As a result, objects of discursive-pragmatic intervention have been used in various communicative contexts, such as interpersonal exchange, political discussion, institutional communication, media texts, as well as digitally mediated settings (van Dijk, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

Bucholtz and Hall (2005) argued that one of the outstanding areas of application is identity construction and positioning. The discursive-pragmatic approach to identity views it not as a psychological trait but as an interactional achievement that comes about by the taking of stances, the use of evaluative language, the use of pronouns, the framing of narratives, and alignment/disalignment processes. DP allows researchers to analyse the role of such linguistic resources in locating speakers into social groups, communities of practice, and ideological groups.

The other relevant area has to do with power, ideology, and political rhetoric. Discourse-pragmatic analysis has been widely used when analysing political speeches, ideological narratives, legitimation efforts, and media discourses (van Dijk, 2008; Wodak, 2011). Scholars can reveal the construction of ideological meanings, naturalisation and contention of ideological meaning, and discursive formation of authority and legitimacy through analytical resources like transitivity analysis, appraisal theory, implicature, and presupposition.

According to Drew and Heritage (1992), DP is also rather significant to the institutional and professional communication in which the relationships are mediated by power relations, role expectations, and organizational norms. Some of the practices explored in this area through empirical research include gatekeeping, authority construction, role negotiation, and facework in different settings such as courts, classrooms, healthcare settings, and even in corporate settings. Specifically, conversation analysis can provide detailed information about the process of the enactment of institutional identities and responsibilities in a sequential manner.

DP can provide a useful understanding of framing, evaluative stance, ideological bias, and audience positioning in media and in the digital setting. The framework has been especially useful in studying social media discourse, where meaning-making is done using multimodal resources, like images, emojis, and platform-specific affordances, and where interaction is mediated by the work of the algorithmically visible and participatory practices (Fairclough, 2013; Page, 2014).

Lastly, the DP has been very instrumental in the analytical examination of emotional discourse and affective sense. Within this framework, the concept of emotions is not perceived as an internally situated psychological condition, but rather reflected and conceptualised as the socially and discursively deployed actions, which are reflected in the appraisal, stance, metaphor, and narrative evaluation (Bednarek, 2008; Martin & White, 2005). This standpoint can make researchers explore the strategic operation of the affective meanings in the interaction, such as persuasion, conflict management, and solidarity construction.

7. Research Gaps

In spite of the fact that DP has made significant strides in its development, it still has a number of research gaps that need scholarly coverage. A common weakness has been the high Western-centric bias of the discipline. The available body of scholarship is based on English and European culture of discourse, with minimal representation of Arabic and Asian, as well as African and Indigenous communicative practices. This localised geographic and cultural context limits the wider applicability and intercultural generalizability of discursive-pragmatic knowledge.

The other outstanding lacuna relates to inadequate use of corpus-based methodologies. Despite the fact that corpus tools present significant benefits in the context of empirical validation, a lot of research still refers to using only a small amount of data or qualitative analysis. Enlarged annotated corpora would have enormous implications on the field. This augmentation would strengthen empirical validation and help to develop more systematic corpus based and multimodal methodological systems.

Multimodal perspectives have not been developed to their fullest extent in the field. Modern communications become more and more dependent on visual, auditory, gestural, and spatial forms of communication, particularly in digital venues; however, the literature that has been preserved up to the present tends to focus on those channels of communication that are predominantly textual. There is a need to integrate multimodal analytical practices systematically so that the overall system of meaning-making practices expressed in technologically mediated discourse is captured.

Additionally, DP is yet to embrace the full application of cognitive dimensions in its analysis process. Attention, memory, inference, and mental representation are processes that are rarely explicitly theorised, yet they hold substantial importance in explaining the processes of meaning processing and interpretation in real time. This gap stresses the need to have a more in-depth interaction with cognitive-pragmatic approaches. Finally, the field faces conceptual inconsistencies, as key constructs such as context, ideology, stance, and discursive practice are often defined differently across studies. The absence of unified definitions limits theoretical clarity and makes cross-study comparisons difficult.

Addressing these inconsistencies would help strengthen the conceptual foundation of DP and improve coherence across research outputs.

8. Critical Evaluation of Discursive Pragmatics

The critical review follows an integrative method of analysis that aims to judge the previous research that has been conducted in DP based on three major criteria; theoretical consistency and conceptual clarity, methodological consistency and analytical openness, and the scope of its application in the realities of sociocultural and communicative settings. Such criteria are used to extract the gaps, limitations, and strengths of the existing literature in a systematic way.

Although the DP provides a rather flexible and analytically rich approach to the study of meaning as socially and ideologically constructed, its theoretical openness can also be described as one of its major constraints. The lack of a single theoretical centre of interest implies that discursive-pragmatic analyses tend to use non-homogenous schemes and may result in the overlapping of concepts across studies and the lack of compatibility of analyses. Besides, the high interpretive bias of DP, as well as the facilitation of the contextual sensitivity, creates the issues of methodological transparency and replicability, especially in the studies that cannot be supported by empirical or corpus-based evidence.

The other critical issue is the area of unbalanced involvement to cognitive aspects of meaning-making. Even though the DP is effective in the forecasting social interaction and ideological positioning, the cognitive processes involved in the interpretation and inferencing have been under-theorised. Lastly, the Western oriented nature of most of discursive-pragmatic studies restricts its explanatory scope to non-European and non-Anglophone situations. Such limitations indicate that even though DP has been rather useful as a tool of analysis, it still lacks theoretical adjustments and other methodological improvements, which would allow it to serve as a more consistent and universally applicable research paradigm.

The discipline is advanced by the review because it systematically brings together fragmented theoretical and methodological tendencies within DP, thus clarifying gaps in research and outlining future avenues of interdisciplinary and empirical research.

9. Future Directions

The discourse studies are expected to develop more integrated and holistic models of analysis in the future, combining the merits of CA, SFL, CDA, and appraisal theory (Heritage, 2012; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Martin & White, 2005; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). Building single frameworks that would simultaneously emphasise micro-level interactional meanings and macro-level ideologies-oriented frameworks is likely to allow the field to generate more consistent and theoretically sound forms of interpretation. The other issue of concern refers to the widening of DP to include digital and multimodal discourse as modern communicative practices are becoming more and more reliant on visual, interactive, and platform-specific affordances (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Page, 2014). Such a shift requires analytical tools that would be able to comprehend multimodal meaning-making practices within the scope of social media, streaming mobile platforms, and technologically mediated settings.

The corpus-driven approaches remain one of the key areas for continued development. The multilingual corpora construction and the introduction of the corpus-based methodologies can be used to strengthen the empirical basis, enhance the validity of the findings obtained, and eliminate the Western-centric disposition that had historically infiltrated discourse studies (Baker, 2006; Jucker & Taavitsainen, 2014). Furthermore, cross-cultural inquiries, especially in the context of Arabic, African, and Asian ones, are essential to expand the theoretical scope of the study and enhance our understanding of pragmatically situated and culturally localised communicative practices (Sharifian, 2011; Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

Lastly, the analytical value of cognitive pragmatics will be used to strengthen the explanatory strength of DP since it will establish the connection between discursive phenomena and the mind process of interpretation, attention, and meaning-making (Giora, 2003; Wilson & Sperber, 2012). These questions of inquiry, in such a relation, bring out the possibilities of the field as regards to theoretical unification, diversity of methods, and diversity of the world.

10. Conclusion

In the light of the critical review, DP has now emerged as a vibrant and interdisciplinary approach that offers a viable analytical framework for examining meaning-making, negotiation, and ideological persuasion in language. It can be concluded based on a comparative synthesis of the theoretical and methodological patterns identified in the studies that are analysed. The DP gives a detailed explanation of language as a social agent in both conventional and contemporary communicative contexts in terms of foregrounded contextualised meaning-making, identity formation, power relations and evaluative position. Besides the theoretical synthesis, this review provides an applied analytical input in critically analysing the manner in which DP has been operationalised in previous research. The analysis of the DP through a systematic comparison of the reviewed literature analytical framework and methodological decisions and strategies of interpretation illustrates the usefulness of this analytical approach as a practical tool other than as only a theoretical construct. Simultaneously, the given review has also shown that a range of issues remains to be pursued by researchers such as the lack of cross-cultural representation, immaturity of corpus-assisted and multimodal methods, or the necessity to become more specific when it comes to conceptual integration. It has also been demonstrated in the review through the chosen illustrative studies that DP has successfully been used to analyse political, media, and institutional discourse illustrating that it is analytically flexible despite the lack of unified empirical models. Overall, DP is well-placed to work on further studies of discourse in the ever-more-complicated, multimodal, and digitally mediated spaces, providing important insights into the relationship between language, society, and ideology. The review provided a critical assessment of the work of DP in which the theoretical heterogeneity and the methodological difficulties were also identified in addition to the strengths of the analytical feature of it.

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