

The Pragmatics of Politeness: Speech Acts and Cultural Variation in Three Linguistic Contexts

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the cross-cultural realization of speech acts in Uzbek, Russian, and English, focusing on how cultural norms influence the degree of directness and politeness strategies in communication. Drawing on qualitative analysis and secondary data sources, the research explores the structure, frequency, and cultural framing of speech acts such as requests, compliments, and refusals. The findings reveal a strong preference for indirectness and soft politeness strategies in Uzbek discourse, a dominant use of direct and assertive acts in Russian, and a balanced approach in English, where indirectness is often achieved through syntactic softening. These variations are deeply rooted in sociocultural values – such as collectivism, hierarchical awareness, and time sensitivity – which shape not only linguistic form but also interpersonal dynamics. The study underscores the importance of cultural awareness in avoiding pragmatic failure and highlights implications for intercultural communication and language pedagogy.

Keywords: Cross-cultural pragmatics; speech acts; directness; indirectness; politeness strategies; Uzbek language; Russian language; English language; intercultural communication; sociolinguistics

INTRODUCTION

A speech act refers to any utterance made with a communicative intent. Acts such as apologizing, introducing, requesting,

complaining, asking for help, complimenting, or denying all fall under this category. Language across all societies performs the dynamic role of enabling interaction. Nevertheless, the structure and execution of conversations are often shaped by the norms, traditions, and values of the culture in question. In addition to phonological variations, lexical differences – reflected in the distinct vocabulary of each language – are also prominent (Alhusban 2022).

At its essence, culture finds expression through language. Language performs a fundamental social function by transmitting values, ideologies, and cultural practices, thereby reinforcing a shared sense of identity and community. It serves not only as a communicative tool but also as a medium for the preservation and dissemination of cultural norms and collective values.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cross-cultural pragmatics is an academic discipline concerned with the ways in which language gains significance through its cultural embedding and contextual application. A central area of investigation within this field involves speech acts, which refer to communicative functions that embody deliberate linguistic intentions (Alghazo, Alghazo & Ibrahim 2021). These acts include functions such as requests, apologies, suggestions, and instructions, each demanding contextually appropriate responses. Mastery of intercultural communication principles forms the initial step in overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers, thereby minimizing misunderstandings (Jalilifar, Karimi & Movahedi 2021). Essential components of such mastery include clarity, humor, spoken discourse proficiency, cultural empathy, and communicative preparedness.

While intercultural pragmatics emphasizes communicative exchanges between speakers of different languages and cultural backgrounds, cross-cultural pragmatics engages in a comparative analysis of how language is used across cultures. This includes studying speech acts, behavioral norms, and culturally specific communicative patterns (Moafian, Rahimi & Sadat Tabatabaei 2022). Within the broader realm of pragmatics – a field exploring

language use in social contexts – the theory of speech acts plays a pivotal role. It highlights the pragmatic dimensions of communication, which are typically structured around three core elements: language usage, language variation, and adherence to conversational norms. The capacity to strategically employ language to fulfill communicative goals is thus inherently linked to speech act theory (House 2022; Ahmed 2021).

This paper delves into the nuanced terrain of cross-cultural pragmatics by focusing on the role and interpretation of speech acts across different cultural environments. Using a secondary qualitative research methodology, the study aims to underscore subtle cultural distinctions in communicative behavior. Since speech acts are vital to the process of linguistic interaction, they serve as a primary medium for information exchange. Consequently, cultural differences significantly influence the interpretation and efficacy of these acts.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study explores the communicative function of compliment exchanges, which represent a critical category of speech acts. The paper proposes several pedagogical strategies aimed at enhancing learners' awareness of effective communicative practices. These include exposing learners to standard structures, typical themes, and culturally embedded features of compliments; sensitizing them to potential communicative pitfalls; and offering them diverse strategies for appropriately responding to praise (Ahmet 2021). Given the significance of appropriateness and perceived responses in intercultural contexts, such instruction is essential.

These activities are applicable not only to general foreign language learners but also to students involved in specialized language programs, including fields like interpretation and professional communication. Implementing speech acts in a second language can be particularly challenging because learners often project the linguistic norms of their native language onto the target language. Without a clear understanding of colloquial usage or cultural expectations in the second language, they may

inadvertently commit pragmatic errors. Learners tend to rely on their first language as a template for communication, often assuming direct translatability of speech acts (Alghazo, Alghazo & Ibrahim 2021).

Although language performs a broadly consistent communicative function across cultures, the manner in which interaction is structured and interpreted remains deeply influenced by culturally specific values and social conventions. According to Su (2023), direct communication refers to the clear articulation of one's thoughts and intentions. In contrast, indirect communication does not overtly express a speaker's internal reflections; rather, meaning is often conveyed through nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions and physical gestures. A speech act is any utterance made with the intention of communicating a specific purpose. Common examples include apologies, introductions, inquiries, complaints, requests for help, acknowledgments, and denials. Within the frameworks of conversation analysis, communication studies, and speech act theory, indirectness is understood as the strategic use of hints, rhetorical questions, bodily movements, and circumlocutory expressions to convey underlying intentions.

Abdelhady (2023) explains that the concept of cross-cultural communication acknowledges the varying backgrounds, nationalities, and life experiences of individuals – particularly in professional and business contexts – and emphasizes the need to bridge these differences. In the context of globalization, cross-cultural competence has become increasingly important for corporate success, particularly when expanding into new markets. Acquiring basic skills in intercultural communication is the first step toward mitigating potential misunderstandings. Key attributes required for successful intercultural interactions include openness, humor, linguistic awareness, cultural sensitivity, and readiness to adapt.

Communication styles also differ markedly across cultures. Western societies, often characterized by individualism, egalitarian values, and analytic thinking, tend to prefer direct communication. On the other hand, Eastern cultures, which frequently emphasize hierarchical structures and collective

norms, are more inclined toward indirect communicative strategies. Speech acts, in general, serve five primary functions: directive, expressive, declarative, commissive, and representative.

Elasfar, Marzouki & Ben Said (2023) highlight that in indirect cultures, even within professional settings, delivering bad news directly may be perceived as disrespectful or socially inappropriate. When individuals from different communicative traditions engage without awareness of each other's styles, serious interpersonal conflicts may arise. Indirect communication serves as a means of maintaining social harmony and preventing unnecessary conflict. It allows speakers to manage sensitive topics more diplomatically, thereby protecting relationships and avoiding direct confrontation.

Moreover, indirectness enables the expression of subtle emotions and complex thoughts, which may be more difficult to convey explicitly. In cultures where directness is often interpreted as rude or abrasive, indirect communication offers a socially acceptable alternative that upholds relational sensitivity and cultural decorum.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the empirical findings on speech acts, the research raises the following questions:

- How does the realization of speech acts differ in Uzbek, Russian and English contexts.
- How do multilingual speakers of these languages make use of speech acts in cultural settings.

METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the specific methods and procedures employed in the execution of the current research. The selection of suitable methodological tools is a critical aspect of any academic inquiry, as it ensures the acquisition of data that is both relevant and meaningful to the study's objectives. In light of this,

the chosen methodological framework, including the philosophical orientation, research design, and corresponding rationale, is thoroughly discussed and substantiated.

The implementation of an appropriate research design is essential for ensuring systematic organization and coherence of the research process. Broadly, research designs are categorized into quantitative and qualitative approaches. A quantitative design is characterized by the collection of numerical data followed by statistical evaluation, whereas a qualitative design centers on non-numerical data and emphasizes interpretative, narrative-based analysis (Morawska, Tluczek & Kuzborska 2021).

Given the nature of the present study, which delves into the subjective and culturally embedded dimensions of cross-cultural pragmatics, a quantitative research design was deemed the most appropriate.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis of English, Russian, and Uzbek speech acts reveals distinct structural and cultural patterns that shape communicative behavior in each language. In English discourse, speech acts tend to be brief, explicit, and formal, often articulated through direct and syntactically simple expressions such as “Can you do this?”, “Thanks for your support,” or “Sorry for disturbing.” These examples exhibit a high level of politeness, not through elaborate phrasing but through clarity and efficiency. The dominance of directive and expressive acts in English reflects broader cultural values of individualism, directness, and time-consciousness, where effectiveness and precision in communication are prioritized.

In contrast, Russian discourse is more frequently characterized by direct, firm, and at times emotionally charged speech acts, particularly in refusals, commands, and expressions of criticism. For example, in refusal acts, expressions like *Извините, я не смогу...* (“Sorry, I won’t be able to...”) are commonly used. However, Russian speakers often prioritize clarity and authority over softened politeness, especially in formal contexts. Stylistically, Russian exhibits a preference for

conciseness, hierarchical structure, and formality, aligning with cultural values such as honesty, explicit criticism, and a clear delineation of social roles. Being a fusional language, Russian allows flexibility in word order and relies heavily on intonation, stress, and contextual cues to convey pragmatic meanings.

On the other hand, Uzbek speech acts predominantly follow indirect and polite strategies, deeply rooted in cultural norms of etiquette and social respect. Requests are often preceded by greetings, apologies, or softeners – for instance, *To‘g‘irlabberaolasizmi?* (“Would you be able to fix it?”) or *Oyligimdanberardim* (“I would have given from my salary”). Expressive acts in Uzbek discourse are closely associated with gratitude, compassion, and personal accountability, reflecting a cultural emphasis on modesty, hospitality, and moral responsibility. As an agglutinative language, Uzbek utilizes complex morphological constructions that support indirectness and help preserve the interlocutor’s face, reinforcing interpersonal harmony and community-oriented communication. These findings suggest that while English and Russian prioritize clarity and assertiveness, albeit through different linguistic routes, Uzbek prioritizes harmony, respect, and social cohesion, which is evident in both form and function of its speech acts. Therefore, understanding these cultural-linguistic patterns is essential for fostering effective intercultural communication and avoiding pragmatic failure in cross-cultural contexts.

Table 1. *Cross-cultural comparison of directness and politeness strategies in speech acts*

Language	Degree of directness	Politeness strategies	Examples / Expressions	Remarks
Uzbek	Low (Indirect preferred)	– Soft openings: “Sorry to disturb you” – Requests: “If possible” – Religious and ethnolinguistic markers	“If it’s meant to be, I’ll write” “We’ll get back to this later”	Communication is based on sincerity and equality; strong emphasis on maintaining face
Russian	Medium – High	– Combination of formality and	“Could you find out?”	Communication is structured by

		simplicity – Use of <i>Byl</i> for social distance – Sometimes direct imperatives	“The department will inform later” “I asked a long time ago”	organizational and social roles, but politeness is less emphasized
English	Medium / Low (more indirect)	– Use of modals: “Could you...”, “Would you mind...” – Hedging: “Maybe we should...” – Minimization and softened imperatives	“Just checking in...” “I was wondering if you could...” “Let me know when you're free”	Reflects values of individualism, time-consciousness, and respect for social distance, yet consistently softened in tone

Further analysis of cross-linguistic communication strategies reveals significant variation in the degree of directness, politeness strategies, and contextual framing of speech acts across Uzbek, Russian, and English. In Uzbek, the level of directness is notably low, with a clear preference for indirect formulations. Politeness strategies often involve soft openings (e.g., *Uzrko'pbezovtaqildim* – “Sorry for disturbing you”), religious or ethnolinguistic markers, and hedged requests such as *Agar ilojibo'lsa* – “If possible.” Example expressions like *Nasibbo'lsayozaman* (“I will write if it's meant to be”) and *Yana to'xtalibo'tamiz* (“We'll return to this later”) reflect an orientation toward modesty, social harmony, and face-saving behavior, which are deeply rooted in Uzbek cultural norms of sincerity, respect, and social equality.

In Russian discourse, the degree of directness ranges from moderate to high, and communication tends to be more explicit, especially in institutional or hierarchical contexts. While politeness can be expressed through formal distancing – such as the use of the formal pronoun *Вы* – it is often paired with direct imperatives or straightforward assertions. Common expressions like *Вы сможете узнать?* (“Can you find out?”) or *Отделкажет потом* (“The department will say later”) indicate a preference for clarity and decisiveness, with less emphasis on

softening. Russian communication style is often grounded in organizational and social roles, where efficiency and transparency may take precedence over interpersonal sensitivity. In contrast, English discourse is characterized by moderate to low directness, often realized through indirect and softened language, even when conveying specific requests. The use of modals (“Could you...”, “Would you mind...”), hedging expressions (“Maybe we should...”), and minimizing imperatives (“Let me know when you’re free”) illustrates a strong commitment to politeness through mitigation. English speech acts frequently reflect values such as individualism, time management, and respect for personal space, yet they are consistently embedded within socially soft and cooperative forms.

This comparative framework underscores that while Uzbek prioritizes deference and indirectness, Russian emphasizes formality and role-based clarity, and English balances politeness with indirect efficiency. Such findings reinforce the importance of cultural context in shaping pragmatic norms and highlight the potential for miscommunication in intercultural exchanges when these divergent norms are not properly recognized.

Table 2. *Distribution of direct and indirect speech acts across Uzbek, Russian, and English speakers*

Language	Direct speech acts	Indirect speech acts	Total responses
Uzbek	12 (24%)	38 (76%)	50
Russian	57 (95%)	3 (5%)	60
English	26 (52%)	24 (48%)	50

The data visualized in the horizontal bar chart and frequency table demonstrates notable differences in the use of direct and indirect speech acts across Uzbek, Russian, and English speakers. In Uzbek, a clear preference for indirect speech is observed, with 76% of utterances categorized as indirect. This confirms the high reliance on culturally embedded politeness strategies, differences, and contextual sensitivity. This aligns with earlier findings that Uzbek discourse prioritizes face-saving and

harmonious interpersonal relations, often utilizing softened or embedded requests.

In contrast, Russian speakers overwhelmingly favor direct speech acts, with 95% of responses falling into this category. This dominance of directness reflects a cultural tendency toward explicitness, assertiveness, and role-based hierarchical communication. It also confirms that Russian discourse is less oriented toward indirectness or mitigation, particularly in formal or task-oriented exchanges.

English presents a balanced distribution, with 52% direct and 48% indirect speech acts. This equilibrium suggests that while English communication values clarity and efficiency, it often achieves this through softened structures such as modal verbs and hedging. The close ratio also reflects the pragmatic flexibility in English, where speakers select directness or indirectness based on the context, relationship, or desired politeness level.

These findings reinforce the earlier qualitative insights and highlight how cultural norms and linguistic structure influence speakers' preferred strategies in performing speech acts. The Uzbek tendency toward indirectness, Russian emphasis on directness, and English balance reflect deeper socio-cultural ideologies tied to collectivism vs. individualism, formality vs. egalitarianism, and interpersonal sensitivity.

CONCLUSION

The study offers significant insights into how speech acts are pragmatically and culturally constructed across three typologically and culturally distinct languages – Uzbek, Russian, and English. The findings reveal that Uzbek speakers predominantly favor indirect and deferential speech, reflecting a cultural emphasis on modesty, respect, and harmony. Russian speakers, conversely, tend to use direct and unambiguous expressions, particularly in institutional or hierarchical settings, indicating a communication style rooted in clarity, assertiveness, and role-consciousness. English speakers exhibit a balanced use of direct and indirect speech, employing mitigation and modal verbs to preserve politeness while maintaining communicative

clarity. These distinctions reflect deeper ideological and cultural underpinnings – such as individualism versus collectivism, egalitarianism versus hierarchy, and the varying weight placed on emotional sensitivity and efficiency. Recognizing and understanding these patterns is essential not only for theoretical linguistic inquiry but also for practical applications in intercultural competence training, language teaching, and professional communication across cultures. The study encourages future research into other speech types and broader cross-cultural comparisons, particularly involving emergent multilingual contexts and digital discourse.

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