Pragmatics And Culture: Approaches in Intercultural Communication

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Abstract. This article examines the interrelationships between pragmatics and culture and analyzes the role of these relationships in intercultural communication. The assessment of language not only as a structural element, but also as a field of socio-cultural activity reveals the importance of the pragmatic approach (Knoblauch, 2008). In intercultural communication, the correct understanding of the context, the speaker's intention, and social norms is one of the main indicators of pragmatic competence (Wierzbicka, 2006). Politeness strategies, indirect expressions, and contextual meanings manifest themselves in different ways across cultural environments, which can lead to misunderstandings and communication barriers in the communication process (Cohen, 2012). The article explains these differences from a theoretical point of view and at the same time illustrates them with specific examples.

In this regard, the study of culture-related aspects of pragmatics is of great importance not only from a theoretical but also from a practical point of view (Ten Thije, 2020). The article examines how the same expressions are understood differently in different cultural contexts, what pragmatic errors can occur, and how these errors affect mutual communication (Žegarac & Pennington, 2000). At the same time, the importance of developing pragmatic competence in language learning processes to ensure mutual understanding in a global communication environment is highlighted (Cohen & Sykes, 2013). These results create a serious basis for establishing effective communication in international relations, translation, teaching as a foreign language, and multicultural societies. The article shows that a deep understanding of the interaction of pragmatics and culture is the key to success in the complex and diverse linguistic/cultural communication environment of the modern world (Hussan, 2024).

Keywords: *pragmatic competence, politeness strategies, language and culture, social norms, indirect expression, communication barriers, linguistics*

Introduction

In the modern world, as a result of globalization and the development of technology, people from different cultures are increasingly interacting with each other. This process is not only based on grammatical and lexical knowledge of the language—it also requires understanding the social and contextual nuances of language use. This is the main subject of study in pragmatics (Wierzbicka, 2006).

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Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics that studies how language is used, the speaker's intention, the role of context, and the process of meaning creation. Language is not only a means of transmitting information but also a means of establishing relationships, expressing social roles, demonstrating politeness, and conveying culture (Eslami, 2018).

In this regard, pragmatic differences in intercultural communication can sometimes lead to serious misunderstandings, communication breakdowns, and even social tensions (Hussan, 2024). An expression that is considered polite in one culture may seem cold or rude in another (Sergeevna, 2021). This shows that pragmatic competence—the speaker's ability to ensure situational and cultural relevance in the use of language—is one of the main conditions for successful communication (Cohen, 2012).

The purpose of this article is to analyze the interaction between pragmatics and culture, to investigate how language works in different cultural contexts, and to consider pragmatic problems that arise during intercultural communication and their solutions. The topic is of both theoretical and practical relevance and can make significant contributions to the fields of linguistics, translation, pedagogy, and communication (Ten Thije, 2020).

One of the issues that is particularly emphasized in this study is how pragmatic norms related to culture are formed and how these norms affect the behavior of the parties involved in communication. For successful communication between individuals speaking different languages, language knowledge alone is not enough—the way the speaker expresses themselves in a social context, what expressions and gestures mean, and how they are received also play an important role (Knoblauch, 2008). For example, while open and direct communication is positively perceived in Western cultures, indirect and polite forms of expression are preferred in Eastern cultures (Wierzbicka, 2006). Such differences indicate that pragmatic approaches are strongly influenced by cultural characteristics.

In addition, this article analyzes the causes and consequences of pragmatic inconsistencies that are often encountered in intercultural communication. One of the main reasons for these inconsistencies is the failure to take into account or misinterpretation of intercultural pragmatic differences (Žegarac & Pennington, 2000). In such cases, the parties may misunderstand each other's intentions or emotional attitudes and, as a result, encounter communicative obstacles.

The practical significance of the study is that the results obtained in this area can be applied in language teaching, translation practice, diplomatic communication, and international cooperation (Cohen & Sykes, 2013). In the continuation of the article, intercultural pragmatic differences will be explained with examples, specific communicative situations from different languages will be analyzed, and ways to develop pragmatic competence will be discussed (Eslami, 2018). The goal is to create conditions for the reader to understand not only the language but also how that language interacts with culture and social context.

Literature review

Scientific research in the field of intercultural communication and pragmatics shows that the correct and effective use of language is based not only on the understanding of grammatical rules, but also on

the contextual and cultural norms (Wierzbicka, 2006; Knoblauch, 2008). The literature review aims to summarize the main theoretical directions, methodological approaches, and empirical results in this field.

First, István Kecskés (2014, 2022) has deeply analyzed the intercultural aspects of pragmatics in his works, examining how speech acts and contextual meanings are formed in different cultures. In his opinion, intercultural pragmatics allows us to analyze not only different languages, but also different "ways of thinking" (Kecskés, as cited in Ten Thije, 2020). This view has also been widely included in collective publications such as *The Cambridge Handbook of Intercultural Communication* (Ten Thije, 2020).

Edward T. Hall (1976), classifying cultures as "high" and "low" context societies, showed that in some cultures, meaning depends more on context. This classification is widely used to explain the causes of pragmatic inconsistencies (Cohen, 2012). Geoffrey Leech (1983) and Givón (2005) also supported this approach and studied the social function of language and politeness strategies within the framework of pragmatic analysis (Wierzbicka, 2006).

Researchers such as Bouchet (2010) and Sztencel (2020) have empirically confirmed the pragmatic inconsistencies encountered in intercultural communication and their psychological and social consequences. In their opinion, most misunderstandings are caused not by the speaker's linguistic competence, but by a lack of pragmatic and cultural compatibility (Žegarac & Pennington, 2000).

Félix-Brasdefer (2025) considered the development of pragmatic competence in foreign language teaching to be necessary, showing that language learners should learn not only vocabulary and grammar, but also which expressions to use in which situations during communication (Cohen & Sykes, 2013).

More recent articles available on ResearchGate, for example, Oktavia et al. (2023) and Usmani & Al-Mashham (2024), have analyzed the practical implications of cross-cultural pragmatics by comparing the communication strategies of learners and speakers from different cultures. They have shown in particular how requests and indirect expressions vary according to cultural context (Hussan, 2024).

In conclusion, the existing literature shows that the interaction between pragmatics and culture is of great importance for a correct understanding of the social function of language. In order to ensure successful communication in the field of intercultural communication, it is necessary to take into account not only linguistic knowledge, but also contextual and cultural differences (Cohen, 2012; Ten Thije, 2020). The literature provides both theoretical and practical recommendations in this direction, which confirms the continuing scientific relevance of the topic.

Methodology

The analysis of pragmatic differences in the field of intercultural communication allows us to understand more deeply the differences and misunderstandings that arise between people of different languages and cultures (Wierzbicka, 2006). Pragmatics, which takes into account not only the syntactic and lexical structure of language, but also the context of use and social intentions, has become an important field of research in this regard (Cohen, 2012). The purpose of the analysis is to show how

speech acts, politeness strategies, indirect expressions, and forms of reference are formed, accepted, and applied in different cultural contexts (Hussan, 2024).

The same words and expressions in different cultures can carry different social loads; this directly affects the course and outcome of negotiations (Žegarac & Pennington, 2000). For example, while frank speech is considered normative in one culture, in another this behavior may be perceived as rudeness (Hall, 1976). Identifying and explaining such differences is possible through pragmatic analysis. In this article, aspects such as changing contextual meanings, different concepts of politeness, and indirectness of expressions will be analyzed in an empirical and theoretical framework based on specific examples taken from different cultures (Eslami, 2018).

The relationship between pragmatics and culture is particularly important for intercultural communication in terms of studying the situational and social aspects of language (Knoblauch, 2008). Although the grammatical structures of a language are the same, the use and meaning of these structures may differ in different cultures. These differences are mainly manifested through the form of speech acts, politeness strategies, indirect expressions, and contextual clues (Wierzbicka, 2006). Below is a preliminary analysis of these differences based on real and typical examples.

In English: "Could you please close the window?"

In English, this request sentence is an indirect expression formulated with high politeness. However, in Azerbaijani, such indirectness is not always considered normative. Even more direct expressions ("close", "can you close") are acceptable. Thus, the expression of politeness here varies according to the cultural context.

In Japanese: "You have a lot to do, don't you?" (actually means "ask me for help").

In Azerbaijani: "If you want, I can help.":

In Japanese culture, requests are often conveyed indirectly, because a direct request can damage the relationship. In Azerbaijani, polite but somewhat more explicit expressions are preferred. These differences show how pragmatic understanding changes in cultural contexts.

In Turkish: "You know this better, you can support me, right?"

In Azerbaijani: "Can you help me with this?"

In Turkish culture, politeness is expressed by emphasizing the other person's ability (positive politeness) and as if in the form of a "request based on mutual friendship". In Azerbaijani, more functional and logically structured forms of politeness are preferred. This also shows that the same intention (a request for help) can be expressed in different pragmatic forms in different cultures.

In Scandinavian countries, not responding (for example, not saying "please" in response to "Thank you") can be considered normal.

In Azerbaijani culture, such silence is often perceived as disrespect or coldness.

This example shows that pragmatic inconsistency in context can lead to communication disruption. Language use includes not only the words expressed, but also non-verbal and contextual behaviors such as responding, pausing, and reacting.

These examples show that during pragmatic analysis, attention should be paid not only to the grammatical structures of the language, but also to the cultural affiliation of the speaker, social status, communication context, and communication purpose. The following sections will systematically analyze these differences and discuss ways to form pragmatic competence for successful intercultural communication.

Although speech acts, politeness strategies, and indirect expressions are used for the same communicative purposes across different cultural contexts, their forms of expression and levels of acceptability vary significantly. This reveals the culturally conventional features of pragmatics.

1. Realization of Speech Acts

Speech acts—particularly requests, offers, expressions of gratitude, and apologies—are shaped by varying social norms across cultures. For example, in American culture, speech acts are generally expressed in a more direct and explicit manner, whereas in Japanese and Southeast Asian cultures, these acts are often conveyed in more indirect and ambiguous styles.

In the U.S.: "I need you to send this by tomorrow."

In Japan: "If it's not too much trouble, would it be possible to have this by tomorrow?"

This contrast illustrates the sensitivity of certain cultures to norms of status and politeness.

2. Politeness Strategies and Social Status

Within the framework of pragmatics, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory offers a useful model for explaining such differences. According to their classification, in high-context cultures (e.g., China, Iran, Azerbaijan), indirect politeness strategies are more prominent because apologies, thanks, and criticisms are frequently conveyed through implicit means.

In Turkish: "İstersen birlikte gözden geçirebiliriz."

(This implies "You couldn't do it alone," but it is not stated directly.)

In Azerbaijani: "Səncə bu hissəyə bir də baxmaq lazımdırmı?"

("Do you think we should revisit this part?")

These examples show how criticism or suggestions are softened culturally.

3. Indirectness and the Role of Context

The level of indirectness often reflects the speaker's intent to convey respect, social distance, or power dynamics. In Western countries (especially in Scandinavia and Germany), direct and transparent

communication is normative. In contrast, Eastern cultures often use indirect phrasing as a sign of politeness and respect.

In Germany: "This presentation is poorly prepared."

In Azerbaijan: "Maybe we could improve this part a bit?"

4. Referencing and Self-Referencing in Communication

Reference—especially self-reference—is a pragmatic tool used to frame discourse and clarify relationships with the listener. The value and usage of such references vary across cultures.

In English: "As I said before…"

In Azerbaijani: "Yadındadırsa, demişdim ki…" ("If you remember, I said that…")

In Western languages, self-referencing is commonly used, while in Eastern languages, it tends to indicate insistence or self-assertion, often carrying different social implications.

The use of metaphors varies with cultural context and affects both the tone of interaction and the emotional weight of the message.

In English: "He broke the ice." (i.e., made the conversation more comfortable)

In Azerbaijani: "Söhbəti açdı." ("He opened the conversation.")

If such metaphors are not translated accurately, the pragmatic intent may be misunderstood or lost. Therefore, culturally aware metaphorical analysis and appropriate translation are essential.

Although silence is a universal phenomenon, its interpretation is culturally dependent. In some cultures, silence implies agreement or contemplation, whereas in others it suggests disapproval or discomfort.

In Finnish culture – silence may be seen as a sign of respect and thoughtfulness.

In Azerbaijani culture – silence is often interpreted as misunderstanding, disagreement, or emotional detachment.

This difference in interpretation makes silence a critical subject in cross-cultural pragmatics.

When translating across cultures, speech acts—especially politeness and irony—often suffer pragmatic losses.

In English: "Would you mind if I asked something?"

Literal translation: "Sual versəm, narahat olmazsınız ki?"

Yet, the more commonly used equivalent in Azerbaijani would be: "Bir şey soruşmaq istəyirəm." ("I want to ask something.")

Here, the degree of politeness and the perceived social distance inherent in the English version diminishes in translation, resulting in pragmatic loss and a shift in communicative intent (Wierzbicka, 2006). In international

contexts, speakers are often required to pragmatically adapt their speech. While this may impact the speaker's linguistic identity, it is necessary for mutual understanding (Cohen & Sykes, 2013).

An Azerbaijani speaker in Turkey may say *"İlgileniyorum"* instead of *"Mən bu məsələ ilə maraqlanıram"* to align with local usage. Such adaptation demonstrates not only changes in pragmatic nuance but also a broader effort toward social integration and communicative effectiveness (Sergeevna, 2021). In global communication, pragmatic flexibility and intercultural awareness are essential for building successful social relationships (Ten Thije, 2020; Eslami, 2018).

Conclusion

This study highlights the profound interconnection between pragmatics and culture in the context of intercultural communication. It becomes evident that effective communication is not solely determined by lexical or grammatical accuracy, but also by the speaker's ability to navigate the implicit social, cultural, and contextual rules that govern meaning-making in different cultural settings (Knoblauch, 2008).

Through the analysis of speech acts, politeness strategies, indirectness, metaphorical expressions, and silence, we observe that pragmatic norms are deeply shaped by the cultural frameworks within which they operate (Hall, 1976; Wierzbicka, 2006). What may be considered polite, respectful, or appropriate in one culture may be interpreted as rude, overly direct, or ambiguous in another. Such divergences often lead to misunderstandings, communicative breakdowns, or unintended offense in intercultural interactions (Hussan, 2024; Žegarac & Pennington, 2000).

Furthermore, the concept of pragmatic loss in translation underscores the challenge of conveying not just semantic meaning, but the full communicative intent behind a message (Cohen, 2012). This is particularly crucial when translating culturally loaded expressions such as metaphors or indirect requests, where the surface meaning fails to reflect the speaker's actual intention (Wierzbicka, 2006).

In a globalized world where intercultural communication is increasingly common, developing pragmatic competence and intercultural sensitivity is essential (Eslami, 2018; Cohen & Sykes, 2013). Language learners, educators, translators, and professionals engaged in international communication must not only acquire linguistic knowledge but also understand the cultural logic that shapes communicative behavior. Pragmatic adaptability, cultural awareness, and context-based interpretation are therefore indispensable skills for fostering successful, respectful, and meaningful cross-cultural interactions.

Ultimately, recognizing the cultural embeddedness of pragmatic norms allows us to better appreciate linguistic diversity and enhance the effectiveness of communication in multicultural environments (Ten Thije, 2020; Wolf & Polzenhagen, 2006).

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