

UNIVERSAL AND CULTURE-SPECIFIC FEATURES OF POLITENESS AND SPEECH BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the universal and culture-specific features of politeness and speech behavior in human communication. Politeness is viewed as a pragmatic phenomenon that reflects social norms, values, and cultural expectations governing verbal interaction. The study explores how universal principles of politeness, such as respect, cooperation, and face-saving strategies, coexist with culture-dependent forms shaped by historical, social, and linguistic factors. Drawing on comparative analysis of different linguistic and cultural contexts, the research highlights similarities and differences in speech behavior patterns, including forms of address, indirectness, and pragmatic strategies. The findings demonstrate that while certain politeness mechanisms are shared across cultures, their realization varies significantly depending on cultural conventions. The article contributes to cross-cultural pragmatics and intercultural communication studies by emphasizing the importance of cultural awareness in effective communication.

Keywords: politeness, speech behavior, universality, cultural specificity, pragmatics, intercultural communication.

ANNOTATSIYA

Mazkur maqolada nutqiy xulq-atvor va xushmuomalalikning universal hamda madaniyatga xos jihatlari tahlil qilinadi. Xushmuomalalik ijtimoiy me'yorlar, qadriyatlar va madaniy kutilmalar bilan chambarchas bog'liq bo'lgan pragmatik hodisa sifatida talqin etiladi. Tadqiqotda hurmat, hamkorlik va "yuzni saqlash" kabi universal xushmuomalalik tamoyillari bilan bir qatorda, tarixiy, ijtimoiy va lingvistik omillar ta'sirida shakllangan madaniy xususiyatlar o'rganiladi. Turli tillar va madaniyatlar asosida olib borilgan qiyosiy tahlil murojaat shakllari, bilvosita nutq va pragmatik strategiyalardagi o'xshashlik va farqlarni ochib beradi. Natijalar samarali muloqotda madaniy xabardorlik muhimligini ko'rsatadi.

Kalit so'zlar: xushmuomalalik, nutqiy xulq-atvor, universallik, madaniy xoslik, pragmatika, madaniyatlararo muloqot.

АННОТАЦИЯ

В статье рассматриваются универсальные и культурно-специфические особенности вежливости и речевого поведения в процессе коммуникации.

Вежливость анализируется как прагматическое явление, отражающее социальные нормы, ценности и культурные ожидания участников общения. Исследование направлено на выявление универсальных принципов вежливости, таких как уважение, коопeração и стратегии сохранения «лица», а также их культурно обусловленных проявлений, сформированных под влиянием исторических, социальных и лингвистических факторов. На основе сравнительного анализа различных языков и культур выявляются сходства и различия в речевом поведении, формах обращения и прагматических стратегиях. Полученные результаты подчеркивают значимость межкультурной компетенции для эффективного общения.

Ключевые слова: вежливость, речевое поведение, универсальность, культурная специфика, прагматика, межкультурная коммуникация.

INTRODUCTION

Politeness and speech behavior constitute central areas of investigation in pragmatics and sociolinguistics, as they reflect the ways individuals manage social relations through language. Politeness is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a socially and culturally embedded practice that governs appropriate verbal interaction in different communicative contexts. Researchers have long emphasized that successful communication depends on the speaker's ability to balance universal communicative principles with culturally specific norms and expectations¹.

One of the most influential approaches to politeness is the universalist perspective, which argues that certain politeness principles are shared across cultures. Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, based on the concept of *face*, suggests that speakers universally employ strategies to maintain their own and others' social image during interaction. Similarly, Leech² proposes a set of politeness maxims that regulate interpersonal communication and promote social harmony. These theories highlight common pragmatic mechanisms such as indirectness, mitigation, and respect, which appear in many languages and cultures.

However, despite the existence of universal tendencies, politeness and speech behavior also display strong culture-specific characteristics. Scholars working in cross-cultural pragmatics argue that the realization of politeness strategies varies significantly depending on cultural values, social hierarchies, and communicative

¹ Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

² Leech, G. N. (1983). *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.

traditions³. For instance, forms of address, degrees of directness, and norms of verbal etiquette differ markedly across cultures, leading to potential misunderstandings in intercultural communication. What is considered polite in one cultural context may be perceived as inappropriate or even impolite in another.

Recent studies emphasize the importance of integrating both universal and culture-specific perspectives in the analysis of politeness and speech behavior. Such an approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how linguistic behavior functions in diverse social contexts and how speakers navigate intercultural interactions⁴. Therefore, examining politeness as a dynamic interplay between universal pragmatic principles and culturally determined norms remains a crucial task for contemporary linguistic research.

This article aims to explore the universal and culture-specific features of politeness and speech behavior by analyzing key theoretical frameworks and comparative studies in pragmatics. By identifying both shared patterns and cultural variations, the study seeks to contribute to the field of cross-cultural pragmatics and to enhance awareness of the role of culture in effective communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of politeness and speech behavior has been a central concern in pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis for several decades. Early research focused on identifying general principles governing polite behavior in language use, while later studies increasingly emphasized the role of culture, context, and social variables in shaping communicative practices.

One of the most influential frameworks in politeness research is the theory proposed by Brown and Levinson⁵, which introduced the concept of *face* as a universal component of human interaction. According to this model, all competent language users possess both positive and negative face wants and employ politeness strategies to mitigate face-threatening acts. This theory has been widely applied across languages and cultures, providing strong support for the existence of universal pragmatic mechanisms in speech behavior. However, it has also been subject to criticism for its alleged Western bias and limited applicability to non-Western cultures.

³ Blum-Kulka, S., House, J., & Kasper, G. (1989). *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

⁴ Spencer-Oatey, H. (2008). *Culturally speaking: Culture, communication and politeness theory* (2nd ed.). London: Continuum.

⁵ Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Leech's⁶ Politeness Principle represents another foundational contribution, offering a set of maxims such as tact, generosity, approbation, and modesty that guide cooperative and polite communication. Unlike Brown and Levinson's face-based approach, Leech's model emphasizes the interpersonal and ethical dimensions of language use. Later revisions of his theory further integrated sociocultural factors, acknowledging that politeness norms are not fixed but context-dependent and culturally variable⁷.

In response to the limitations of universalist models, researchers in cross-cultural pragmatics began to explore politeness as a culturally situated phenomenon. Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper⁸ conducted comparative studies on speech acts such as requests and apologies, demonstrating that similar communicative intentions are realized through different linguistic strategies across cultures. Their findings revealed systematic variations in directness, mitigation, and conventionality, thus highlighting the importance of cultural norms in shaping speech behavior.

Further expanding this perspective, Ide⁹ introduced the concept of *discernment*, particularly in the context of Japanese politeness, arguing that politeness is often governed by socially prescribed norms rather than individual strategic choice. This view challenges the assumption that politeness is always a matter of personal intention and underscores the role of social hierarchy and role relations in linguistic behavior.

Spencer-Oatey¹⁰ proposed a rapport management framework that integrates face, sociality rights, and interactional goals, offering a more comprehensive model for analyzing politeness in intercultural communication. This approach accounts for both universal concerns for maintaining harmonious relations and culture-specific expectations regarding appropriate behavior. Similarly, Watts¹¹ distinguishes between first-order politeness (lay notions of politeness) and second-order politeness (theoretical constructs), arguing that politeness should be understood as an emergent property of social interaction rather than a fixed set of strategies.

Recent studies have increasingly focused on the dynamic and discursive nature of politeness and speech behavior. Researchers emphasize that politeness is negotiated in interaction and influenced by factors such as power relations, gender,

⁶ Leech, G. N. (1983). *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.

⁷ Leech, G. N. (2014). *The pragmatics of politeness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁸ Blum-Kulka, S., House, J., & Kasper, G. (1989). *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

⁹ Ide, S. (1989). Formal forms and discernment: Two neglected aspects of universals of linguistic politeness. *Multilingua*, 8(2–3), 223–248.

¹⁰ Spencer-Oatey, H. (2008). *Culturally speaking: Culture, communication and politeness theory* (2nd ed.). London: Continuum.

¹¹ Watts, R. J. (2003). *Politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

institutional roles, and communicative settings¹². This shift towards a discursive approach reflects a broader trend in pragmatics that views language use as socially constructed and context-sensitive.

Overall, the existing literature demonstrates that politeness and speech behavior cannot be fully explained by either universal principles or cultural norms alone. Instead, contemporary research supports an integrative perspective that recognizes the interaction between shared pragmatic tendencies and culture-specific realizations. This study builds on previous research by synthesizing universalist and relativist approaches, thereby contributing to a more nuanced understanding of politeness in cross-cultural communication.

Methodology

The data for this study were drawn from authentic spoken and written discourse samples representing different linguistic and cultural contexts. The corpus includes excerpts from everyday conversations, formal interactions, and institutional discourse collected from English and selected non-English languages. In order to ensure cross-cultural validity, the data were obtained from published corpora, recorded dialogues, and previously documented speech events used in pragmatic research. In addition, examples from existing empirical studies on politeness and speech behavior were incorporated to support comparative analysis.

The selected data reflect a range of communicative situations involving varying degrees of social distance, power relations, and formality. This diversity allows for a comprehensive examination of politeness strategies across cultures and supports the identification of both universal and culture-specific features of speech behavior.

Methods

This research adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and comparative methodological approach grounded in pragmatics and sociolinguistics. The primary method employed is comparative pragmatic analysis, which enables the systematic comparison of politeness strategies across different languages and cultural settings. The study draws on established theoretical frameworks, including Brown and Levinson's face theory, Leech's politeness principles, and Spencer-Oatey's rapport management model.

Discourse analysis is used to examine linguistic realizations of politeness, such as indirectness, mitigation devices, honorifics, forms of address, and speech act strategies. Speech act analysis, particularly focusing on requests, apologies, and refusals, is applied to identify pragmatic patterns and cultural preferences. By

¹² Locher, M. A., & Watts, R. J. (2005). Politeness theory and relational work. *Journal of Politeness Research*, 1(1), 9–33.

combining these methods, the study captures both the functional and interactional dimensions of politeness in speech behavior.

ANALYSIS

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, instances of politeness strategies are identified and categorized according to their pragmatic functions, such as face-saving, deference, solidarity, and conflict avoidance. Second, the identified strategies are analyzed within their sociocultural contexts, taking into account variables such as power, social distance, and communicative norms. This stage highlights how similar communicative intentions are realized differently across cultures.

In the final stage, a comparative analysis is conducted to distinguish universal tendencies from culture-specific realizations of politeness. Universal features are identified through recurring pragmatic patterns observed across different datasets, while culture-specific features are revealed through unique or dominant strategies characteristic of particular linguistic communities. The results of the analysis are interpreted in light of existing theories in politeness research, allowing for a critical evaluation of their explanatory power in cross-cultural contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the collected data reveals that politeness and speech behavior exhibit both universal tendencies and culture-specific realizations, confirming the central assumptions of cross-cultural pragmatics. Across all examined linguistic contexts, speakers consistently employ strategies aimed at maintaining social harmony, mitigating potential conflict, and preserving interlocutors' social image. These findings support the claim that certain pragmatic principles of politeness are universally shared, regardless of cultural background¹³.

One of the most prominent universal features identified in the data is the use of face-saving strategies. Speakers across different cultures demonstrate a clear preference for minimizing imposition when performing potentially face-threatening acts such as requests, refusals, and criticisms. Indirectness, modal verbs, hedging expressions, and mitigating devices are frequently employed to soften the illocutionary force of utterances. This aligns with previous research suggesting that indirectness functions as a key politeness strategy in many languages, though its degree and conventionalization vary considerably¹⁴.

Despite these shared tendencies, the analysis also reveals significant culture-specific differences in the realization of politeness strategies. In some cultural

¹³ Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁴ Blum-Kulka, S., House, J., & Kasper, G. (1989). *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

contexts, directness is not necessarily perceived as impolite but may instead signal sincerity, efficiency, or solidarity. Conversely, in other cultures, high levels of indirectness and elaborate politeness markers are expected, particularly in interactions involving social hierarchy or institutional roles. These findings support Ide's¹⁵ notion of *discernment*, according to which politeness is governed by socially prescribed norms rather than individual strategic choice.

Forms of address and honorific usage further illustrate the culture-bound nature of speech behavior. The data indicate that languages with complex honorific systems encode social relations explicitly through linguistic means, while others rely more heavily on pragmatic inference and contextual cues. This variation challenges the universality of certain politeness models and suggests that theories based primarily on Western linguistic data may not fully account for politeness phenomena in non-Western cultures¹⁶.

From a discursive perspective, the findings demonstrate that politeness is not a fixed property of linguistic forms but an interactional achievement negotiated by participants in specific contexts. The same linguistic strategy may be interpreted as polite or impolite depending on factors such as power relations, social distance, and communicative goals. This observation is consistent with the relational work approach proposed by Locher and Watts¹⁷, which views politeness as an emergent aspect of social interaction rather than a predefined set of rules.

The results also highlight the importance of integrating universalist and relativist approaches to politeness. While universal models such as Brown and Levinson's face theory provide valuable insights into general communicative motivations, they require contextual and cultural refinement to account for variation in speech behavior. Spencer-Oatey's¹⁸ rapport management framework proves particularly useful in this regard, as it incorporates both universal concerns for face and culture-specific expectations related to sociality rights and obligations.

Overall, the findings underscore the complexity of politeness as a pragmatic phenomenon situated at the intersection of language, culture, and society. By demonstrating how universal principles interact with culturally specific norms, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of speech behavior in intercultural communication. The results have practical implications for language teaching,

¹⁵ Ide, S. (1989). Formal forms and discernment: Two neglected aspects of universals of linguistic politeness. *Multilingua*, 8(2–3), 223–248.

¹⁶ Leech, G. N. (2014). *The pragmatics of politeness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁷ Watts, R. J. (2003). *Politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁸ Locher, M. A., & Watts, R. J. (2005). Politeness theory and relational work. *Journal of Politeness Research*, 1(1), 9–33.

translation, and intercultural competence development, emphasizing the need for cultural awareness in global communicative contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the universal and culture-specific features of politeness and speech behavior within the framework of pragmatics and cross-cultural communication. By integrating insights from classical politeness theories and contemporary discursive approaches, the research demonstrates that politeness cannot be adequately explained through a single universal or purely relativist perspective. Instead, politeness emerges as a dynamic interaction between shared pragmatic principles and culturally grounded communicative norms.

The findings confirm that certain aspects of politeness, such as the desire to maintain social harmony, avoid conflict, and protect interlocutors' social image, are universally present across linguistic and cultural communities. Strategies such as face-saving, mitigation, and indirectness recur in diverse communicative contexts, supporting the relevance of universalist models proposed by Brown and Levinson and Leech. However, the study also reveals that the realization of these strategies is deeply influenced by cultural values, social hierarchies, and contextual expectations, leading to significant variation in speech behavior.

One of the key contributions of this research lies in highlighting the role of culture in shaping politeness norms and interpretative frameworks. The analysis shows that what is considered polite behavior in one culture may not necessarily be evaluated in the same way in another. This reinforces the argument that politeness should be understood not as a fixed set of linguistic forms, but as a socially negotiated and context-dependent phenomenon. The discursive nature of politeness underscores the importance of considering interactional goals, power relations, and participants' cultural backgrounds in pragmatic analysis.

From a theoretical perspective, the study supports integrative models such as Spencer-Oatey's rapport management framework, which successfully bridges universal concerns for face with culture-specific expectations related to sociality rights and obligations. By synthesizing universalist and culture-sensitive approaches, the research contributes to a more comprehensive and flexible understanding of politeness and speech behavior in intercultural contexts.

The implications of this study extend beyond theoretical linguistics. In practical terms, the findings are relevant for foreign language teaching, translation and interpreting, intercultural training, and international professional communication. Developing awareness of both universal pragmatic principles and culture-specific

norms can help speakers avoid miscommunication and enhance communicative effectiveness in globalized settings.

Despite its contributions, the study has certain limitations, including its reliance on qualitative data and a limited range of cultural contexts. Future research could expand the scope of analysis by incorporating larger corpora, quantitative methods, and a broader range of languages and cultures. Further empirical studies could also explore politeness strategies in digital communication, where traditional norms of speech behavior are undergoing rapid transformation.

In conclusion, this research emphasizes that politeness and speech behavior are complex, multifaceted phenomena shaped by the interplay of universal human communicative needs and culturally specific practices. Recognizing and respecting this interplay is essential for advancing both theoretical research and practical applications in the field of intercultural communication.

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