



## **POLITENESS AND CULTURE**

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### **Abstract**

Every language and culture develops a linguistic system in order to enable speakers of that language to communicate effectively. Therefore, understanding people's cultural and linguistic behavior can facilitate communication and increase understanding across-cultures. As speaking or communicating takes place in certain social and cultural environment, culture may exert great influence on people's use of language and their views on politeness. This paper attempts to analyze the relationship of politeness and culture.

**Keywords:** politeness, culture, language

## **ВЕЖЛИВОСТЬ И КУЛЬТУРА**

### **Аннотация**

Каждый язык и культура развивают лингвистическую систему, позволяющую носителям этого языка эффективно общаться. Таким образом, понимание культурного и языкового поведения людей может облегчить общение и улучшить понимание между культурами. Поскольку речь или общение происходят в определенной социальной и культурной среде, культура может оказывать большое влияние на использование людьми языка и их взгляды на вежливость. В данной статье предпринята попытка проанализировать взаимосвязь вежливости и культуры.

**Ключевые слова:** вежливость, культура, язык.

### **Introduction**

Every language and culture develops a linguistic system in order to enable speakers of that language to communicate effectively. Therefore, understanding people's cultural and linguistic behavior can facilitate communication and increase understanding across-cultures. Language helps bind people together into a speech community in which people "share a set of norms, rules, and expectations regarding the use of language." (Yule, 2000:239) Politeness, usually achieved through the use of language, may be either one of the goals which people tend to achieve with certain linguistic choices, or one of the criteria which people are supposed to abide by while using language to communicate with others. In daily communication, people make different linguistic choices for different purposes among which politeness turns out to be an important one.

In different cultures, people conduct their social lives in different cultural contexts in which certain norms, rules and expectations are imposed on them. These differences include the social distance, in-



group and out-group differences, socially-defined rights and obligations, etc. Therefore, when people express politeness, they are supposed to follow the cultural conventions and adopt certain strategies for expressing politeness.

One of the main claims in the work of Brown and Levinson (1987) is that politeness is a universal feature in language usage. In other words, linguistic politeness could be explained as universal in human social interactions across cultures and all the languages in the world have their own way to express politeness. Thus, since Brown and Levinson first claimed "universality" in politeness phenomena, scholars have both developed and challenged this idea. Some research studies (Wierzbicka: 1985; Matsumoto: 1988; Ide: 1989; Mao: 1994) have demonstrated that the principles underlying Brown and Levinson's model, which explain interactional styles on the basis of face wants, are not applicable to the analysis of Eastern languages, whose politeness values are not based on individualism, but on group identity.

Blum-Kulka (1987), for instance has doubts on the validity of the universality claim. She points out that the most indirect request strategy, i.e., hints, is not universally acceptable as the most polite. She also adds that second language speakers who have excellent command of the grammar and vocabulary of the target language might fail to communicate effectively. For her, this failure is due to cross-linguistic differences in speech acts realization rules. Blum- Kulka and Olshtain (1984) report that diversity in the realization of speech act in context may emerge from at least three different variables: a) intra-cultural, situational variability, b) cross cultural variability and c) individual variability. Thus there might be systematic differences in the realization patterns of speech acts, depending on social constraints embedded in the situation. For instance, requests directed to superiors, in a given culture, might be phrased in less direct terms than requests addressed to social juniors, or vice-versa. On another dimension, within the same set of social obligations, members of one culture might express a request more or less directly than their counterparts in another culture. Finally, members in the same society might differ in their speech act realization patterns, depending on personal variables such as sex, age, or even level of education and status.

On the other hand, some scholars have done several empirical studies to show that the strategies for performing illocutionary acts are essentially the same across languages. For instance, Gordon and Lakoff (1975) say that when checking with a score of speakers of widely divergent languages, they found that the conventional utterances they use are almost universal. Lakoff presents three politeness rules that she claims to be universal in all cultures, although different cultures will consider these rules differently according to the priority and conditions in which they are used. These rules are categorized in the following:

- 1- Formality: keep aloof
- 2- Deference: give options
- 3- Camaraderie: show sympathy.

Leech (1983) has also dealt with the notion of universality in terms of his Politeness Maxims. He claims that the six maxims operate along with the four maxims of Grice in almost all cultures but with different values associated to them in different cultures. For example, in English-speaking linguistic and cultural traditions, the concept of politeness, although it is considered as a manifestation of respect, is more



pragmatic, utilitarian. This is primarily related to the rules of speech behavior in the social context, and is based on the principles of politeness and face theory, or the image of behavior that the participants of the conversation "put on" in a certain social environment.

In Eastern culture, there are two main factors influencing behavior: religious and social. A person must maintain a balance between these two attitudes. On the one hand, religion says to show humility in dealing with other people. On the other hand, society strongly advises an individual to have self-respect. The conflict between these two opposing factors often puts a person in a difficult situation.

The traditions of Eastern nations distinguish between individual and collective courtesy. Individual tact refers to the inner intuitive tact of an intelligent person. Collective politeness is an external politeness that arises from the rules of behavior that a person must obey in society, for example, a person is polite, optimistic, caring, etc., depending on the communicative situation. Being polite includes manners, politeness, pessimism, optimism, respect, praise, etc.

If we look at the concept of politeness in English and Uzbek language and cultural traditions, we can say that both cultures interpret politeness as respect for other participants of communication, which is a universal feature of this concept. At the same time, each of the traditions has its own cultural understanding of this phenomenon: in Uzbek traditions, politeness is internal, intuitive and external politeness arising from the rules of behavior in society. The most pragmatic and developed theory of politeness can be recognized in the English-speaking tradition, which considers politeness to be a rule of conduct, a "face" that interlocutors put on to achieve their pragmatic goals.

The present study suggests that universality of politeness exists in the similarities between languages. It lies in the human social interaction across cultures, but the same intended function of politeness does not always match the semantic formula used to express the speech act among languages. On the other hand, cultural differences lead to pragmatic transfer since different forms are associated with different values in different cultures. And this transfer can cause pragma-linguistic failure during communication. The problem of the „universality“ of politeness as an interactive procedure of talk or of making oneself more accessible to human society is that it lacks consensus in both its linguistic representation and the criteria of social assessment: “there is little agreement among researchers in the field about what, exactly, constitutes politeness and the domain of related research. . . . The distinction between linguistic and non-linguistic politeness is not drawn . . . a viable theory of politeness cannot rest upon a set of rules based on social, normative behavior” (Fraser, 1990: 234). It is quite obvious now that it is difficult to generalize universal rules about the use of politeness strategies across cultures since each language has its culture-specific pragmatic features. What is universal about politeness is the concept itself. The strategies differ from one culture to another.

In a word, politeness is closely related to culture. People from different cultures seem to follow different criteria of expressing politeness. Additionally, people do not live in a vacuum but in a speech community which is full of cultural conventions. In Claire Kramsch's words, "etiquette, expressions of politeness, social dos and don'ts shape people's behavior through child rearing, behavioral upbringing, schooling," and professional training. (Kramsch, 2004:6) Therefore, when people are faced with the need to show politeness, they are likely to be influenced by their cultural expectations and norms.



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