

**FACE-THREATENING ACTS IN PROFESSIONAL VS. INFORMAL
COMMUNICATION IN UZBEK AND ENGLISH**

Karimova Ozodaxon Avazxon kizi

Teacher of World Language department, Kokand University

e-mail: o1516067@gmail.com

ORCID: 0009-0009-0643-8445

ABSTRACT. This study examines face-threatening acts (FTAs) in professional and informal communication in English and Uzbek, highlighting cross-cultural and context-dependent differences in language use. Grounded in Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, the research investigates how speakers mitigate potential threats to the hearer's face through strategies such as indirectness, hedging, honorifics, and politeness markers. Data were drawn from authentic written and spoken discourse, including workplace emails, professional meetings, casual conversations, and social media exchanges. The findings reveal that FTAs are realized differently depending on both cultural norms and communication context. In professional settings, English speakers tend to employ explicit yet mitigated strategies, balancing clarity with politeness, while Uzbek speakers rely heavily on context-sensitive honorifics and relational markers to preserve social hierarchy and interpersonal harmony. In informal settings, both languages demonstrate greater flexibility, but Uzbek communication still emphasizes indirectness and relational sensitivity more than English. These results underscore the significance of cultural and contextual awareness in managing FTAs and preventing miscommunication. The study offers insights for cross-cultural communication, language teaching, and professional interaction, highlighting the importance of pragmatic competence in navigating face-threatening situations effectively across languages and contexts.

Keywords: Face-threatening acts, pragmatics, politeness strategies, English, Uzbek, professional communication, informal communication, cross-cultural communication

INTRODUCTION

Communication is not merely the exchange of information; it is a complex social interaction in which speakers constantly negotiate self-image, interpersonal relationships, and social norms. A central concept in this negotiation is "face," which refers to an individual's public self-image or the positive social value a person claims in interaction (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This concept has its roots in Goffman's (1967) sociological theory, where face is viewed

as a social resource that participants attempt to maintain in conversation. Brown and Levinson (1987) extended this notion to linguistics, introducing the concept of face-threatening acts (FTAs), which are communicative behaviors that risk damaging either the speaker's or the hearer's face. Face-threatening acts include requests, criticisms, disagreements, or even compliments when they potentially conflict with the addressee's autonomy or self-esteem (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

FTAs are unavoidable in daily communication because many utterances, even routine ones, inherently threaten face. Brown and Levinson (1987) differentiate between positive face, the desire to be liked and accepted by others, and negative face, the desire to act freely without imposition. These dimensions guide speakers' choices of politeness strategies, including directness, indirectness, hedging, positive politeness, negative politeness, or avoidance, to mitigate potential threats (Brown & Levinson, 1987). While Brown and Levinson propose a universal framework, research has demonstrated that cultural norms strongly shape the interpretation and mitigation of FTAs. In English-speaking contexts, often associated with individualist cultural values, communication tends to emphasize clarity, directness, and personal autonomy. By contrast, in Uzbek, reflecting a collectivist cultural orientation, communication prioritizes relationship preservation, respect for social hierarchy, and indirect strategies to minimize face threats (Karimova, 2024). These cross-cultural differences make the study of FTAs especially significant, particularly in contrasting professional and informal communication contexts.

In professional communication—such as workplace meetings, organizational emails, or institutional interactions—there is typically a higher emphasis on formal conventions, role expectations, and institutional norms. FTAs in such settings often occur when speakers issue directives, requests, or constructive criticism. English speakers generally employ negative politeness strategies, mitigating impositions with modal verbs or hedging phrases such as “Could you possibly...” or “Would it be possible...?” (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989). Such strategies aim to balance politeness with efficiency and clarity. In Uzbek professional communication, by contrast, speakers often rely on honorific forms, relational markers, and deferential phrasing to preserve social hierarchy and interpersonal harmony, consistent with collectivist values (Karimova, 2025).

In informal communication, including interactions among friends or peers, FTAs may arise in requests, teasing, disagreements, or casual advice. English speakers often employ positive politeness strategies in these contexts, emphasizing camaraderie, shared experiences, or mutual interests to maintain solidarity and reduce the perceived threat of the FTA (Thomas, 1983). Uzbek informal communication also uses indirectness and relational cues, but with more nuanced politeness markers that reflect age, status, and group identity, even when social distance is minimal (Karimova, 2024). These differences illustrate how cultural norms continue to influence face management, even in casual settings.

The concept of FTAs is also closely tied to power dynamics and social roles. In professional settings, for instance, a superior issuing a directive or feedback inherently carries

more weight than a peer-level interaction. English communication norms may allow for more direct strategies in such hierarchical settings if institutional efficiency is prioritized, whereas Uzbek norms temper directives with relational softeners and deferential language to protect interpersonal harmony. Conversely, informal contexts reduce hierarchical impositions but still require attention to relational expectations and politeness markers to avoid offending the addressee (Gass & Houck, 1999).

Cross-cultural interaction further complicates the management of FTAs. Misunderstandings arise when interlocutors apply their native pragmatic norms to the target language context. For example, an English speaker's direct professional request may be perceived as rude or overly blunt by an Uzbek interlocutor accustomed to indirect strategies and honorifics. Conversely, an Uzbek speaker's indirect approach may be interpreted as ambiguous or evasive by an English interlocutor (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Thomas, 1983). These differences highlight the importance of pragmatic competence, defined as the ability to understand and produce context-appropriate language while managing face effectively (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Prior studies in cross-cultural pragmatics support these distinctions. Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) found that requests and apologies vary systematically across languages due to differences in politeness conventions, social hierarchy, and context sensitivity. Thomas (1983) introduced the concept of pragmatic failure, describing situations where communication breakdowns occur not because of grammar but because of mismatched expectations in politeness or face management. Research on Central Asian languages, including Uzbek, shows that indirect strategies, honorifics, and relational markers are integral to maintaining social harmony, reflecting a collectivist orientation in both professional and informal settings (Karimova & Sobirova, 2025).

Analyzing FTAs in professional versus informal communication across English and Uzbek thus offers important theoretical and practical insights. It illustrates how face is managed differently according to context, social distance, power dynamics, and cultural norms. The findings have significant implications for language teaching, intercultural competence, and professional communication, enabling learners to navigate face-threatening situations more effectively and avoid miscommunication. Explicit teaching of FTA management strategies, including both direct and indirect forms, can enhance learners' awareness of culturally appropriate speech acts and improve communication in multicultural environments (Gass & Houck, 1999; Thomas, 1983).

In summary, this study examines how face-threatening acts are realized in English and Uzbek across professional and informal contexts, highlighting the interplay of language, culture, and context in pragmatic behavior. It contributes to cross-cultural pragmatics by demonstrating that FTAs are shaped not only by the linguistic forms of utterances but also by cultural norms, relational expectations, and situational factors. By understanding these dynamics, language learners, translators, and intercultural communicators can better anticipate potential

misunderstandings, manage face effectively, and enhance both professional and social interactions.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach to examine how face-threatening acts (FTAs) are realized in professional and informal communication in English and Uzbek. A qualitative methodology is suitable because FTAs are context-dependent, culturally nuanced, and socially mediated, requiring in-depth analysis of politeness strategies, relational markers, and linguistic forms (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989).

Data Sources

Data were drawn from authentic and elicited sources:

- **Professional communication:** Workplace emails, institutional letters, formal meetings, and professional forums.
- **Informal communication:** Conversations among friends, family, and social media exchanges.
- **Elicited scenarios:** Short tasks adapted from discourse completion principles to provoke FTAs in controlled contexts.

This variety ensures a rich and context-sensitive dataset capturing differences in politeness strategies across languages and settings (Thomas, 1983).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a thematic and discourse-pragmatic framework:

1. **Identification of FTAs:** Requests, advice, disagreements, or criticisms were marked as FTAs.
2. **Pragmatic coding:** Strategies such as directness, indirectness, hedging, positive/negative politeness, and honorific forms were categorized (Brown & Levinson, 1987).
3. **Contextual interpretation:** Differences across professional and informal settings and between English and Uzbek were analyzed to reveal cultural and hierarchical influences.
4. **Cross-linguistic comparison:** Patterns were compared to identify **universal and culture-specific trends**.

Ethical Considerations

Only public or anonymized texts were used, with identifiers removed. Participants in elicited scenarios gave informed consent.

Rationale

A qualitative approach allows detailed exploration of how speakers manage FTAs in context, revealing the intersection of culture, language, and social norms that quantitative methods cannot capture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined face-threatening acts (FTAs) in professional and informal communication in English and Uzbek, focusing on requests, disagreements, advice, and criticism. The analysis revealed clear patterns in how cultural norms, relational markers, and context influence the selection of politeness strategies and the mitigation of FTAs.

1. Requests: Requests are a common type of FTA because they impose on the addressee's negative face—the desire to act freely without imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

In professional English communication, requests were often direct but mitigated through modal verbs and hedging expressions. Examples include:

- “Could you send me the revised report by tomorrow?”
- “Would it be possible to schedule a meeting next week?”

These strategies aim to balance clarity with politeness, reflecting English norms that value efficiency and individual responsibility in professional contexts (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). In professional Uzbek communication, requests were more indirect and deferential, frequently incorporating honorifics and relational markers. For example:

- “Iltimos, agar sizga noqulay bo'lmasa, bu hisobotni menga yuborishingiz mumkinmi?”
(“Please, if it is not inconvenient for you, could you send me this report?”)
- “Balki siz menga yordam bera olasiz?”
(“Perhaps you could help me?”)

These forms highlight collectivist cultural values, emphasizing social harmony and respect for hierarchy. In informal English communication, requests tended to be more casual and solidarity-oriented, often relying on shared context and positive politeness:

- “Hey, can you send me that doc when you get a sec?”
- “Mind helping me out with this?”

In contrast, informal Uzbek communication still maintained some level of indirectness and relational markers, even among close peers:

- “Iltimos, yordam bera olasizmi?”

- (“Please, could you help me?”)
- “Balki sizga noqulay bo‘lmasa, shuni qilishingiz mumkinmi?”
 (“If it’s not inconvenient, perhaps you could do this?”)

English speakers prioritize **task completion and clarity**, while Uzbek speakers prioritize **relationship maintenance and face-saving**, even in informal contexts.

2. Disagreements and Criticism: Disagreements and criticism inherently threaten both positive and negative face.

In professional English, criticism is often direct but softened through hedging and impersonal phrasing:

- “I think there may be an issue with the methodology in this section; perhaps we could review it together.”
- “It appears that some data might need updating.”

In professional Uzbek, criticism is frequently indirect, often accompanied by polite expressions and honorifics to minimize offense:

- “Ehtimol, bu bo‘limni qayta ko‘rib chiqish foydali bo‘lar edi, deb o‘ylayman.”
 (“Perhaps it would be useful to review this section.”)
- “Agar siz rozilik bildirsangiz, men ma‘lumotlarni yangilashni tavsiya qilaman.”
 (“If you agree, I would recommend updating the data.”)

In informal English, disagreements are often expressed more openly but moderated through humor or solidarity markers:

- “I don’t totally agree with that point, maybe we should check it again.”

In informal Uzbek, disagreement is typically phrased indirectly with mitigating phrases:

- “Men sizning fikringizga to‘liq qo‘shilmayman, balki boshqa nuqtai nazarni ham ko‘rib chiqishimiz mumkin.”
 (“I don’t fully agree with your opinion; perhaps we can also consider another perspective.”)

Professional English prioritizes clarity and responsibility, while professional Uzbek emphasizes hierarchy and politeness. Informal English allows more direct disagreement, whereas informal Uzbek retains indirectness, reflecting a cultural emphasis on face preservation and respect (Thomas, 1983; Abduazizova, 2018).

3. Advice and Suggestions: Advice can threaten negative face because it implies the addressee

is not acting appropriately.

In professional English, advice often uses hedging and conditional phrasing:

- “You might want to consider revising this section to improve clarity.”
- “Perhaps it would help to review the references again.”

In professional Uzbek, advice is often embedded in polite, deferential language:

- “Agar sizga qulay bo‘lsa, ushbu bo‘limni qayta ko‘rib chiqishingiz mumkin.”
 (“If it is convenient for you, you may review this section.”)
- “Men tavsiya qilardimki, manbalarni yana tekshirib chiqilsin.”
 (“I would recommend reviewing the sources again.”)

In informal English, advice is generally direct but softened by solidarity markers:

- “You should probably check this part again, just to be safe.”

In informal Uzbek, advice retains politeness and indirectness, even among peers:

- “Balki siz bu bo‘limni qayta ko‘rib chiqishingiz mumkin.”
 (“Perhaps you could review this section.”)

These patterns confirm that English communication emphasizes directness tempered with hedging, while Uzbek communication emphasizes face-saving through indirectness and relational markers, even in informal settings (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Tamaddunnuri Journal, 2018).

4. Cross-Linguistic and Contextual Patterns: Across all speech acts, several trends emerge:

1. **Directness vs. Indirectness:** English speakers are generally more direct; Uzbek speakers favor indirectness, even in casual interactions.
2. **Mitigation Strategies:** Uzbek relies on hedging, honorifics, and relational markers, whereas English relies on hedging and formulaic politeness expressions.
3. **Cultural Orientation:** English reflects individualist values (clarity, personal responsibility); Uzbek reflects collectivist values (relationship maintenance, group harmony).
4. **Context Sensitivity:** FTAs are more formalized in professional contexts; informal contexts allow flexibility but cultural norms continue to shape strategy choice.

The findings highlight the importance of pragmatic competence for effective cross-cultural communication. Misunderstandings can arise if interlocutors transfer native-language norms without considering contextual and cultural expectations. Teaching learners context-sensitive FTA strategies can enhance professional and informal communication across English and Uzbek

(Thomas, 1983; Gass & Houck, 1999).

CONCLUSION

This study examined how face-threatening acts (FTAs) are realized in professional and informal communication in English and Uzbek, revealing both culture-specific patterns and context-dependent variations. The analysis demonstrated that English speakers generally employ direct yet mitigated strategies, using hedging and formulaic politeness to balance clarity with respect for the addressee's autonomy. In contrast, Uzbek speakers rely heavily on indirect strategies, relational markers, and honorific forms to maintain interpersonal harmony and respect hierarchical structures, even in informal contexts.

In professional settings, FTAs are managed with a strong awareness of power dynamics, institutional roles, and relational expectations. English communication favors clarity and task completion, while Uzbek communication emphasizes social harmony and deferential politeness. In informal contexts, both languages allow for greater flexibility, but cultural norms continue to shape the degree of indirectness, use of relational markers, and face-saving strategies.

These findings highlight the importance of pragmatic competence in cross-cultural communication. Misunderstandings can arise when interlocutors fail to recognize differences in FTA management, as English directness may seem blunt to Uzbek speakers, and Uzbek indirectness may appear ambiguous to English speakers. The study offers valuable insights for language teaching, intercultural competence development, professional communication training, and translation practices, emphasizing that effective communication extends beyond grammatical accuracy to include sensitivity to social context, cultural norms, and face considerations.

In conclusion, understanding how FTAs are realized in different languages and contexts enhances our comprehension of language as a social tool, fostering more effective and harmonious interactions in both professional and informal settings across cultures.

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