

HOW DO DIFFERENT CULTURAL CONTEXTS CREATE CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS IN EXPRESSING THESE SPEECH ACTS?

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Abstract: This study explores how different cultural contexts shape the way people express speech acts, such as requests, apologies, and compliments. Speech acts are an important part of communication, but people from different cultures may perform them in various ways. These differences are influenced by cultural values, social norms, and language structures. For example, in some cultures, people may be direct when making requests, while in others, they may use polite or indirect language. Similarly, the way people apologize or give compliments can vary depending on cultural expectations. Understanding these differences is important for successful communication across cultures. This paper examines how cultural contexts influence speech acts and highlights the importance of being aware of these differences in multicultural interactions.

Key words: Cultural context, speech acts, communication, cultural expectations, requests, apologies, compliments, cross-cultural interaction, language use, social norms.

Introduction

Language is a powerful tool for communication, and speech acts play a key role in how people express their thoughts and feelings. Speech acts refer to actions performed through language, such as making requests, offering apologies, giving compliments, and expressing gratitude. While these acts are common in all languages, the way they are expressed can vary greatly across different cultural contexts. Cultural norms and values shape how individuals use language, influencing whether speech acts are performed directly or indirectly, formally or informally, and with varying levels of politeness.

Different cultures have unique expectations about how speech acts should be expressed. For example, in some cultures, people may value directness and view straightforward communication as honest and clear. In contrast, other cultures may prioritize politeness and indirectness to maintain social harmony and avoid conflict. These cultural differences can affect how people interpret and respond to speech acts, which may lead to misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication.

Understanding how cultural contexts shape speech acts is essential for effective communication, especially in today's globalized world. Miscommunication can occur when individuals are unaware of these cultural expectations. By studying the relationship between culture and speech acts, we can better understand the diversity of human interaction and improve communication across different cultural backgrounds. This paper explores how cultural contexts influence the expression of speech acts, focusing on requests, apologies, and compliments. It examines the differences in speech act performance across cultures and highlights the importance of cultural awareness in fostering successful communication.

Main part

Speech acts are essential components of everyday communication. According to J.L. Austin¹ and John Searle², speech acts can be categorized into three main types: locutionary acts (the actual words spoken), illocutionary acts (the intended meaning behind the words), and perlocutionary acts (the effect the words have on the listener). While these categories apply universally, the way they are performed and interpreted depends significantly on cultural norms and expectations.

Cultural contexts shape how people deliver speech acts, influencing whether they are expressed directly or indirectly, formally or informally, and with varying degrees of politeness. For example, in cultures that value individualism, such as the United States and many Western European countries, speech acts tend to be more direct and explicit. In contrast, collectivist cultures like Japan, China, and many Middle Eastern societies often use more indirect and implicit speech acts to maintain social harmony and avoid confrontation.

Requests are common speech acts that people use to ask others for assistance or information. However, the way requests are framed depends on cultural values. In direct cultures, speakers often make straightforward requests, as clarity is valued. For instance, an American might say, "Can you help me with this task?" In contrast, in more indirect cultures, people may soften their requests with polite expressions or hints. For example, a Japanese speaker might say, "I wonder if it might be possible to get some help," which reflects a desire to be respectful and avoid imposing.

Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness explains these differences through the concepts of positive and negative face³. In individualistic societies, requests often appeal to positive face, emphasizing friendliness and openness. In collectivist societies, requests focus on negative face, respecting the listener's autonomy and minimizing imposition. Misunderstandings may occur if a direct request is perceived as rude or an indirect one as vague.

Apologies are another speech act where cultural expectations vary. In some cultures, frequent and explicit apologies demonstrate humility and responsibility, while in others, excessive apologizing may be viewed as a sign of weakness. For instance, in Japanese culture, apologies are used not only to admit fault but also to maintain harmony and show consideration. A Japanese person may apologize even when they are not directly responsible for a problem to preserve group cohesion. In contrast, Western cultures like the United States or Germany may reserve apologies for situations where clear wrongdoing has occurred. For example, an American might say, "I'm sorry I made a mistake," while a Japanese person might say, "I apologize for the inconvenience," regardless of fault. These differences in apology strategies can lead to cross-cultural misunderstandings if one party perceives an apology as insincere or unnecessary.

¹ Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Harvard University Press, 1962.-P.64.

² Searle, John R. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge University Press, 1969.-P.79.

³ Brown, Penelope, and Stephen C. Levinson. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge University Press, 1987. -P.50.

Compliments serve to express admiration or approval but are also subject to cultural variation. In Western cultures, giving compliments is common and often expected as a form of positive reinforcement. For example, an American might say, "You did a great job on your presentation," as a way to boost the listener's confidence. In some Asian cultures, however, receiving a compliment may create discomfort because humility is highly valued. In China or Japan, a typical response to a compliment might involve downplaying the achievement, such as saying, "It was nothing special." This reflects a cultural norm that discourages self-praise. Failure to recognize these differences can lead to confusion, as a refusal of a compliment in one culture may seem like modesty but could be misinterpreted as disagreement in another.

Language structure also affects how speech acts are expressed across cultures. Languages with rich honorific systems, such as Korean or Japanese, offer speakers multiple ways to convey respect and formality. For example, in Japanese, there are different levels of politeness when making requests depending on the social relationship between the speaker and the listener. Conversely, English relies more on intonation and choice of words to signal politeness.

Additionally, contextual factors such as social status, age, and gender influence how speech acts are performed. In hierarchical cultures, a subordinate may use highly respectful language when addressing a superior, while in egalitarian cultures, people are more likely to use casual language regardless of rank. Understanding these contextual influences is essential for interpreting speech acts accurately in intercultural communication.

Miscommunication often arises when people from different cultural backgrounds interpret speech acts based on their own cultural norms. For instance, a direct request from an American manager might be seen as aggressive by an employee from a culture that values indirectness. Conversely, an indirect apology from a Japanese colleague may be misunderstood as avoiding responsibility by someone from a more direct culture.

Studies in intercultural pragmatics highlight that successful communication requires recognizing and adapting to these differences. Thomas introduced the concept of pragmatic failure, which occurs when a speaker's intended meaning is not understood due to cultural differences⁴. For example, if a British person says, "I wonder if you could help me," a listener unfamiliar with British politeness strategies might not recognize this as a direct request for assistance. To overcome these challenges, it is crucial to develop cultural awareness and communicative flexibility. By understanding how speech acts function across cultures, individuals can better navigate social interactions and avoid unintended offense. Moreover, fostering intercultural competence helps bridge communication gaps and promotes mutual understanding in diverse environments.

Conclusion

In conclusion, speech acts are an integral part of communication, but their interpretation and execution vary significantly across cultural contexts. Differences in expressing requests, apologies, and compliments reflect deeper cultural values such as individualism, collectivism, and social hierarchy. Misunderstandings often arise when individuals interpret speech acts based on their own cultural frameworks, leading to pragmatic failures in intercultural communication.

⁴ Thomas, Jenny. Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure. *Applied Linguistics*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1983. -P.110.

Developing cultural awareness and adaptability is essential for successful cross-cultural interactions. By recognizing and respecting these cultural differences, individuals can foster clearer communication and build stronger, more respectful relationships in a globalized world.

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