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THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE ON PRAGMATIC USE IN ENGLISH-SPEAKING COUNTRIES

Shokhida Rakhmatillayeva Baxtiyor qizi
Teacher of Integrated Course of the English Language Department
№1Uzbekistan State University of World Languages Tashkent,
Uzbekistan

Abstract

This study explores the influence of cultural values and norms on the pragmatic use of language in English-speaking countries. Pragmatics—the study of language in context—encompasses how speakers use indirectness, politeness strategies, speech acts, and conversational implicature to convey meaning beyond literal words. Despite sharing a common language, English-speaking countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia exhibit significant variation in pragmatic conventions due to differing historical, social, and cultural backgrounds. Through a comparative analysis of conversational data, media discourse, and cross-cultural studies, the research identifies how cultural dimensions—such as individualism vs. collectivism, power distance, and attitudes toward formality—influence expressions of politeness, disagreement, humor, and requests.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Intercultural communication, Politeness strategies, Cultural norms, Pragmatic competence, Cultural variation

Introduction

Language is not only a tool for communication but also a reflection of the social and cultural values of its speakers. While grammar and vocabulary are often taught explicitly, the pragmatic aspects of language—how meaning is shaped by context, social norms, and cultural expectations—are less directly addressed, yet they are essential for successful communication. Pragmatics involves understanding how language functions in real-life interactions, including how people use speech acts, politeness strategies, indirectness, and implicature to achieve their communicative goals.

In English-speaking countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, the pragmatic use of English varies considerably despite a shared linguistic foundation. These differences are influenced by distinct cultural attitudes toward hierarchy, individualism, formality, and interpersonal relationships. For instance, American English tends to favor directness and egalitarianism, while British English often emphasizes indirectness and formality. Such cultural distinctions can significantly affect how requests, refusals, compliments, and apologies are interpreted in different English-speaking contexts. Misunderstandings in communication often arise not from grammatical errors, but from a lack of pragmatic awareness—particularly in intercultural or multicultural settings. This issue becomes even more complex in globalized societies where English serves as a lingua franca among speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Literature Review

The field of pragmatics has long recognized the importance of cultural context in shaping how language is used and interpreted. One of the foundational frameworks in this area is Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, which introduces the concept of face and face-threatening acts, explaining how speakers use strategies like indirectness, hedging, and honorifics to maintain social harmony. Their work highlights the cultural variation in politeness norms, particularly between collectivist and individualist societies—a principle applicable to distinctions within English-speaking countries. Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle and his conversational maxims—quantity, quality, relevance, and manner—offer further insights into how meaning is inferred in conversation. While these maxims are considered universal, how they are applied can vary significantly across cultures. For example, what counts as "relevant" or "polite" in British English may be perceived as evasive or overly formal in American English. Wierzbicka (1991) argues that language is culture-specific and that even closely related languages like American and Australian English reflect different cultural scripts. Her work supports the idea that pragmatic norms are not uniform across English-speaking countries. For example, Australians may prefer egalitarian and informal speech patterns, whereas British speakers might adhere more strongly to hierarchical and formal structures. Research

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by Thomas (1983) introduced the concept of *pragmatic failure*, which occurs when a speaker's intended meaning is misinterpreted due to cultural differences. This is particularly common in intercultural communication, where a speaker's native pragmatic norms may clash with those of their interlocutor. In English-speaking multicultural societies, such as Canada or the UK, pragmatic failure can lead to breakdowns in communication or perceived rudeness.

More recent studies, such as Placencia & García and Kádár & Haugh, emphasize the role of culture in shaping discursive practices and speech acts like apologies, compliments, and refusals. These researchers note that while the surface structure of English may be shared, the underlying pragmatic intentions and interpretations often differ. For example, British indirectness may serve to express politeness, while in American English, more direct speech may be seen as honest and efficient.

Studies in intercultural pragmatics have provided comparative analyses of speech acts across cultures and languages, reinforcing the idea that culture deeply influences not just what people say, but how and why they say it. Even within English-speaking nations, these studies reveal significant differences in expressions of gratitude, disagreement, and criticism.

Conclusion

In conclusion this study highlights the critical role that culture plays in shaping the pragmatic use of English across different English-speaking countries. While these countries share a common language, their cultural values, social norms, and communication styles vary significantly, influencing how language is used in context. Politeness strategies, directness or indirectness in speech, and the interpretation of speech acts are all deeply embedded in cultural expectations, which can differ greatly between, for example, American, British, Australian, and Canadian English. The findings from the literature reveal that pragmatic variation is not merely a matter of personal style but is often a reflection of broader cultural frameworks. Misunderstandings in communication often stem from these cultural differences, not from linguistic incompetence. Thus, effective communication—particularly in multicultural and international contexts—requires more than fluency in English; it demands cultural awareness and pragmatic competence.

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Understanding how culture influences pragmatic behavior can help avoid communication breakdowns, enhance intercultural understanding, and improve language education by incorporating sociocultural elements into teaching. As the use of English continues to grow globally, especially as a lingua franca, recognizing and respecting pragmatic diversity will become increasingly important for both native and non-native speakers.

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