

THE ROLE OF SPEECH ACTS IN CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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This article explores five key dimensions of how speech acts affect cross-cultural communication. By examining how cultural norms shape language use how directness and politeness vary and how social dynamics influence communicative behavior, we can develop a deeper understanding of why communication sometimes breaks down and how it can be improved.

Keywords: Speech acts, directness, indirectness, individualism and collectivism, direct and indirect speech acts.

Introduction

In today's globalized world, communication across cultural boundaries is increasingly common whether in international business, education, tourism, diplomacy or digital communication. Despite sharing a common language, people from different cultural backgrounds often experience misunderstandings and misinterpretations. One significant, yet often overlooked, reason for this is the cultural variation in speech acts the communicative actions we perform through language, such as requesting, apologizing, offering, refusing or complimenting.

The concept of speech acts originated in the field of pragmatics, a subfield of linguistics and philosophy that studies language use in context. British philosopher J.L. Austin introduced the idea in the 1960s, which was later expanded by John Searle. According to this theory, when we speak, we are not merely conveying information we are performing actions. For example, when someone says, "Can you pass the salt?" they are not simply inquiring about ability but are making a polite request. This illustrates how language operates beyond grammar and vocabulary it functions socially and contextually.

In cross-cultural communication, these speech acts do not always transfer smoothly from one culture to another. What is considered a polite request in one culture might be perceived as rude or overly direct in another. Similarly, an apology that seems sincere in one cultural setting may appear superficial or excessive in another. These discrepancies arise because speech acts are deeply embedded in **cultural values, norms, and social expectations**. For example, Western cultures like those in the United States, Canada or much of Northern Europe tend to value **directness**, efficiency and clarity in communication. A request or refusal is often expected to be made clearly and explicitly. In contrast, many Asian, African, or Middle Eastern cultures may value **indirectness**, harmony and face-saving strategies. In such cultures, people might avoid saying "no" directly or frame requests more subtly to preserve social relationships and avoid embarrassment.

Another complicating factor is **politeness**. Politeness strategies differ vastly across languages and societies. English speakers often use modal verbs (could, would), tag questions, or softeners to be polite. In contrast, cultures with strong hierarchical structures (Korean, Thai, or Javanese) may rely heavily on formal speech levels, honorifics, and elaborate deference systems. When individuals from different politeness systems interact, mismatches in expectations can easily arise, sometimes leading to unintended disrespect or confusion.

These culturally governed patterns of speech acts can influence not just one-on-one conversations but also institutional and professional communication. In international business negotiations, for instance, failing to understand how compliments, refusals, or apologies are interpreted in a different culture could lead to failed deals or damaged relationships. In education, international students may struggle not with grammar, but with how to appropriately make requests, participate in group discussions, or respond to feedback.

Moreover, speech acts are closely tied to **social roles and relationships**. They reflect and reinforce power dynamics, status differences, and social distance. The way a manager speaks to an employee, or a student speaks to a professor, varies not just by role but by cultural norms surrounding hierarchy and respect. When people from different cultural backgrounds apply their own norms to unfamiliar contexts, they may unintentionally come across as disrespectful or inappropriate.

Language is not simply a neutral tool for expressing ideas it is deeply influenced by the cultural norms, values and social expectations of its speakers. In every culture, specific rules govern **what we say, how we say it, when and to whom**. These rules shape the way speech acts are performed and interpreted. When individuals from different cultures interact, their differing assumptions about these rules can lead to miscommunication, even when they share a common language.

At the heart of this variation is the idea that speech acts are not universal. A single act such as making a request, apologizing, or offering help can be carried out in vastly different ways depending on the speaker's cultural background. For example, a simple request like "Close the window, please" may be considered clear and polite in a culture that values **directness and efficiency**, such as the United States or Germany. However, in a culture that emphasizes **indirectness and relationship preservation**, such as Japan or Indonesia, that same request might sound too abrupt or even rude. Instead, a person might say, "It's getting a bit chilly," expecting the listener to infer the request and take action without it being explicitly stated.

These differences in speech act strategies are often rooted in broader cultural dimensions. Sociologist Geert Hofstede identified several dimensions that help explain how cultures differ, including **individualism and collectivism, power distance and uncertainty avoidance**. For instance, **individualistic cultures** (the U.S., Australia, the Netherlands) encourage individuals to express their thoughts openly and assert their personal needs. In such societies, speech acts tend to be more **explicit and goal-oriented**. **Collectivist cultures** (China, Korea, Mexico), on the other hand, place a higher value on group harmony, social obligations, and saving face. As a result, speech acts in these cultures are often **indirect, context-sensitive, and relational**.

These contrasting approaches to communication influence how people make offers, respond to compliments, apologize, and even greet each other. For example, in American English, it's common to say "Nice to meet you" or "You look great today" as a form of casual rapport-building. In contrast, in many East Asian cultures, people might avoid giving or receiving compliments directly, as doing so may be seen as boastful or intrusive. Instead, humility and modesty are emphasized and compliments may be downplayed or deflected with responses like "Not really" or "I'm not sure about that," which may puzzle Western speakers who expect a simple "Thank you."

Cultural norms also shape how speech acts reflect social hierarchy and formality. In cultures where social status and age matter greatly (Thailand, Ethiopia, Korea), the structure of speech acts can change dramatically depending on the speaker's and listener's relative status. Honorifics, titles and respectful language forms are often required. For example, in Korean, the verb endings used in requests or apologies differ depending on whether one is speaking to a peer, a superior, or an elder. Westerners unfamiliar with these systems may unintentionally offend by using inappropriate levels of formality or speaking too casually.

Moreover, cultural norms influence not only **what is said** but also **what is not said**. In some cultures, silence itself can be a form of speech act signaling disagreement, respect, contemplation or refusal. In many Indigenous cultures, for instance, silence is valued and considered a meaningful part of communication, while in other cultures (many Western societies), silence may be seen as awkward or unproductive. Misreading silence can lead to misjudgments about someone's intentions or emotional state.

Understanding how cultural norms shape speech acts is essential for successful cross-cultural communication. Without this awareness, people may interpret each other's speech acts through the lens of their own cultural expectations, leading to misunderstandings, frustration, or even conflict. For educators and language learners, this means teaching not just the "what" of a language, but also the "how" and "why" behind it. For professionals working in global settings, it means developing **intercultural sensitivity and adaptability**, learning to read between the lines and adjust communicative behavior accordingly.

In essence, speech acts are more than linguistic formulas they are **cultural performances**. To communicate effectively across cultures, one must understand not only the language but the underlying **cultural scripts** that guide how and when speech acts are used. Only then can we begin to bridge the gaps that separate us and foster more meaningful, respectful interaction in our interconnected world.

One of the most striking and widely studied differences in cross-cultural communication is the varying use of **direct** and **indirect** speech acts. How explicitly people express their intentions or desires can differ dramatically from one culture to another, shaping not only the form but also the interpretation of communication. This variation plays a crucial role in how requests, refusals, suggestions, and other speech acts are produced and understood in intercultural encounters.

Directness refers to a style of communication where the speaker's intentions are clearly and explicitly stated. In direct speech acts, the meaning is conveyed straightforwardly with minimal ambiguity or need for inference. For example, in a direct request, someone might say, "Please

close the window,” or “Can you help me with this task?” Cultures that value **direct communication** often see this approach as efficient, honest, and respectful because it reduces uncertainty and gets to the point quickly. English-speaking countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and many Northern European nations often lean toward this communication style. In these cultures, being direct is associated with clarity and professionalism, especially in contexts like business meetings or academic settings.

In contrast, **indirect communication** involves expressing intentions in a less explicit manner, often relying on context, shared knowledge, tone, or nonverbal cues to convey meaning. An indirect request, for example, might sound like: “It’s getting cold in here,” or “I’m really struggling with this task.” The speaker is not openly asking for help but expects the listener to infer the request. Indirectness is often preferred in cultures that prioritize social harmony, respect, and face-saving. Indirect speech acts allow speakers to avoid confrontation, embarrassment, or loss of face both for themselves and for the interlocutor. For example, many East Asian cultures such as Japan, Korea, and China employ high levels of indirectness. In these societies, direct refusals or requests might be seen as rude or disrespectful because they could embarrass or pressure the other person.

The preference for direct or indirect speech is deeply tied to cultural values and social norms. One key cultural dimension related to this difference is **high-context and low-context communication**, a theory popularized by anthropologist Edward T. Hall. **High-context cultures** (Japan, Arab countries, many Latin American cultures) communicate in ways that heavily rely on implicit messages, shared background knowledge, and nonverbal cues. Because much of the information is “in the context,” the actual spoken words may be fewer and less explicit. Indirect speech acts fit well in these cultures as they help preserve social harmony and save face.

Low-context cultures (the United States, Germany, Scandinavia) rely more on explicit, clear verbal communication. The spoken or written message carries most of the information. In these cultures, direct speech acts are valued for their clarity and efficiency.

Examples of Cross-Cultural Differences in Directness.

Requests: In the U.S., a student might say directly, “Can you extend the deadline?”. In Japan, the same request might be phrased as, “I’m worried that the deadline might be difficult to meet,” hoping the professor will infer the request without direct questioning. **Refusals:** In Germany or the U.S., a direct “No, I cannot attend” is common and expected. In Thailand or India, a refusal might be softened by phrases like “I will try” or “It might be difficult,” which serve to avoid direct confrontation or disappointment. **Compliments:** Westerners might offer straightforward compliments like “Great job!” to encourage or praise. In many East Asian cultures, compliments may be downplayed or redirected to avoid appearing boastful or making the recipient uncomfortable.

When people from direct and indirect cultures communicate, mismatches in expectations can cause friction. For example, a direct speaker might view an indirect speaker as evasive or dishonest. Conversely, an indirect speaker might find a direct speaker rude or insensitive.

Such misunderstandings can lead to negative judgments about the other person’s intentions or character. In business, this can affect negotiations, teamwork, and trust. In education, students

from indirect cultures may be perceived as unassertive or uninterested, while teachers from direct cultures may seem overly blunt. Directness and indirectness are fundamental to how speech acts function within different cultural frameworks. Recognizing the underlying cultural reasons for these styles helps reduce misunderstandings and fosters smoother intercultural communication. By appreciating both approaches and developing flexibility in communication, individuals can build stronger relationships and achieve clearer understanding across cultural boundaries.

Politeness is expressed differently across cultures and can impact how speech acts are performed. In English, politeness might be achieved through modals or softeners (“Would you mind if...”), while in cultures like Thai or Javanese, politeness is embedded in complex honorifics and speech levels. Not recognizing these strategies can result in communication that feels too blunt or too vague.

A speech act that is intended as polite in one culture might be perceived as inappropriate in another. For example, declining an offer directly (“No, thank you”) is common in the U.S., but may be considered impolite in cultures where refusals are expected to be more ambiguous or delayed. These differences can cause miscommunication or unintended offense. How speech acts are performed often reflects social hierarchies and relationships. For example, in some cultures, a subordinate might never issue a direct request to a superior, opting instead for suggestions or questions. Understanding the role of power dynamics and social distance helps ensure that speech acts are appropriate and respectful in different contexts.

Speech acts are more than just words—they carry cultural meaning and social weight. In cross-cultural communication, awareness of how speech acts function differently across cultures can help avoid misunderstandings, build rapport, and foster respectful, effective interaction. For educators, learners, and global professionals alike, mastering the pragmatics of speech acts is a vital step toward intercultural competence.

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