



## Different Culture Means Different Discourse Perception: Personal True-based Story in Light of Face-Threatening Acts

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**Abstract**

*One of the driving motives of language use is to pave the way for communication and understanding. However, sometimes the exclusive use of language cannot help to stream mutual understanding among people who have different cultures which, unfortunately, researchers have not treated in much detail. As such, this study brings to light the essential role of cultural norms and conventions in interaction. Based on a true story, the current study shows that different cultural norms can raise issues that cause misunderstanding and could lead to face threatening acts. This manifests that being aware of the interaction conventions of one's culture does not necessarily mean that speakers of other cultures will have the same conventions, and what speakers of a certain culture consider to be polite may be considered impolite and trespassing in other cultures.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Communication, in general, is “a sharing of elements of behaviours or modes of life” (Cherry 1996, p. 12) which can be done by all creatures, but using a language to communicate is human-specific. The way people communicate with each other varies from one situation to another and there are certain conventions, often based on cultural background, that must be observed in different situations, including choice of speech genre. Crystal (2010) mentions that jokes can be uttered at funerals because no law prohibits it, but people always follow the conventions of their culture and they do not tell jokes at funerals. So, when an interaction takes place among people who belong to different backgrounds, many issues might arise and as a result these issues might lead to misunderstandings, and in some cases, there may be negative consequences. Politeness, therefore, ensures the inner solidarity of societies. Being polite is essential to preserve the image of the speakers as well as the listeners. This is because the face is linked to the interlocutors intention and desire. This is supported by (Spencer- Qatey 2008; Culpeper 2011) who point out that face has a significant role in our everyday social interaction.

Face is a linguistic term that covers several fields and it is not exclusive to pragmatics (Betti, 2020). As such, the face is divided into two main elements: the positive face which is based on

freedom; and the negative face which is based on the desire to be useful. In order for the speakers and listeners to maintain this, they must avoid any way of threat in their interaction. This entails also that the way we communicate with people from different circles (e.g. family members, friends, colleagues, acquaintances and strangers) requires different strategies and norms.

Furthermore, it is very essential to promote positive interaction between interlocutors. Yet, several factors might hinder such positiveness in everyday communication such as the face-threatening acts (henceforth: FTAs) which is a strategy implemented by some speakers that causes embarrassment, humiliation as well as the loss of self-image. This act, according to (Lambert, 2020), might negatively affect the conversation to cause conflict among interactants. As pointed out by (Aporbo, 2022) eschewing conflict, promoting cooperative content and managing deference are essential to maintain politeness in any conversation. As such, several well-behaved people are inclined to use politeness to mitigate FTAs to save the face of interlocutors (Kamalu and Fasassi, 2018). Similarly, Sembiring et al. (2023) pointed out that FTAs must be suppressed when interacting with people; suppression can be exercised by avoiding negative triggers such as criticism and useless arguments.

This paper aims to identify some of the communication issues (from my own life experience) which can happen in real interactions between people and the appropriate way to deal with these problems is also discussed. These problems include when the communication happens in the mother tongue (the Arabic used in Saudi Arabia) and in English as a foreign language.

## **2. Culture-based norms in light of literature**

Over the past decade, most research in pragmatics has pointed out the role and use of politeness in social interaction. According to Leech (1980), politeness is a strategy used in order to avoid conflict; it refers to types of behaviours that are used to consolidate the participants' cooperation and social conformity. Similarly, Hill et al (1986) pinpointed that "politeness is one of the imperatives on human connection, whose reason for existing is to think about others' sentiments, build up levels of shared solace, and advances compatibility" (p.349). For this reason, Brown and Levinson (1987) highlight that different cultures and different languages require different ways of expressing politeness verbally and actionably.

People in Saudi Arabia pay a great deal of attention when interacting with each other. Many factors, such as age, gender, educational background, and social status are considered important to take into account when addressing people. Wardhaugh (1990) clarifies that using titles when communicating shows that people have different powers as well as being unfamiliar with each

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other. For this reason, it is considered rude if a student calls his/her teacher by their name; rather, one must use a title such as teacher, Dr., Prof., etc. This shows how important it is to be aware of politeness in interactions because politeness is “a social device used in order to reduce friction in personal interaction” (Lakoff, 1989). As a university lecturer, my students, my colleagues, and other members of society always use one title or another and no one will call me by my first name except my family. This convention causes problems for me when addressing people of other cultures such as Australians. In this culture, it is not important to use titles when addressing people, but I consider it rude and I use titles when writing emails, or in a live conversation as a part of culture transference. According to Archer et al. (2012), cross-cultural interaction may be an obstacle between people in the way they address each other. As a result, I sometimes avoid a situation where I may have to call a person by his/her name because it is difficult for me to utter it that way. In one of the classes here at Macquarie, a postgraduate student from Saudi Arabia used to call the professor “Dr.” all the time even though he observed that the local students called her by her first name. This happened because he still, like me, considered it rude or impolite to call her by her name because this is not appropriate in our culture and if we call a teacher or a professor by his or her first name, we are violating the rules of politeness.

In our culture, in addition to the use of titles, conversational implicature plays an important role in everyday communication since Arabic is a high-context culture, which, according to Hall (1976), is one in which a few verbal and non-verbal messages are used to convey meaning and messages are frequently conveyed indirectly. One of the issues or problems that arise when we speak with native English speakers is that they might say something which has a positive meaning to them but we consider it negative and vice versa. Silence in our culture, like many other cultures, can convey something that might be difficult for outsiders to understand. Linguists often focus on silence and pauses in numerous situations because they play a crucial role in communication. Mora (2000) investigated a class with non-native students and he found that silence could cause some communication difficulties and negative impression in a different community where students are free and welcome to express their views. In our Middle Eastern culture, being silent indicates the politeness and respect we pay for our teachers and professors. In Western culture, in contrast, being silent in class might convey a negative impression of the students as being passive learners or lacking knowledge in a particular subject.

### **3. Methods**

The current study is based on a case study approach. Case studies have been long established in the field of linguistics to present a detailed analysis of any phenomenon. The data for this

study was collected based on personal true story happened in real life span. The qualitative method is considered the suitable one to analyze the data based on a descriptive approach. The main purpose of the study was to find the answer to the main research question of the paper which is:

- To what extent does our culture shape our perception of different cultural discourses?

### **Situational Data (Personal-based true story)**

I remember one day I picked up my daughter from child care and I wanted to use the bus at Maquarie University and it happened that I only had \$50 (No Change). The dialogue between me and the female bus driver was as the following:

*I: "Hi, how are you?"*

*Female Bus driver: "Good, thanks".*

*I: (handing her the \$50). "Two tickets for me and my daughter, please".*

*Female Bus driver: "What is this, \$50?"*

*I: "Sorry, I don't have change".*

*Female Bus driver: (in a harsh way). "Do you think I am a bank". [pauses for maybe 6 seconds]  
"Just have a seat".*

*I: "No thanks, I prefer to walk, I'm not begging".*

*Female Bus driver: "No, I don't mean that, sorry".*

*I: "I accept your apology but I prefer to walk not to be humiliated".*

### **4. Analysis and discussion of the discourse**

The previous interaction between me and the bus driver led to a negative consequence and made me angry and I walked to my home on foot to save my face which is very essential in any social contact as pointed out by (Spencer- Qatey 2008; Culpeper 2011). When she said '***Do you think I am a bank***' I felt offended it was considered a face-threatening act and it was on record without redressive action that made me make a negative impression about her and all other bus drivers. Moreover, the driver here breached the maxim of manner by using an obscure expression which I inferred as 'you are not welcome aboard'. Clyne (1994) confirms that one

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of the most 'culturally limiting' maxims is the maxim of manner; such violation of manners results in face threatening. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), self-image is an essential matter for people and that is why they try to avoid doing something which can reflect on the face of others. In the second part, when she said 'just have a seat', there was an implied meaning which indicated the force of the request to leave the bus since this kind of utterance implied the message 'you want to get a free trip', and my reply was to tell her that I got the message and I was not begging for a ride. When she replied that she did not mean that it was a matter of mitigation but it was too late to withdraw what had been said. This conversation shows what the bus driver considered being frank I considered her to be insulting because in my culture people use indirect speech to convey the meaning; however, my inference could have been wrong at that time and the driver did not mean it but cross-cultural misunderstanding took place. As stated earlier in the introduction people from different cultural backgrounds might misunderstand simple way of expression that has no personal reasons. But this simple expression is not perceived in isolation, the accumulative experience that we have triggers us how to shape our perception and impression. I preferred, at that moment, that she would say: I don't have cash and you wouldn't be allowed to get in for free rather than 'Do you think I am a bank!'

The final point that is worth mentioning is the role of interruption in communication. Clark and Krych (2004) mention that one of the main roles of speakers is to keep their interaction on the right track. For this reason, adding a bit of information or answering a certain question is expected when we speak in our culture. Being silent and only listening in our culture makes the speaker doubt that you are paying any attention to them. I personally tried this and I did an experiment with a group of my family and friends by listening to them while they were speaking without any interruption, so they kept asking "are you following" since they are used to being interrupted. Ng, Brook and Dunne (1995) explain that interruption is not always a negative matter but it is a strategy used to help in elaboration or for more clarification. When I come to speak with English native speakers, I tend to pay more attention to what they are saying and I use many strategies to listen carefully since I believe that when interruption takes place people might consider it a way of controlling the conversation, especially when talking to females. Archer et al. (2012) assume that there is a relationship between the use of interruption in conversation and dominance. This assumption makes it very difficult for me to make any interruption while speaking with English native speakers, even though Edelsky (1981) claims that interruption is not always distorting interaction but rather collaborating positively. However, because I am afraid to be considered rude or impolite, I prefer to be silent and listen

till the speaker gives a signal that it is my turn to take part in the conversation. In the scenario with the bus driver, I did not interrupt her verbally, I used action by stepping out of the bus to show her that the way she addressed me was inappropriate at all believing that action could carry stronger messages than words. Many non-native speakers of English, I do believe, tend to cut their stream of communication or they just leave the place when they feel that the person is violating any maxims of communication. The findings of the current paper shed light on the pivotal role of intercultural communication and how miscommunication could bring about negative consequences. It has shown also that the negative impact we receive from other people is based on what they say. Moreover, it could be more negative if the way people talk is accompanied by a tone that is not friendly. On the other hand, sometimes we think that other people are so harsh and jarring because the way they speak is not familiar and different from what we used to hear; this also could cause cultural clashes and negative perceptions. Therefore, people from different cultural backgrounds should be aware of the impact of their way of communication when addressing expatriates. Besides, I believe that social intelligence is necessary when socializing with people from other cultures. Both native and non-native speakers should learn how to apply repair strategies when something wrong takes place in order to minimize any threat or negative face. Conflict always arises among people when both speakers and listeners neglect or lack awareness of each other's standards of decency and cultural norms.

The final point that needs to be addressed here is that it is important to be polite with others both verbally and actionably. Rote memorizing of greeting phrases and made-up smiles do not necessarily enhance the effectiveness of our communication. What we say must be adhered with what we do and this is what the bus driver lady missed when she said: 'Just have a seat' with angry face.

## **5. Conclusion**

Summing up, I could mention many more personal examples of interactions where things have been interpreted in the wrong way or, in some cases, have caused problems, but for the time being, I have given only some of them and described how these problems are related to pragmatic devices. Furthermore, it can be clearly stated that to be involved in a conversation with people does not mean that a person should be equipped only with language but s/he should pay attention to the actual use of language in various situations and what other language elements can be used. In addition, being aware of the interaction conventions of one's culture does not necessarily mean that speakers of other cultures will have the same conventions; and what speakers of a certain culture consider to be polite may be considered impolite in other



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cultures. From my point of view, the use of a language must not be detached from its culture to keep the course of interaction worthwhile. Therefore, I believe that the courses in the English language should address some of the pragmatics and cultural issues to prepare students for the real world of communication. Learners should be exposed intensively to communicative competence in the second language to avoid any negative impact. Teachers, conveners and stakeholders should revisit the textbook they use in classrooms to add pragmatic elements that learners need to enhance their competence and performance in communication.

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