

PRAGMATIC FAILURE IN ENGLISH-UZBEK INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND SPEECH ACTS IN EVERYDAY DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT The theory of speech acts occupies a central position within contemporary pragmatic scholarship precisely because it demonstrates that language operates as an instrument of social action rather than as a passive vehicle for the transmission of propositional content. Participants in communication do not confine themselves to the production of well-formed sentences; through language they extend apologies, issue requests, undertake commitments, decline proposals, express gratitude, evaluate, counsel and persuade. This first part of the study lays out the theoretical foundations of speech act theory from Austin and Searle through Brown and Levinson, Leech and the notion of pragmatic transfer and examines how speech acts such as requests, apologies, gratitude and refusals are realized in everyday, quotidian communication in English and Uzbek. The analysis shows that although the same speech act categories are attested across the two languages, their linguistic encoding and pragmatic interpretation diverge considerably, with Uzbek distributing politeness work across morphology and lexis to a degree with no direct English equivalent.

Keywords: speech acts, pragmatics, intercultural communication, politeness theory, pragmatic transfer, everyday discourse

Verbal interaction constitutes one of the most compelling objects of linguistic inquiry. The dominance of dialogic forms of speech under the conditions of contemporary communication accounts for the current relevance of research into the units of speech activity. Phenomena that once occupied the margins of linguistic

science have moved decisively into the centre of scholarly attention: the speech act itself, verbal interaction, the reciprocal behaviour of communicants, the parameters of the speech situation, the causes underlying communicative failure, and the strategies and tactics characteristic of colloquial speech [1].

Over the past several decades the discipline has redirected its attention away from an exclusively structural conception of language toward its functional and pragmatic dimensions. What follows from this reorientation is a set of analytic priorities that would have appeared peripheral to an earlier generation of linguists: how interlocutors coordinate their intentions, how situational parameters shape linguistic choice, why exchanges break down, and which tactics speakers deploy in everyday and professional communication alike.

Underlying this shift is a recognition that communicative success is not reducible to grammatical accuracy. It depends equally upon the speaker's capacity to select forms that are pragmatically appropriate to the context, the communicative purpose and the sociocultural norms in operation. The investigation of speech act realization across discourse types therefore acquires particular significance, since it permits the researcher to trace how intentions are encoded and how meaning is negotiated in communicative environments that differ substantially in their conventions.

Language has conventionally been characterized as an instrument for the articulation of thought and the representation of reality. Modern pragmatic theory, however, establishes that language simultaneously constitutes a mode of action. Within language, units resemble one another and their semantic values shift according to the contexts in which they are deployed [2]. When a speaker apologizes, requests, promises, refuses, thanks or advises, that speaker is not simply producing an utterance but executing a socially consequential act. This functional conception furnishes the theoretical foundation of speech act theory and the point of departure for the present study.

Accordingly, this part of the study pursues two objectives. The first is to set out

the theoretical foundations of speech act theory. The second is to examine the realization of speech acts in quotidian discourse in English and Uzbek, as a basis for the comparative analysis of academic, institutional and media discourse undertaken in the second part of this study.

Speech act theory received its first systematic formulation in the work of Austin, who drew an initial distinction between constative and performative utterances. Constatives report on states of affairs and are assessable as true or false; performatives, by contrast, bring about the action they name in the very moment of their utterance. Austin subsequently abandoned the strict dichotomy in favour of a more general claim: every utterance simultaneously accomplishes three acts. The locutionary act consists in the production of a meaningful linguistic expression; the illocutionary act constitutes the communicative force with which that expression is issued; and the perlocutionary act comprises the effect produced upon the addressee.

The significance of this tripartite division for intercultural analysis is considerable. Two utterances may be locutionally equivalent across languages while differing in illocutionary force, and identical illocutionary force may generate divergent perlocutionary effects depending on the cultural expectations of the hearer. It is at these points of asymmetry that communicative failure characteristically originates.

Searle refined the Austinian model and proposed a classification of illocutionary acts into five principal categories.

- **Assertives** bind the speaker to the truth of the proposition expressed. Utterances such as *“The conference begins tomorrow”* or *“The results indicate a significant difference”* belong to this class.
- **Directives** are produced with the intention of inducing the addressee to carry out an action. Requests, commands, recommendations and advice fall under this heading, as in *“Please close the door”* or *“Could you review this article?”*

- **Commissives** commit the speaker to some future course of conduct and comprise promises, offers, undertakings and threats. Representative instances include *“I will send the report by Monday”* and *“We promise to improve the service.”*
- **Expressives** articulate a psychological state — gratitude, contrition, congratulation, condolence. Formulations such as *“Thank you very much”* and *“I am sorry for the inconvenience”* exemplify this category.
- **Declarations** alter institutional or social reality through the fact of their utterance by a speaker vested with the requisite authority. *“You are hereby appointed,” “I pronounce you husband and wife”* and *“The meeting is officially closed”* illustrate the type.

Searle’s supplementary account of indirect speech acts is of particular consequence for the present analysis. An utterance may perform one illocutionary act by means of another: *“Could you review this article?”* is interrogative in its syntactic form yet directive in its illocutionary force. The interpretation of such utterances requires the hearer to compute an implicature, and the conventions governing that computation are not uniform across speech communities.

Subsequent pragmatic scholarship, associated above all with Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, foregrounded the role of politeness strategies in the realization of speech acts. Their theory of face maintenance accounts for the systematic preference speakers display for indirect formulations: certain acts intrinsically threaten the addressee’s positive face (the desire for approval) or negative face (the desire for freedom from imposition), and speakers accordingly deploy mitigating devices to preserve social equilibrium. Leech’s complementary formulation of politeness maxims — Tact, Generosity, Approbation, Modesty, Agreement and Sympathy — offers a further explanatory framework for the tendency, observable in both English and Uzbek, to minimize the cost imposed on the interlocutor and to minimize praise of oneself.

Research in intercultural pragmatics has established that speech acts vary in

their realization across languages and cultural systems. Comparative investigations of apology, gratitude, refusal and request have documented substantial divergence in the strategies preferred by different speech communities, in the degree of directness considered acceptable, and in the internal and external modification employed. Of particular relevance to the present study is the notion of pragmatic transfer the carrying over of first-language pragmatic conventions into second-language production together with Thomas's distinction between pragmalinguistic failure, in which the speaker attributes an incorrect form–function correspondence, and sociopragmatic failure, in which the speaker misjudges the social parameters of the situation. Both categories will be shown to operate in English–Uzbek interaction.

Everyday conversation represents the most natural and the most frequently instantiated form of human communication. Its defining characteristics are informality, spontaneity, emotional expressiveness and a heavy reliance upon knowledge shared between the interlocutors. In contrast to institutional or academic exchange, everyday interaction is subject to comparatively few formal constraints and is shaped instead by interpersonal relations, situational particulars and cultural expectation. Speech acts realized in this environment consequently exhibit a marked tendency toward implicitness, indirectness and context-sensitive interpretation.

A prominent feature of quotidian discourse is the systematic mitigation of potentially face-threatening acts, and requests are the paradigm case. Politeness theory identifies requests as inherently impositive: they oblige the interlocutor to expend effort, furnish assistance or grant permission. Speakers therefore resort to indirect linguistic forms in order to reduce the imposition and safeguard social harmony. In English-speaking environments, bare imperatives such as *“Give me your book”* or *“Help me with this task”* are liable to be received as discourteous, particularly between interlocutors of equivalent social standing or limited acquaintance. English speakers accordingly favour interrogative and conditionally softened formulations: *“Could I borrow your book?”*, *“Can you help me with this?”*, *“Would you mind lending me your notes?”*

Uzbek everyday communication displays a comparable orientation, though the linguistic resources recruited for the purpose differ. Politeness is realized through interrogative structures, modal constructions and, most characteristically, honorific morphology. In place of direct commands, speakers formulate requests in mitigated form: “*Kitobingizni olib tursam bo’ladimi?*” (‘May I borrow your book?’) or “*Yordam bera olasizmi?*” (‘Can you help me?’). The first of these merits closer attention. The auxiliary construction *olib tur-* encodes the temporary character of the intended possession, thereby signalling in advance that the imposition is bounded; the conditional *-sa* introduces hypotheticality; and the honorific second-person marking indexes deference. Three distinct mitigating devices thus operate simultaneously within a single clause. It is worth observing that Uzbek possesses a polite imperative in *-ing* (*bering* ‘give’, *keling* ‘come’) which is imperative in morphological form yet entirely courteous in illocutionary value, and that the interrogative particle *-mi* combined with *mumkin* (‘permissible’) yields conventionalized permission requests. Uzbek also disposes of an extensive inventory of address terms *aka*, *opa*, *ustoz*, *domla*, *singlim* which perform substantial politeness work at the nominal level. Politeness in Uzbek, in other words, is distributed across morphology and lexis to a degree that has no direct equivalent in English, where the burden falls predominantly upon clausal syntax. Direct requests are nonetheless attested in everyday discourse. Their occurrence is conditioned by urgency, by asymmetry of power, or by high familiarity between the participants. In interaction between parent and child, imperatives such as “*Bring me water*” or “*Close the door*” are socially unremarkable, the unequal status relationship licensing directness. Close friends and family members likewise employ direct forms without adverse pragmatic consequence, since established intimacy reduces the requirement for elaborate mitigation.

Apologies constitute a second major category of speech act in everyday communication. Their pragmatic function is remedial: they restore social equilibrium following a transgression of norms, an inconvenience caused, or a perceived offence. English speakers draw upon a set of formulaic expressions “*Sorry,*” “*I’m really*

sorry,” “Excuse me,” “I apologize” which vary in intensity according to the gravity of the offence and the formality of the setting.

Uzbek discourse employs apologies with comparable frequency, though these frequently carry a heavier emotional and relational charge. Expressions such as “*Kechirasiz*,” “*Uzr so’rayman*” and “*Meni afv eting*” not only acknowledge fault but additionally convey humility and deference toward the addressee. Uzbek apologies tend more often than their English counterparts to incorporate an explicit statement of responsibility, as in “*Kechirasiz, sizni kutdirib qo’ydim*” (‘Sorry for making you wait’) or “*Noqulaylik uchun uzr*” (‘Apologies for the inconvenience’). This elaboration reflects the collectivist orientation of Uzbek culture, within which the maintenance of harmonious interpersonal relations is accorded high value.

Expressions of gratitude likewise occupy a central position in everyday discourse. As expressive acts they acknowledge a benefit conferred and consolidate positive social relations. English realizes gratitude through such formulae as “*Thanks*,” “*Thank you very much*,” “*Thanks a lot*” and “*I really appreciate your help*,” graded according to formality and emotional intensity. Uzbek speakers deploy the corresponding expressions “*Rahmat*,” “*Katta rahmat*” and “*Minnatdorman*.” Gratitude in Uzbek discourse is nevertheless frequently accompanied by heightened interpersonal warmth or by invocations of blessing, particularly when the addressee is an elder or a person commanding respect. Culturally specific formulae emphasizing sincerity or indebtedness commonly supplement the core expression, and the resulting turn may extend considerably beyond what an English speaker would produce in comparable circumstances. Response strategies to expressions of gratitude are of equal analytic interest. In English-speaking contexts the conventional and expected responses are “*You’re welcome*,” “*No problem*,” “*Anytime*” and “*My pleasure*,” whose function is to minimize the magnitude of the favour and to maintain conversational fluency. Uzbek employs “*Arzimaydi*,” “*Hechqisi yo’q*” and “*Mayli*” to comparable effect, downplaying the effort expended and asserting modesty. The recurrence of such minimizing responses in both languages testifies to culturally

embedded norms governing reciprocity and self-effacement, and corresponds closely to the operation of Leech's Modesty maxim. Refusals rank among the most pragmatically delicate speech acts in everyday discourse, since they threaten the interlocutor's positive face by rejecting a request, an offer or an invitation. Direct refusal is consequently rare in informal interaction. English speakers characteristically prefer indirect strategies incorporating justification, expression of regret or positive politeness: *"I'd love to, but I'm busy," "Maybe another time," "I'm afraid I can't."* Uzbek refusal strategies exhibit an even higher degree of indirectness and ambiguity. Rather than reject an offer or request explicitly, speakers may resort to *"Ko'ramiz"* ('We'll see'), *"Nasib qilsa"* ('If fate allows') or *"Vaqt bo'lsa"* ('If there is time'). Superficially these utterances appear non-committal or even favourably disposed; their pragmatic function, however, is that of an indirect refusal. Such strategies permit the speaker to avoid open confrontation and to preserve interpersonal harmony. It should be added that a substantial subset of these formulae *"Nasib qilsa," "Xudo xohlasa," "Insholloh"* derives from religious discourse, and that their conventionalization as refusal markers has largely bleached the original theological content while retaining the deferential tone.

A related phenomenon warrants mention because it follows directly from the same cultural logic. Uzbek hospitality conventions incorporate a ritualized sequence in which an offer of food, assistance or accompaniment is declined once or twice before being accepted, the host being expected to renew the offer. The initial refusal is therefore not sincere but conventional, and constitutes a display of modesty rather than an actual rejection. Interlocutors unfamiliar with this convention are liable to treat the first refusal as final, with the result that the offer is withdrawn and the Uzbek participant is left, from their own perspective, discourteously unattended.

Quotidian discourse demonstrates that speech act realization is profoundly conditioned by contextual, relational and cultural factors. Although the same speech act categories are attested across languages, their linguistic encoding and pragmatic interpretation diverge considerably. Speakers of both English and Uzbek strategically

deploy indirectness, mitigation, formulaicity and culturally sanctioned expressions in order to attain their communicative objectives while preserving social balance. These findings underscore the centrality of pragmatic competence to everyday communication and establish a theoretical and empirical basis for examining how speech acts operate across the more constrained discourse types academic, institutional and media considered in the second part of this study.

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