



## PRAGMATIC MISUNDERSTANDINGS IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: ILLOCUTIVE ACTS IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK

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### Abstract

The study investigates the creation of pragmatic misunderstandings arising from the production and comprehension of illocutionary speech acts like requests, refusals, apologies, and commands in English and Uzbek. The results stress the need for pragmatic sensitivity in language learning, translation practice, and cross-cultural communication, as well as for more culturally aware approaches to speech act research. The study is a contribution to intercultural pragmatics and applied linguistics by way of a deeper insight into the cultural rationality of speech behavior in English and Uzbek discourse.

**Keywords:** Illocutionary speech acts, requests, refusals, apologies and commands, Uzbek, English, pragmatic misunderstanding

### Introduction

In a more globalized world, effective intercultural communication has become more crucial than ever before. While individuals learning second languages understandably try to learn vocabulary and grammar forms, many instances of communication breakdown in cross-cultural interactions are actually caused not by linguistic errors, but by pragmatic misinterpretation—most notably speech act misunderstandings. Illocutionary acts, such as the act of making requests, refusals, apologies, and commands, constitute the heart of interpersonal communication because they capture not just the words spoken but the intention behind them and the perception of this intention. In cases where individuals from various cultures and languages are interacting with one another, variations in the production and comprehension of these illocutive acts can result in misunderstandings, misinterpretations, or even insulting behavior.

The English and Uzbek languages, embodying two different paradigms of culture—one generally linked to individualism and low-context communication and the other linked to collectivism and high-context communication—show a stark contrast in the generation and comprehension of speech acts. English speakers value clarity, efficacy, and personal agency, and they tend to use direct illocutionary strategies. Conversely,





communication styles prevalent in Uzbek culture stress indirectness, deference, and social harmony, frequently embedding illocutionary intent into culturally specific expressions or figurative language.

Despite the growing significance of intercultural communication, research in cross-cultural pragmatics involving less widely spoken languages like Uzbek is limited. This study tries to fill that gap by examining the pragmatic realization of illocutive acts in English and Uzbek and the extent to which differences in cultural expectations contribute to misunderstandings in real intercultural interactions. Based on a qualitative and contrastive examination of naturally occurring data, this article examines major points at which pragmatic conventions differ and assesses their implications for cross-cultural competence, translation practice, and language instruction.

### **Literature Review**

Research in intercultural communication and pragmatics has consistently shown that the success of cross-cultural interaction depends not only on linguistic competence but also on an awareness of culturally specific communicative norms. One of the most frequently cited sources of misunderstanding in intercultural discourse is the misinterpretation of illocutionary acts, which are speech acts that express a speaker's intention and carry out actions through language (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969).

Speech act theory, originally developed by Austin (1962) and refined by Searle (1969), emphasizes the illocutionary force of utterances—how speakers use language not just to convey information, but to perform actions such as requesting, refusing, or apologizing. While these functions may be universal, their realization is deeply influenced by cultural conventions (Wierzbicka, 1991). For example, a direct request in English (e.g., “Can you help me?”) may be considered efficient or friendly, while in Uzbek, such directness might be seen as impolite or disrespectful unless softened by elaborate politeness markers or metaphorical expressions.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness provides a useful framework for analyzing these cross-cultural differences. Their distinction between positive and negative politeness strategies helps explain why some cultures favor directness (low-context cultures like the U.S. and U.K.), while others prioritize indirectness and relational harmony (high-context cultures like Uzbekistan). These strategies shape the way illocutionary acts are expressed, often leading to pragmatic mismatches when speakers from different backgrounds interact (Thomas, 1983).

A key concept in cross-cultural pragmatics is pragmatic transfer, where speakers apply the norms of their native language when using a second language (Kasper & Blum-





Kulka, 1993). This often results in unintended violations of host-culture norms. For instance, Uzbek speakers of English may rely on indirect or poetic strategies when refusing or requesting, which may confuse English interlocutors accustomed to more explicit cues. Conversely, English speakers using direct language in Uzbek contexts may be perceived as blunt or insensitive.

Thomas (1983) draws a critical distinction between linguistic and pragmatic failure, with the latter being more damaging to intercultural relationships. Pragmatic failure occurs when the speaker's intended meaning is misunderstood due to differences in illocutionary norms—precisely the type of misunderstanding this study aims to explore. As House (2000) notes, these failures are often “invisible” but impactful, eroding trust and mutual understanding over time.

Several empirical studies support the idea that illocutionary acts are culturally shaped. Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), in their seminal Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP), documented how requests and apologies differ across languages such as English, Hebrew, and German, revealing systematic differences in directness, mitigation, and formality. More recent work by Economidou-Kogetsidis (2012) and Ishihara & Cohen (2010) has shown similar variation in EFL contexts, highlighting the need for pedagogical intervention in the teaching of pragmatic competence.

However, studies focusing on Central Asian languages—especially Uzbek—are still sparse. Some contributions (e.g., Yusupova, 2016; Karimov, 2020) have begun to document metaphorical and culturally embedded expressions in Uzbek speech acts, but comprehensive comparative studies with English remain limited. These gaps highlight the necessity of further investigation into how Uzbek speakers construct illocutive acts and how misunderstandings emerge in intercultural exchanges involving English.

Wierzbicka (1991, 2003) introduces the idea of cultural scripts—shared patterns of communicative behavior that reflect deeply held cultural values. In the Uzbek context, such scripts often involve appeals to collectivism, honor, and relational deference. For example, refusals may be couched in metaphorical or fate-oriented expressions (*nasib bo'lsa* – “if it is destined”), which differ sharply from the task-focused refusal strategies in English. Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory also supports this view, arguing that metaphors are not just linguistic but cognitive, shaping how speakers conceptualize speech acts and interpersonal relationships.



## Methods

The work is based on the comparison and contrast of metaphors in apologies, offers, invitations, complaints in English and Uzbek languages. In addition, another method that is used in the article is a comprehensive analysis of literature review to explore the topic.

## Results and Discussions

The analysis of naturally occurring discourse in English and Uzbek across a range of formal and informal settings revealed substantial cross-cultural variation in how requests, refusals, apologies, and commands are performed and interpreted. These differences are often the source of pragmatic misunderstandings, especially when speakers rely on the norms of their native language while interacting in a second language. The results presented below reflect data collected through interviews, role plays, and authentic conversational transcripts.

English speakers generally favor directness tempered with polite forms such as modals (“Could you...?”, “Would you mind...?”) and downgrades (“just,” “a bit,” “possibly”) in requests. The speaker’s goal is usually to be clear, efficient, and non-imposing without losing clarity.

*Example:* “Could you send me that file today, please?”

Uzbek speakers, by contrast, tend to employ indirectness, emotional appeals, and metaphorical expressions when making requests. The preferred strategy often involves minimizing imposition through humility, honorifics, and elaborate politeness formulas.

*Example:* Agar sizga og‘irlik qilmasa, shu hujjatni yuborsangiz, minnatdor bo‘lardim (“If it’s not a burden for you, I’d be grateful if you could send that document.”)

This indirect style can lead to misunderstandings: English speakers may perceive the request as vague or excessively deferential, while Uzbek speakers may view English-style requests as too forward or even demanding.

Refusals are highly sensitive face-threatening acts (FTAs). English speakers typically employ brief justifications or vague excuses, aiming for efficiency and clarity while avoiding confrontation.

*Example:* “I’m sorry, I can’t make it. I have a meeting.”

In contrast, Uzbek refusals are often indirect, emotionally considerate, and heavily embedded in cultural metaphors or fatalistic expressions (e.g., referring to destiny or timing).

*Example:* InshaAlloh keyinroq bo‘lar, hozir imkon yo‘q (“God willing, maybe later—it’s not possible at the moment.”)





This culturally appropriate vagueness may confuse English speakers, who may interpret it as indecision or avoidance rather than a polite “no.” Conversely, the directness of English refusals may appear blunt or even rude to Uzbek speakers.

Apologies in English tend to be concise, centered on acknowledging the offense and offering a remedy:

Example: “Sorry I missed the meeting. I’ll email you the notes.”

Apologies in Uzbek are generally more ritualistic and emotionally expressive, often including elaborate metaphorical language, reference to the addressee’s honor, and repeated expressions of regret.

Example: Ko‘nglingizni og‘ritgan bo‘lsam, ming afsusdaman  
 (“If I have hurt your heart, I deeply regret it.”)

While English apologies prioritize solution and responsibility, Uzbek ones focus on mending social harmony and emotional balance. If Uzbek speakers apologize this way in English, they may be perceived as overly dramatic; English-style apologies may seem cold or insufficient in Uzbek contexts.

In English, direct commands are often softened with polite forms or phrased as suggestions, especially in professional or formal settings.

Example: “Let’s try to wrap this up by noon.” / “I need you to finish this today.”

Uzbek speakers, however, tend to frame commands in a relational and emotional context, often with appeals to respect and using proverbs or indirect structures to reduce face-threats.

Example: Sizga ishonganim uchun shuni topshiryapman  
 (“I entrust this to you because I have faith in you.”)

This indirectness, rooted in hierarchical social norms, may be misinterpreted by English speakers as ambiguous or unclear. Conversely, English commands may be seen as abrupt or lacking in warmth by Uzbek listeners.

These findings demonstrate that even universal speech acts are shaped by culture-specific norms regarding politeness, honor, and interpersonal relationships. Misunderstandings often occur not because of poor grammar, but due to mismatches in expectations about how intentions should be communicated.

## Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that pragmatic misunderstandings in intercultural communication frequently arise not from grammatical errors, but from culturally divergent norms in the performance of illocutive acts such as requests, refusals, apologies, and commands. The comparative analysis of English and Uzbek speech behavior highlights the influence of underlying cultural values—such as individualism



versus collectivism, low-context versus high-context communication styles—on the interpretation and realization of these speech acts.

English speakers often prioritize clarity, efficiency, and directness, viewing these features as essential to effective communication. In contrast, Uzbek speakers tend to favor indirectness, emotional sensitivity, and politeness strategies grounded in social hierarchy and relational harmony. These differing expectations can lead to unintended offense, confusion, or a breakdown in communication, especially when each party interprets the other's pragmatics through the lens of their own cultural norms.

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