

POLITENESS AND IMPLICATURES IN SOCIAL MEDIA INTERACTIONS: A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *This study investigates the role of conversational implicatures as politeness strategies in digital communication across different cultural contexts. Conversational implicatures, unstated meanings inferred from context, serve as essential tools for managing politeness, mitigating face-threatening acts, and negotiating social interactions online. While politeness theories have traditionally focused on face-to-face interactions, social media platforms provide a unique space for examining how users from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds employ indirectness, hedging, and implied meanings. Using a cross-cultural approach, this research analyzes user interactions on various social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram to identify patterns of politeness implicatures. A key focus is on how users navigate politeness in online discourse, where the absence of non-verbal cues makes indirectness and pragmatic inference particularly significant. By drawing on politeness theory and the high-context vs. low-context communication framework, this study examines the extent to which cultural background influences the use and interpretation of implicatures. Four central research questions guide the study: (1) How do social media users from different cultures use conversational implicatures to express politeness? (2) Are there significant differences in indirectness and politeness strategies across different platforms? (3) How do users interpret politeness implicatures differently based on cultural background? (4) What role do language and communication style play in shaping the use of implicatures for politeness? To address these questions, the study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative discourse analysis with quantitative corpus-based methods. A comparative analysis across platforms and cultures provides insights into how politeness strategies evolve in digital interactions. Findings from this research contribute to a deeper understanding of intercultural pragmatics in online communication. By highlighting differences in politeness strategies across social media contexts, this study sheds light on broader implications for cross-cultural communication, digital diplomacy, and the development of AI-mediated conversational systems. Ultimately, it underscores the importance of pragmatic awareness in fostering more inclusive and effective online interactions.*

Keywords: *pragmatics; conversational implicatures; politeness strategies; social media; intercultural communication; indirectness*

1. Introduction

In the digital age, social media has become a dominant platform for intercultural interaction, reshaping how politeness and implicatures are expressed, interpreted, and sometimes misinterpreted. The theoretical frameworks of

pragmatics, especially Grice's Cooperative Principle and Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, remain pivotal in understanding how meaning is constructed and negotiated in these virtual environments. This article explores the nuanced manifestations of politeness and implicature across diverse cultural backgrounds on platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok, focusing on how cultural variation affects the interpretation of indirectness, face-threatening acts (FTAs), and pragmatic inference.

Literature Review

The intersection of politeness and implicature has been a core focus of pragmatics since its formalization in the late 20th century. At its foundation lies Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975), which posits that speakers generally adhere to four conversational maxims, quality, quantity, relevance, and manner, to facilitate cooperative communication. However, as Grice himself noted, these maxims are often flouted in ways that generate conversational implicatures, meanings not explicitly stated but inferred based on shared contextual knowledge¹. In the digital sphere, where contextual cues such as tone, facial expression, and immediate feedback are often absent, these implicatures become particularly ambiguous, thus increasing the potential for cross-cultural misinterpretation.

Building on Grice's foundation, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987) introduced the notions of *positive* and *negative face*, the desire to be liked and the desire to be unimpeded, respectively. Their framework classifies politeness strategies into bald on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies, each varying in directness and mitigation of face-threatening acts². Importantly, this theory assumes a degree of universality in face wants, but subsequent research has questioned this assumption by demonstrating how cultural variability shapes both the perception and production of politeness³.

In high-context cultures, such as those in East Asia, where communication often relies on indirectness and shared cultural assumptions, face-saving strategies may be subtle and implicit⁴. In contrast, low-context cultures, such as the United States or Germany, favor more explicit and direct expressions of politeness. This divergence leads to what Thomas⁵ terms "pragmatic failure"—when a speaker's intended meaning is misunderstood due to differing pragmatic norms. Social media platforms, where users from varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds interact in real time, exacerbate such risks.

¹ H. Paul Grice, *Logic and conversation*, in COLE, Peter, MORGAN, Jerry L. (eds.), *Syntax and semantics: Vol. 3. Speech acts*, New York, Academic Press, 1975, p. 45.

² Penelope Brown, Stephen C. Levinson, *Politeness: Some universals in language usage* (2nd ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 61.

³ Ron Scollon, Suzanne W. Scollon, *Intercultural communication: A discourse approach* (2nd ed.), Oxford, Blackwell, 2001, p. 36.

⁴ Edward T. Hall, *Beyond culture*, New York, Anchor Books, 1976.

⁵ Jenny Thomas, *Meaning in interaction: An introduction to pragmatics*, London, Longman, 1995, p. 89.

Moreover, Leech's (2014) Politeness Principle extends Grice's Cooperative Principle by incorporating interpersonal maxims such as tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement, and sympathy, offering a more nuanced understanding of how politeness operates across different speech communities. These maxims are often observed to be culturally relative and more challenging to interpret in online communication, where messages are decontextualized and highly condensed⁶.

Recent scholarship has paid growing attention to the implications of these theories in digital communication. Locher and Graham⁷ argue that social media platforms create what they call "polylogal spaces," where multiple threads of discourse overlap and intersect asynchronously. In such spaces, politeness is not merely a function of speaker intention but is co-constructed by audiences through replies, likes, and algorithmically mediated visibility. This shifts politeness from being a static strategy to a dynamic and often contested practice.

Additionally, Haugh (2013) emphasizes that online interactions require a rethinking of traditional politeness theories, as users engage in what he describes as "interactional achievement"—meaning that politeness and impoliteness are continuously renegotiated through user participation and communal norms. This renegotiation is particularly salient in cross-cultural interactions where shared politeness norms are absent or divergent, leading to unexpected interpretations of indirectness, sarcasm, or humor.

From an intercultural perspective, Obeng (2006) examines how African cultures interpret compliments, implicatures, and refusals, highlighting that what may be deemed polite in one culture can appear evasive or even offensive in another. In the same vein, Taguchi⁸ underscores the difficulty second-language users face in mastering pragmatic competence online, given the rapid, informal, and multimodal nature of digital discourse. She notes that implicatures often rely on nuanced cultural scripts that learners may not share, thereby hindering comprehension and an appropriate response.

As a conclusion, the literature suggests that pragmatic competence, the ability to use language appropriately in context, is central to navigating politeness and implicature in digital spaces. Yet, as social media transcends borders and blends global and local norms, this competence must be seen as not only linguistic but also intercultural. The convergence of communicative norms, contextual reduction, and technological mediation calls for a reassessment of how politeness and implicatures function in virtual, multicultural discourse environments. This study, therefore, seeks to extend this body of research by offering real-world

⁶ Geoffrey N. Leech, *The pragmatics of politeness*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 103.

⁷ Miriam A. Locher, Sage L. Graham, *Politeness in digital communication*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2021, p. 22.

⁸ Naoko Taguchi, "Pragmatic competence in Japanese as a second language: A review of interlanguage pragmatics research", in TROSBORG, Anna (ed.), *Pragmatics across languages and cultures*, Berlin, De Gruyter Mouton, 2011, p. 147.

examples of intercultural pragmatic conflict and alignment across three globally relevant platforms: Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok.

Case Study 1: Public Apology on Facebook — United States and South Korea Context:

On January 9, 2024, an American pop singer issued a public apology on her official Facebook page after making a controversial remark during a live interview about the aesthetic culture in K-pop. The apology post read: *"I truly didn't mean to offend anyone. I'm sorry if I upset anyone—it wasn't my intention."*

Data Source: Facebook post and top 100 public comments, retrieved January 15, 2024.

Pragmatic Analysis:

At first glance, the post adheres to common politeness norms in American English, utilizing hedging ("if I upset anyone") and an indirect acknowledgment of fault ("wasn't my intention"). This constitutes a mix of off-record politeness and minimization of agency, which reflects a Western preference for avoiding explicit self-incrimination⁹. However, Korean commenters overwhelmingly interpreted the apology as inadequate, insincere, and face-threatening.

In Korean communicative norms, a sincere apology typically includes formulaic expressions of humility, use of honorifics, and acceptance of guilt, regardless of intent. By failing to mark deference or take full responsibility (e.g., "I deeply regret my words and will reflect on my mistake"), the American singer unintentionally violated Korean expectations of negative politeness, which prioritizes deference and acknowledgment of social distance¹⁰.

Moreover, the implicature derived from "if I upset anyone" was interpreted by many Korean users as conditional and evasive. In Western contexts, such expressions function as a hedge to show sensitivity; in this case, however, it flouted the Maxim of Quality and was read as disingenuous¹¹. This pragmatic misalignment exemplifies cross-cultural misfiring, where both politeness and implicature mechanisms fail due to incompatible face systems.

Conclusion:

This case illustrates how digital apologies operate under conflicting politeness frameworks. While appearing polite in an American cultural schema, the message was pragmatically deficient in Korean expectations, creating a rupture in perceived sincerity and accountability.

⁹ Penelope Brown, Stephen C. Levinson, *Politeness: Some universals in language usage* (2nd ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 69.

¹⁰ Ron Scollon, Suzanne W. Scollon, *Intercultural communication: A discourse approach* (2nd ed.), Oxford, Blackwell, 2001, p. 45.

¹¹ H. Paul Grice, *Logic and conversation*, in COLE, Peter, MORGAN, Jerry L. (eds.), *Syntax and semantics: Vol. 3. Speech acts*, New York, Academic Press, 1975, p. 45.

Case Study 2: Sarcasm and Cultural Norms on X (formerly Twitter) — UK and Japan**Context:**

A British travel influencer posted a sarcastic tweet on March 5, 2023, after experiencing service delays in a Tokyo hotel:

"Nothing beats the thrill of being ignored for 15 minutes while smiling politely. Love that Japanese efficiency."

Data Source: X public thread with over 500 interactions, retrieved March 20, 2023.

Pragmatic Analysis:

This utterance is a textbook example of sarcastic implicature, where the speaker intentionally violates the Maxim of Quality in order to convey the opposite of the literal meaning¹². Among British followers, the tweet was interpreted as humorous criticism, aligning with culturally embedded norms of irony and indirect complaint strategies¹³. However, many Japanese users perceived the post as disrespectful and culturally insensitive, leading to backlash.

In Japanese pragmatics, criticism, especially in public, is heavily mitigated, often implicit, and contextually nuanced. The tweet's sarcastic tone was seen as a face-threatening act, particularly offensive because it addressed the service industry, a domain culturally associated with high honorific standards and group representation. The Japanese model of *tatema* (public persona) versus *honne* (private opinion) plays a significant role here. By publicly mocking a culturally valued behavior (polite waiting), the influencer disrupted the expected discourse order.

Moreover, the British speaker employed off-record irony, expecting the implicature to be decoded based on shared knowledge of British sarcasm norms. However, sarcasm is relatively rare and differently cued in Japanese discourse. The absence of paralinguistic features (intonation, facial expression) in a tweet stripped the utterance of cues necessary for recognizing irony, thereby undermining the pragmatic inference¹⁴.

Conclusion:

This case underscores the risks of projecting culturally specific humor onto a global audience. Sarcastic implicatures that function as face-saving devices in

¹² H. Paul Grice, *Logic and conversation*, in COLE, Peter, MORGAN, Jerry L. (eds.), *Syntax and semantics: Vol. 3. Speech acts*, New York, Academic Press, 1975, p. 47.

¹³ Michael Haugh, "Im/politeness, social practice and the participation order", *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 58, 2013, p. 56.

¹⁴ Naoko Taguchi, "Pragmatic competence in Japanese as a second language: A review of interlanguage pragmatics research", in TROSBORG, Anna (ed.), *Pragmatics across languages and cultures*, Berlin, De Gruyter Mouton, 2011, p. 149.

one culture may function as face-threatening acts in another, especially in high-context, hierarchy-sensitive cultures like Japan.

Case Study 3: Compliments and Face Negotiation on TikTok — France and Nigeria

Context:

On July 29, 2023, a French fashion influencer posted a video dancing in vintage clothing on TikTok. A Nigerian viewer commented: “*You look stunning!*” The influencer replied: “*Oh stop it, I look awful today haha.*”

Data Source: TikTok public comment thread, retrieved August 2, 2023.

Pragmatic Analysis:

The French reply was an example of modesty maxim in action, deflecting a compliment through self-deprecation¹⁵. In many European contexts, especially in France, rejecting compliments modestly can signal humility, sophistication, or even social finesse. However, the Nigerian commenter replied: “*Don’t say that. Appreciate compliments when given.*” This response reveals a divergent face orientation, where compliment rejection may be interpreted as disrespect or lack of gratitude¹⁶.

In many West African cultures, compliments serve as solidarity-building speech acts, and their acceptance reinforces positive face and community belonging. By deflecting the compliment, the French user inadvertently weakened the interpersonal bond the Nigerian viewer attempted to establish. This mismatch in compliment response norms led to a pragmatic disalignment: what was intended as a polite hedging strategy was received as an interpersonal slight.

Furthermore, the phrase “I look awful today” relies on the scalar implicature that the speaker does not look as good as usual. In some Western cultures, this triggers a ritual of reassurance. However, in the Nigerian context, such self-deprecation may be perceived as unnecessarily negative or even fishing for praise, contradicting sincerity norms.

Conclusion:

This interaction demonstrates how pragmatic norms around compliments and implicatures vary significantly across cultures. The misalignment reveals not only differences in politeness strategies but also contrasting assumptions about sincerity, modesty, and interpersonal rapport on digital platforms.

¹⁵ Geoffrey N. Leech, *The pragmatics of politeness*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 92.

¹⁶ Samuel Gyasi Obeng, “Communicating respect in African cultural contexts: Compliments and the ethnography of communication”, *Multilingua*, vol. 25, no. 2–3, 2006, p. 201.

Discussion

The analysis of the three case studies reveals the extent to which politeness strategies and implicature mechanisms are deeply embedded in cultural values, social expectations, and communicative norms. In the context of social media interactions, where linguistic cues are stripped of prosodic and paralinguistic support and where audiences are culturally diverse and dispersed, pragmatic strategies are particularly vulnerable to misinterpretation.

Politeness Theory and Cultural Specificity

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework provides a useful typology for analyzing speech acts, yet it was originally developed in Western contexts and presupposes universality in face wants, an assumption increasingly challenged by intercultural data. The case studies show that what constitutes a face-threatening act in one culture may not carry the same illocutionary force in another. For example, the American apology on Facebook (Case Study 1) used a minimization strategy ("I didn't mean to offend"), which, according to Brown and Levinson, should mitigate face threat. However, within Korean communicative culture, which emphasizes collectivism, social harmony, and honorifics, the lack of formal humility strategies rendered the message impolite or even offensive. This highlights the inapplicability of direct facework equivalences across cultures¹⁷.

Similarly, the French TikTok's response to a Nigerian compliment (Case Study 3) used modesty strategies rooted in the Leechian politeness maxims¹⁸, particularly the Modesty Maxim. However, Nigerian discourse norms interpret compliment rejection not as humility but as a face-damaging act, reflecting a cultural orientation toward positive face enhancement and solidarity affirmation (Obeng, 2006, p. 201). Thus, politeness strategies are not only context-sensitive but also evaluated against differing socio-pragmatic baselines across cultures.

Implicature and the Fragility of Shared Assumptions

Grice's theory of conversational implicature is built on the assumption of shared contextual knowledge and interpretive conventions (Grice, 1975, p. 45). In cross-cultural, text-based digital environments, these assumptions often collapse. In the British influencer's tweet (Case Study 2), sarcasm was used to flout the Maxim of Quality, signaling dissatisfaction through ironic implicature. Among British audiences, this was correctly interpreted due to shared cultural scripts that valorize dry humor and critical understatement. However, Japanese audiences—operating under high-context communicative assumptions—did not recognize the ironic

¹⁷ Ron Scollon, Suzanne W. Scollon, *Intercultural communication: A discourse approach* (2nd ed.), Oxford, Blackwell, 2001, p. 36.

¹⁸ Geoffrey N. Leech, *The pragmatics of politeness*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 92.

frame and interpreted the utterance literally, leading to accusations of rudeness. This is a case of pragmatic breakdown through divergent interpretive schemata¹⁹²⁰

What emerges from this comparison is that implicatures are not universal in form or uptake; they are deeply mediated by cultural assumptions about what counts as cooperative behavior. In high-context cultures like Japan and Korea, the norms for inferencing are more contextually grounded, and the expectations for indirectness and humility are encoded differently. Conversely, in low-context cultures, implicatures rely more heavily on verbal cues and shared textual pragmatics, often involving irony, understatement, or elliptical references.

Digital Mediation and Pragmatic Compression

Digital platforms amplify the risk of miscommunication due to what Haugh²¹ refers to as “interactional ambiguity.” On platforms like X and TikTok, where space is limited and interaction is rapid, users often compress complex speech acts into brief utterances that lack sufficient hedging, grounding, or clarification. This constraint forces speakers to rely more heavily on pragmatic inference, which, in intercultural communication, can easily fail. As seen across the three cases, the intended meanings were frequently lost or misjudged due to a mismatch in interpretive resources, resulting in what Locher and Graham²².

This friction is not merely a byproduct of technical limitations, but a result of pragmatic compression under intercultural asymmetry. That is, the speaker and listener may not only lack common ground linguistically, but also conceptually, leading to inferential errors and politeness mismatches. The global reach of social media thus calls into question the viability of applying traditional, speech-based pragmatic models without adaptation to asynchronous, multimodal, and transnational discourse contexts.

Towards an Intercultural Model of Digital Pragmatics

Taken together, these findings point to the need for a revised model of digital intercultural pragmatics, one that integrates politeness theory, implicature, and digital discourse conventions within a framework that is sensitive to cultural variation and platform affordances. Such a model would need to account for the variability in face systems and politeness strategies across cultures, such as the contrasts between collectivist and individualist orientations or between honor-

¹⁹ Jenny Thomas, *Meaning in interaction: An introduction to pragmatics*, London, Longman, 1995, p. 89.

²⁰ Naoko Taguchi, “Pragmatic competence in Japanese as a second language: A review of interlanguage pragmatics research”, in TROSBORG, Anna (ed.), *Pragmatics across languages and cultures*, Berlin, De Gruyter Mouton, 2011, p. 147.

²¹ Michael Haugh, “Im/politeness, social practice and the participation order”, *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 58, 2013, p. 79.

²² Miriam A. Locher, Sage L. Graham, *Politeness in digital communication*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2021, p. 22.

based and egalitarian societies. It should also consider the differing expectations involved in decoding implicatures, particularly when prosodic or situational cues are absent. Additionally, the model must address the influence of digital affordances, like character limits, comment threading, and algorithmic exposure, on how politeness and implicatures are both shaped and interpreted. Finally, it should include metapragmatic negotiation, whereby users revise or reframe their utterances after the fact, frequently employing emojis, hashtags, or follow-up posts to mitigate misunderstandings or communicative breakdowns.

Ultimately, this article advocates for a more situated, culturally aware, and multimodal understanding of pragmatic competence in social media interactions. As users continue to navigate polycentric norms online, it becomes critical not only to teach digital literacy but also intercultural pragmatic literacy, the ability to assess and adapt to varying face concerns, indirectness strategies, and implicature expectations in global communication.

Conclusions

This study has explored how politeness strategies and implicatures function, and often malfunction, in intercultural social media interactions. By analyzing three real-world case studies from Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok, the research has demonstrated that politeness is not a universal code but a culturally contingent system of interpersonal negotiation. Similarly, implicatures, which rely on shared assumptions and contextual alignment, are prone to failure when interlocutors hail from different pragmatic traditions.

Across all three cases, what emerged was a pattern of pragmatic misalignment. American expressions of politeness failed to meet Korean standards of humility and deference. British sarcasm, rooted in off-record indirectness, was interpreted literally by Japanese users and deemed impolite. French modesty clashed with Nigerian norms of compliment acceptance, resulting in interpersonal discomfort. These instances reveal that pragmatic competence must be reframed not just as a linguistic skill, but as an intercultural one.

In digital environments, where linguistic cues are decontextualized, temporally disjointed, and globally accessible, traditional models of politeness and implicature must be re-evaluated. As this study has shown, politeness strategies are not simply applied, they are interpreted, negotiated, and often contested by audiences whose cultural expectations differ. Gricean maxims and Brown and Levinson's face theory remain valuable, but they require recalibration when applied to transnational, asynchronous, and algorithmically structured communication.

A central implication of this study is the need for increased intercultural pragmatic awareness among social media users, educators, and content creators. In a world where digital discourse shapes reputations, influences public opinion, and fosters global dialogue, the ability to navigate politeness and inference across cultures is not optional, it is essential. Educational institutions and platform designers alike must consider how to promote and scaffold this competence.

Finally, this article points toward several avenues for future research. One direction involves expanding the empirical base to include underrepresented languages and regions, especially from the Global South. Another is the development of platform-specific pragmatic models, since the norms and affordances of each platform influence communicative behavior in unique ways. A third involves examining how AI-mediated communication (e.g., chatbots, translation tools) affects the encoding and decoding of politeness and implicatures across languages and cultures.

All these things having been considered, this study underscores the urgent need for a multidimensional approach to pragmatics, one that is linguistically informed, culturally situated, and digitally literate. Only through such an approach can we begin to understand and improve the ways we communicate across cultures in a networked world.

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