

# **INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND MISUNDERSTANDING: PRAGMATIC MISMATCHES IN ACADEMIA**



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# INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN ACADEMIA

IN TODAY'S GLOBALIZED UNIVERSITIES, STUDENTS AND PROFESSORS ARE FROM DIFFERENT CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS. ACADEMIC ENGLISH IS THE SHARED CODE BUT THE PRAGMATIC NORMS VARY ACROSS CULTURES.

THIS STUDY EXPLORES HOW STUDENTS FROM DIVERSE LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS COMMUNICATE WITH PROFESSORS THROUGH EMAIL. USING A SCENARIO-BASED QUESTIONNAIRE, WE EXAMINE THE PRAGMATIC STRATEGIES, POLITENESS CONVENTIONS, AND LEVELS OF DIRECTNESS THAT STUDENTS NATURALLY APPLY WHEN COMPOSING ACADEMIC EMAILS.

THE GOAL IS NOT TO JUDGE ANY STYLE AS CORRECT OR INCORRECT, BUT TO UNDERSTAND HOW CULTURAL NORMS SHAPE THE WAY WE COMMUNICATE IN ACADEMIC SETTINGS AND HOW THESE DIFFERENCES CAN LEAD TO PRAGMATIC MISMATCHES.

# INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN ACADEMIA

- IN ACADEMIA, INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION INVOLVES NAVIGATING DIFFERENT **PRAGMATIC STYLES**, THE UNSPOKEN RULES FOR HOW WE USE LANGUAGE TO PERFORM ACTIONS LIKE DISAGREEING, REQUESTING, OR GIVING FEEDBACK.
- SUCCESS IN A GLOBALIZED UNIVERSITY SETTING DEPENDS ON **PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE**: THE ABILITY TO USE LANGUAGE THAT IS SOCIALLY APPROPRIATE FOR THE SPECIFIC CONTEXT, BEYOND JUST HAVING GOOD GRAMMAR.
- **INTERCULTURAL PRAGMATICS** EXAMINES HOW LANGUAGE IS USED IN MULTICULTURAL ACADEMIC SETTINGS TO PERFORM SOCIAL ACTIONS LIKE REQUESTING, DISAGREEING, OR PROVIDING FEEDBACK.



# WHAT DOES “INTERCULTURAL” MEAN?

**Interaction between individuals from different cultures (countries, regions or groups)!**

“... for cross-cultural communication to be open and effective, interlocutors must be aware of their boundaries, both personal and cultural, so that they might know the limits on and possibilities for understanding one another in the exchange. That is, in understanding another person and culture you must simultaneously understand yourself. The process is ongoing, an endeavour aimed not at a final transparent understanding of the Other or of the self, but at continued communication, at an ever-widening understanding of both. (Sarris, 1993, p. 6) “

# WHAT IS INTERCULTURAL PRAGMATICS?

**DEFINITION: THE STUDY OF HOW PEOPLE FROM DIFFERENT CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS USE LANGUAGE IN SOCIAL INTERACTION AND THE EFFECTS OF THEIR DIFFERING PRAGMATIC NORMS.**

- SPEECH ACTS: HOW WE MAKE REQUESTS, GIVE FEEDBACK, APOLOGIZE, DISAGREE.**
- POLITENESS STRATEGIES: DIRECTNESS VS. INDIRECTNESS.**
- TURN-TAKING: IN MEETINGS, SEMINARS, AND CLASSROOMS.**
- \*WHILE GRAMMAR IS THE 'WHAT', THE RULES OF THE LANGUAGE, PRAGMATICS IS THE 'HOW' I.E. THE RULES OF USE. IT IS THE CULTURAL SOFTWARE THAT RUNS OUR COMMUNICATION. A STUDENT CAN HAVE PERFECT TOEFL SCORES BUT STILL STRUGGLE BECAUSE THEIR PRAGMATIC 'SOFTWARE' IS CALIBRATED FOR A DIFFERENT CONTEXT.\***

# Intercultural Pragmatics

**“ ICP takes the point of view that individuals from different societies or communities interact according to their own pragmatic norms, often resulting in a conflict of expectations and , ultimately, misunderstandings between the groups.”**

Because intercultural interaction has the potential to bring up stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination against entire groups of people, research in ICP is made necessary to reduce these consequences.

# THE "PRAGMATIC MISMATCH" IN ACADEMIA

## AREAS OF CONFLICT:

1. CLASSROOM PARTICIPATION: THE "VALUE" OF SPEAKING UP (E.G., SOCRATIC DEBATE VS. RESPECTFUL LISTENING).
2. ACADEMIC WRITING: STRUCTURING AN ARGUMENT (LINEAR VS. CIRCULAR); USING CITATIONS; EXPRESSING A STANCE (HEDGING VS. STRONG CLAIMS).
3. SUPERVISOR-SUPERVISEE RELATIONS: EXPECTATIONS OF DIRECTNESS, FEEDBACK STYLE (EXPLICIT CRITICISM VS. IMPLIED SUGGESTIONS), AND HIERARCHY.
4. COLLABORATIVE WORK: DECISION-MAKING STYLES AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT.

# INTERCULTURAL PRAGMATICS IN EDUCATION

- **HOME-SCHOOL MISMATCHES IN INTERACTIONAL NORMS**

*EXAMPLE:* A CHILD REMAINS SILENT IN CLASS OUT OF RESPECT FOR ADULTS, BUT THE TEACHER INTERPRETS THIS AS A LACK OF ENGAGEMENT.

- **DIFFERENT CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS OF LANGUAGE**

*EXAMPLE:* INDIRECT FEEDBACK SUCH AS "YOU MIGHT WANT TO REVISE THIS" IS SEEN AS POLITE GUIDANCE IN SOME CULTURES BUT AS STRONG CRITICISM IN OTHERS.

- **DIFFERENCES IN GROUP POWER RELATIONS**

*EXAMPLE:* OPENLY DISAGREEING WITH A TEACHER IS ENCOURAGED IN SOME EDUCATIONAL CULTURES BUT CONSIDERED DISRESPECTFUL IN OTHERS.

WHAT SOUNDS INAPPROPRIATE OR OVERLY INFORMAL IN ONE CULTURE MAY BE ENTIRELY ACCEPTABLE IN ANOTHER (E.G. INFORMAL ADDRESS OR SOCIAL INVITATIONS IN BRAZIL).

# STUDY OVERVIEW

## RESEARCH FOCUS:

HOW STUDENTS FROM DIFFERENT LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS FORMULATE EMAILS TO PROFESSORS — EXAMINING PRAGMATIC STRATEGIES, POLITENESS CONVENTIONS, AND COMMUNICATION STYLES ACROSS CULTURES.

## METHOD:

- ANONYMOUS WRITTEN QUESTIONNAIRE WITH SCENARIO-BASED EMAIL TASKS
- PARTICIPANTS RESPOND TO REALISTIC ACADEMIC SITUATIONS BY COMPOSING EMAILS TO PROFESSORS
- EACH EMAIL INCLUDES A SUBJECT LINE AND SIGNATURE

## WHAT WE ANALYZE:

- DIRECTNESS VS. INDIRECTNESS IN REQUESTS
- POLITENESS STRATEGIES AND FORMALITY LEVELS
- USE OF GREETINGS, CLOSINGS, AND HEDGING LANGUAGE
- CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN HOW POWER DISTANCE IS REFLECTED IN EMAIL COMMUNICATION

# STRATEGIES FOR INTEGRATION

## FOR INSTRUCTORS & INSTITUTIONS:

- **MAKE IMPLICIT NORMS EXPLICIT: EXPLAIN WHY PARTICIPATION, WRITING STRUCTURE, AND FEEDBACK ARE DONE A CERTAIN WAY.**
- **SCAFFOLD PARTICIPATION: USE THINK-PAIR-SHARE, LOW-STAKES ONLINE FORUMS, AND PRE-SUBMITTED QUESTIONS.**
- **DIVERSIFY ASSESSMENT: VALUE REFLECTIVE WRITING AND COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS ALONGSIDE TRADITIONAL DEBATE.**

## FOR STUDENTS & SCHOLARS:

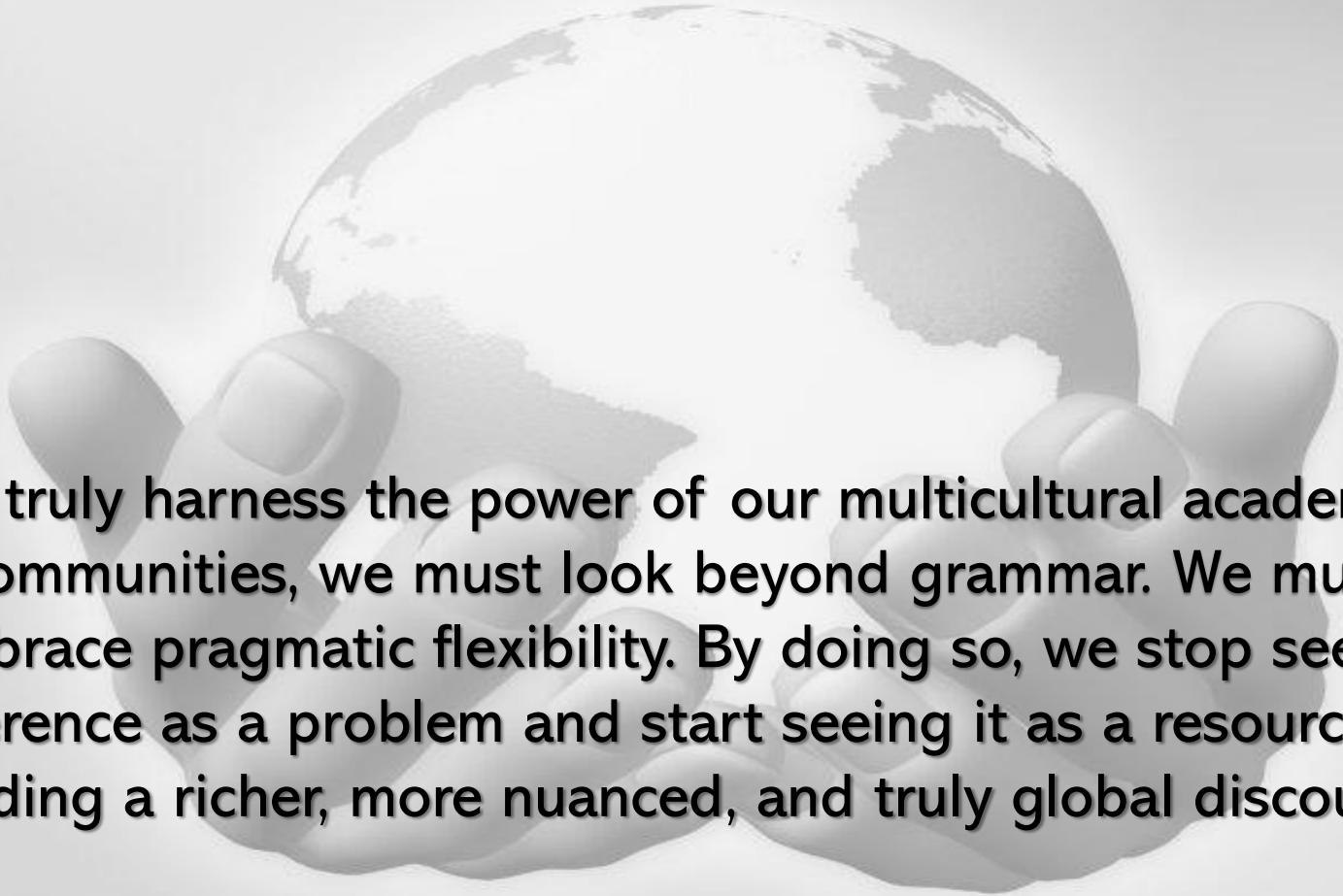
- **DEVELOP METAPRAGMATIC AWARENESS: REFLECT ON YOUR OWN STYLE AND LEARN ABOUT OTHERS.**
- **ASK CLARIFYING QUESTIONS: "WHEN YOU SAID X, DID YOU MEAN...?"**
- **USE "I STATEMENTS": "IN MY CULTURE, WE OFTEN... SO I INTERPRETED YOUR FEEDBACK AS..."**

This requires action at all levels. Institutions must provide training. Instructors must become 'pragmatic guides.' And students must be encouraged to become aware observers of communication. Simple techniques like making norms explicit or using 'I statements' can be transformative.

# CONCLUSION

- **PRAGMATIC DIVERSITY IS A REALITY IN GLOBAL ACADEMIA, NOT A DEFICIT.**
- **MISMATCHES IN DIRECTNESS, POLITENESS, AND TURN-TAKING CAN CREATE SIGNIFICANT BARRIERS.**
- **THE SOLUTION IS PRAGMATIC FLEXIBILITY: THE CONSCIOUS AND STRATEGIC INTEGRATION OF DIVERSE STYLES.**

**THE COMPREHENSION OF DIFFERENCES IN COMMUNICATIVE CONVENTIONS, WORLD VIEWS, NORMS OF SPEECH BEHAVIOUR AND INTERPRETATIONS, TOGETHER WITH ONE'S BACKGROUND, ESTABLISHES SOCIAL, EDUCATIONAL AND WORKPLACE NETWORKS, SUPPORTING SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION. THIS UNDERSTANDING OUGHT TO START IN OUR SURROUNDINGS, AMONG FAMILIES, FRIENDS AND NEIGHBOURS.**



To truly harness the power of our multicultural academic communities, we must look beyond grammar. We must embrace pragmatic flexibility. By doing so, we stop seeing difference as a problem and start seeing it as a resource for building a richer, more nuanced, and truly global discourse.

**Thank you**

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