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PRAGMATIC FEATURES OF SYMBOLS IN CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Khakimova Surayyo Iskandarovna
A PhD student, Alisher Navo'i Tashkent State University of the Uzbek Language and Literature.
surayyokhakimova@gmail.com

Abstract
This study explores the pragmatic features of symbols in cross-cultural communication, focusing on their contextual and inferential meaning. By examining linguistic and non-linguistic symbols, the paper analyzes how these symbols convey social and cultural nuances in English and Uzbek. The study uses a qualitative approach, reviewing cultural case studies and communicative exchanges to assess the role of symbols in effective intercultural communication. Results show that symbols play a significant role in managing politeness, indirectness, and context-driven meaning, with cultural variability influencing interpretation.
Keywords:
Pragmatics, symbols, cross-cultural communication, contextual meaning, indirectness, politeness.

Introduction

Symbols are integral to both verbal and non-verbal communication, acting as carriers of complex cultural, emotional, and contextual meanings. While symbols have long been studied in semiotics and linguistics, their pragmatic features—how they function in real-world communication—still require cumulative research. Pragmatics concerns itself with how meaning is interpreted based on context, speaker intention, and societal norms, making it crucial for understanding the role of symbols in communication (Grice, 1975).

This article investigates the pragmatic features of symbols by comparing linguistic and non-linguistic symbols in English and Uzbek. Specifically, the research seeks to answer the following questions:

- How do symbols convey indirect meaning in different cultural contexts?
- What role do symbols play in managing politeness and face-saving strategies?
- How do linguistic and non-linguistic symbols vary in pragmatic use across cultures?

This study addresses these questions through qualitative analysis, contributing to the field of cross-cultural pragmatics by examining symbols in both everyday communication and formal discourse.

Literature review

The study of symbols is multifaceted, intersecting with various linguistic disciplines, including pragmatics, semiotics, and cross-cultural communication. Understanding the pragmatic features of symbols requires a synthesis of these fields, each contributing a unique perspective on how symbols convey meaning in different contexts and cultures.

Pragmatics is a subfield of linguistics that deals with how context influences the interpretation of meaning. Pioneering work in pragmatics, such as Grice's theory of implicature, emphasizes that meaning is often inferred rather than explicitly stated. Grice argues that communication relies on conversational maxims, where speakers expect certain

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levels of cooperation, relevance, and clarity. When these maxims are flouted, indirect meaning arises, often signaled by symbols that require contextual interpretation (Grice, 1975). Brown and Levinson's politeness theory further explores how language, including symbolic language, manages social relationships by mitigating face-threatening acts. Politeness strategies, such as indirectness and hedging, are key to understanding the pragmatic use of symbols. Symbols in different cultural contexts can perform face-saving functions, allowing speakers to navigate sensitive topics or express criticism politely (Brown and Levinson, 1987). This aspect is particularly relevant in cross-cultural communication, where different societies have varying expectations about the use of symbolic language to maintain social harmony.

Semiotics is a next subfield of linguistics providing a framework for understanding how symbols are interpreted differently across cultures. In some cases, the same symbol can carry entirely different connotations depending on the cultural background of the individuals involved. For example, while a white dove is a symbol of peace in many Western cultures, its meaning may not hold the same weight in other cultures, demonstrating the arbitrary nature of symbolic representation (Wierzbicka, 1992). Semiotics, as developed by Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) and later by Charles Sanders Peirce (1931), focuses on the relationship between signs (symbols) and their meaning. Saussure's model distinguishes between the *signifier* (the physical form of the symbol) and the *signified* (the concept the symbol represents). In this model, symbols can be words, gestures, or objects that communicate meaning based on cultural conventions. Peirce expanded this model by classifying signs into three types: icons, indexes, and symbols. Icons resemble what they represent (e.g., a picture of a tree), indexes have a direct connection to their object (e.g., smoke as an index of fire), and symbols are arbitrary and rely on cultural agreements (e.g., the cross as a symbol of Christianity).

Cross-cultural communication is a field focusing on exploring how people from different cultural backgrounds communicate, and how cultural differences influence the use and interpretation of symbols. Hall introduced the concept of high-context and low-context cultures, which is particularly relevant when examining the pragmatic features of symbols. In high-context cultures, such as those found in many Asian and Middle Eastern societies, communication relies heavily on implicit messages, where symbols play a crucial role in conveying meaning. In contrast, low-context cultures, such as the United States and Western Europe, tend to rely on explicit verbal communication, where symbols are used more sparingly and often have a more literal interpretation (Hall, 1976). This distinction between high- and low-context communication is crucial when analyzing the pragmatic features of symbols, as it underscores the importance of context in interpreting meaning. In Uzbek culture, for instance, symbolic gestures such as a *hand over the heart* convey respect and humility, whereas in many Western cultures, such gestures may not hold the same significance. Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory further supports the idea that cultural values, such as power distance and individualism, shape how symbols are used and understood in different cultural settings(Hofstede, 2001).

Through learning symbols, communicants may not face less language barrier created in interaction of people from diverse cultural, ethnic and religious background. As a result, an addressee and an addresser can get into interaction straightforwardly although there are ethnic, cultural or religious distinctions, resulting in healthy community that supports the participants to understand, appreciate, and acknowledge each other (Khakimova,2022). To exemplify, *"Lotus Flower"*. The lotus flower holds profound spiritual and cultural significance in many

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South Asian and Southeast Asian cultures such as India, Thailand and Nepal. In Hinduism and Buddhism, the lotus symbolizes purity, enlightenment, and rebirth(Eliade 1987), as it grows in muddy waters but blossoms into a beautiful, clean flower. It is known that the lotus is often used as a symbol of spiritual awakening, and gods like Vishnu, Brahma, and Lakshmi are depicted sitting on or holding lotus flowers in most religious and cultural ceremonies. However, lotus also symbolizes rebirth and creation but with a slightly different context, particularly, in Ancient Egyptian culture. It was linked to the sun, as the flower opens during the day and closes at night, symbolizing the cycle of life and the journey of the soul (Rawson, 1992). It was often seen in tombs and art, representing the regeneration of life after death. In many Western contexts, the lotus flower doesn't carry the same deep spiritual or cultural significance. It is often appreciated purely for its aesthetic beauty or linked to exoticism, as it doesn't have inherent religious or symbolic meaning. It is clear that the lotus flower represents a spiritual symbol in India and Buddhist cultures, but in Western cultures, its meaning is often limited to an appreciation of its aesthetic beauty without the same spiritual or symbolic resonance (Wujastyk,2003). This cultural gap can lead to misunderstandings or superficial interpretations when communicating across cultures. For example, gifting a lotus flower in some Asian cultures may convey profound spiritual respect, while in the West, it could be seen as just a beautiful flower. The richness of the symbolic meaning is lost without an understanding of the cultural background. That's why it is crucially important to learn symbols in intercultural communication so as to creat healthier community in interaction.

Methods

This research employs a qualitative approach using case studies from both English and Uzbek speaking communities. Data was collected from two primary sources:

1. Literature Review: Relevant literature on pragmatics, semiotics, and cross-cultural communication was reviewed to build a theoretical framework.
2. Case Studies: Real-world examples of communicative exchanges involving symbols were selected from digital communication (e.g., emails, social media interactions) and face-to-face conversations.

Data Collection

- Linguistic Symbols: Phrases, idioms, and proverbs from both languages were analyzed for their pragmatic meaning. For example, the English idiom *"break the ice"* and the Uzbek proverb "*Olma daraxtdan uzoqqa tushmas"* was evaluated for their symbolic content.
- Non-linguistic Symbols: Gestures, emblems, and cultural icons were studied for their role in communication. For instance, *the hand-over-heart* gesture in Uzbek culture was compared to similar gestures in English-speaking cultures.

Analysis

The data was analyzed using pragmatic analysis frameworks, focusing on how symbols functioned in their respective contexts. Specifically, Grice's theory of implicature(Grice, 1975) and Brown & Levinson's politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) were employed to examine indirect meaning and face-management strategies.

Results

The analysis revealed several key findings regarding the pragmatic features of symbols:

Contextual Flexibility of Symbols

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Symbols showed considerable variability in meaning based on the context in which they were used. For example, the Uzbek *crescent symbol* has significant religious connotations in specific cultural settings, whereas in a different context, such as in graphic design, it may simply function as a decorative element. Similarly, in English, the symbolic meaning of *a heart emoji* could range from affection in personal conversations to sincerity in professional exchanges (Wierzbicka, 1992).

Indirectness in Symbolic Communication

Symbols were found to be effective tools for conveying indirect meaning, allowing speakers to express complex ideas without overtly stating them. In English, idioms such as "*beating around the bush*" carry implicit messages, often related to politeness or avoiding direct confrontation (Grice, 1975). In Uzbek, symbolic expressions like "*Bu ko'kdan tushgan emas"* (This didn't fall from the sky) similarly convey indirect meanings, often related to effort and hard work.

Politeness and Face-Saving

Symbols played a crucial role in face-saving strategies, particularly in maintaining politeness and mitigating face-threatening acts(Brown & Levinson, 1987). In both English and Uzbek, symbols were used to soften criticism or requests. For example, in English, *a thumbs-up symbol* can indicate approval or support, while in Uzbek, the symbolic use of *bread (non) in* certain cultural rituals can communicate respect and solidarity.

Cultural Variability

The interpretation of symbols was shown to be highly dependent on cultural knowledge. Symbols that held significant cultural weight in one language were often neutral or had different meanings in another. For instance, white symbolizes purity and peace in both English and Uzbek, but in English, it can also imply surrender, a nuance not present in Uzbek culture. Similarly, Uzbek's rich tapestry of proverbs often incorporates agricultural and pastoral symbols that may be unfamiliar or carry different associations in English-speaking contexts (Wierzbicka, 1992).

Discussion

The results of this study highlight the importance of context in the interpretation of symbols. Pragmatically, symbols rely on shared cultural knowledge and contextual cues to convey their full meaning, making them powerful tools for indirect communication (Grice, 1975). This aligns with Grice's theory of implicature, where the listener must infer meaning based on context, and Brown & Levinson's concept of politeness strategies, where speakers use symbols to manage face-threatening acts(Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Implications for Cross-Cultural Communication

The study's findings have several implications for cross-cultural communication. Understanding the pragmatic features of symbols can improve cross-cultural interactions by promoting awareness of how indirectness, politeness, and context shape meaning. In a globalized world where digital communication often spans cultures, knowing how symbols function pragmatically can enhance both personal and professional communication. For instance, understanding that the use of certain gestures or emojis can carry different connotations across cultures can prevent miscommunication in international settings (Levinson, 2000).

Limitations and Future Research

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While the study provides valuable insights, its scope is limited to English and Uzbek cultures, and further research is necessary to explore symbolic communication in other cultural contexts. Future studies could also incorporate a larger sample size, including more diverse communicative settings such as political discourse or legal language, where symbolic communication is particularly nuanced.

Conclusion

Symbols serve as fundamental components of communication, and their pragmatic features reveal the intricate ways in which context, culture, and intention shape meaning. By examining symbols from both English and Uzbek cultures, this study has demonstrated how symbols function as indirect communication tools and play a critical role in maintaining politeness and managing face-saving strategies. Understanding these pragmatic features can enhance cross-cultural communication, making symbolic language a key area for future research in linguistics and pragmatics.

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