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Pragmatic Asymmetry in Multilingual Academic Communication

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Abstract

This paper examines the problem of pragmatic asymmetry in multilingual academic communication. The study focuses on academic interaction in which English, Uzbek and Russian are used as significant languages of educational, institutional and intercultural communication. The increasing internationalization of higher education, academic mobility, joint educational programmes, English-medium instruction and international project cooperation has intensified the need for pragmatically appropriate communication among participants belonging to different linguistic and cultural traditions. The article argues that academic communication is not limited to the transmission of information. It also reflects social distance, institutional hierarchy, politeness norms, cultural expectations and communicative responsibility. Pragmatic asymmetry appears when interlocutors understand the literal meaning of an utterance but interpret its social and cultural meaning differently. The paper analyzes forms of address, requests, refusals, apologies, gratitude and disagreement as key speech acts in multilingual academic settings. It concludes that successful academic communication requires not only linguistic competence but also pragmatic competence, including the ability to adapt politeness strategies to English, Uzbek and Russian academic contexts.

Key Words: pragmatic asymmetry, multilingual communication, academic discourse, politeness strategies, speech act, English, Uzbek, Russian, intercultural communication, higher education.

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Introduction

Modern higher education is developing in conditions of intensive internationalization. Universities increasingly participate in academic mobility, joint educational programmes, international research projects, foreign accreditation, digital correspondence and cross-border institutional cooperation. These processes transform academic communication into a multilingual and multicultural phenomenon. In such an environment, communication is not merely a technical exchange of information; it is also a mechanism through which academic status, politeness, institutional responsibility and cultural expectations are expressed.

The relevance of this issue is connected with the growing role of international educational cooperation. The Erasmus+ Programme Guide 2025 emphasizes learning mobility and international cooperation in higher education, which inevitably increases the number of communicative situations involving students, teachers, researchers and administrators from different linguistic backgrounds. In Uzbekistan, English-medium instruction has also become an important part of higher education reform and internationalization. The British Council notes that its EMI work in Uzbekistan was launched in response to national higher education reform, capacity development and internationalization objectives, including support for higher education institutions delivering programmes in English. In addition, the "Uzbekistan-2030" Strategy defines the development of an educated generation and the modernization of the country as long-term national priorities.

In this context, English, Uzbek and Russian perform different but interconnected functions in academic life. English is widely used as a language of international projects, mobility, research publication, institutional visibility and academic cooperation. Uzbek, as the state language of Uzbekistan, is central to official documentation, national academic identity and institutional communication. Russian continues to function as an important language of academic and professional communication in many post-Soviet and regional contexts. Therefore, multilingual academic communication in Uzbekistan cannot be reduced to translation between three languages. It should be understood as the interaction of different pragmatic systems.

The central problem of this article is pragmatic asymmetry. Pragmatic asymmetry may be defined as a

communicative situation in which speakers understand the lexical meaning of an utterance but interpret its social meaning differently. For example, a direct request may be perceived as efficient and clear by one participant, but as impolite or too categorical by another. A long respectful introduction may be interpreted as necessary politeness in one academic culture, but as excessive formality in another. A brief English e-mail may be considered professional and concise in an international context, while in Uzbek or Russian official communication it may seem insufficiently respectful.

Thus, the problem is not only linguistic. It is also cultural, pragmatic and institutional. The aim of the present paper is to analyze the main forms of pragmatic asymmetry in multilingual academic communication and to identify the politeness strategies that help participants avoid communicative misunderstanding in English, Uzbek and Russian academic contexts.

Academic communication represents a special type of institutional discourse. Its participants do not communicate only as private individuals. They act as students, teachers, supervisors, researchers, project coordinators, deans, vice-rectors, rectors, visiting professors or representatives of partner institutions. These roles determine the level of formality, the acceptable degree of directness, the choice of address forms and the expected politeness strategies.

The theoretical basis of this study is connected with pragmatics, speech act theory, politeness theory and intercultural communication. Speech act theory makes it possible to understand language as action. In academic communication, speakers do not only pronounce sentences; they request documents, invite colleagues, refuse proposals, apologize for delays, thank partners, disagree with arguments and confirm institutional obligations. Each of these actions has both linguistic and social meaning.

Politeness theory is also important for the analysis of academic interaction. In higher education, many communicative acts may be face-threatening. A teacher may criticize a student's work, a reviewer may reject an article, an administrator may remind a colleague about a deadline, or a student may ask a professor for additional time. In such cases, speakers use politeness strategies to reduce communicative pressure and preserve academic relations.

However, politeness is not universal in its form. English academic communication often prefers

indirectness, modal verbs and softening formulas: "Could you please...", "Would it be possible...", "I would be grateful if...". Uzbek academic communication often gives special importance to respectful address, age and status hierarchy, introductory politeness and culturally appropriate deference. Russian academic communication frequently combines formal address, official style, institutional clarity and directness. These differences become especially visible in multilingual academic settings.

One of the most important areas of pragmatic asymmetry is the system of address. In English, formal academic correspondence usually begins with formulas such as "Dear Professor", "Dear Dr." or "Dear colleagues". In many international academic environments, first-name address may also be acceptable, especially among colleagues. In Uzbek academic communication, forms such as "hurmatli", "ustoz", "domla", "professor", "rektor" or "prorektor" perform an important pragmatic function. They express not only politeness but also recognition of age, experience and institutional status. In Russian, the use of "Уважаемый/Уважаемая", name-patronymic forms and the formal pronoun "Вы" remains an important marker of respect.

The same form of address may therefore produce different pragmatic effects. If an Uzbek or Russian speaker directly transfers a highly respectful form into English, the message may sound too ceremonial or unnatural. Conversely, if an English-speaking participant uses a very brief and informal form of address in Uzbek or Russian contexts, it may be perceived as a lack of respect. This demonstrates that academic politeness is not contained in words alone. It depends on the communicative expectations of a particular linguistic and cultural environment.

Request strategies also reveal important differences. A request is one of the most frequent speech acts in academic life. Students request consultations, teachers request assignments, administrators request reports, and international coordinators request documents or confirmations. In English academic communication, requests are often softened by modal verbs and indirect structures: "Could you please send the document?", "Would it be possible to arrange a meeting?", "I would appreciate your feedback". Such formulas reduce pressure and protect the addressee's autonomy.

In Uzbek academic communication, requests are often accompanied by contextual explanation and

respectful framing. The speaker may first explain the institutional situation, refer to the purpose of cooperation and then formulate the request. This reflects the importance of social context and respectful relations. In Russian academic communication, official requests may be expressed through formulas such as "Просим Вас...", "Прошу направить...", "Будем признательны за...". These forms may be more direct, but within official discourse they are considered acceptable because they are formal and institutionally clear.

Pragmatic asymmetry occurs when these request strategies are evaluated through another system of expectations. A Russian-style direct request may seem too strong in English. An English-style short request may seem insufficiently respectful in Uzbek. A long Uzbek-style introductory request may seem unnecessarily indirect to an English-speaking partner. Therefore, the most effective strategy in multilingual academic interaction is balance: the request should be clear enough to avoid misunderstanding and polite enough to preserve the interlocutor's face.

Another sensitive area is disagreement. Academic life is impossible without disagreement, because seminars, conferences, peer review and supervision all require critical thinking. However, disagreement may threaten the intellectual face of the interlocutor. In English academic discourse, disagreement is often softened by hedging: "I partly agree, but...", "This point could be reconsidered", "It may be useful to look at the problem from another perspective". These formulas make criticism less personal and more analytical.

In Uzbek academic communication, disagreement may be expressed more indirectly, especially when the interlocutor has higher age, academic authority or institutional status. Instead of direct rejection, the speaker may use suggestion, clarification or reference to collective benefit. In Russian academic discourse, disagreement may be more explicit, especially in scholarly debate, but it is expected to be reasoned, formal and professionally justified. A direct argument is not automatically impolite if it is expressed within the norms of academic discussion.

The danger lies in different interpretations. A direct critical comment may be normal in one academic culture but rude in another. A very indirect disagreement may be perceived as uncertainty or even agreement by participants who expect explicit argumentation. Therefore, pragmatic competence includes not only the

ability to express disagreement politely but also the ability to recognize disagreement when it is encoded indirectly.

Refusal is another speech act that often causes pragmatic difficulty. In academic communication, refusal may concern participation in a conference, acceptance of a proposal, submission of a document, supervision, mobility, recommendation or cooperation. In English, refusal is usually softened by apology, gratitude and explanation: "Thank you for the invitation, but unfortunately I will not be able to attend". In Uzbek, refusal often requires even greater relational sensitivity, especially when addressed to senior colleagues or respected institutions. In Russian, refusal may be direct but formal: "К сожалению, не смогу принять участие..." or "В связи с занятостью вынужден отказать...". These formulas reduce the negative effect of refusal by providing a reason and maintaining respect.

Apology and gratitude also have different pragmatic depth in English, Uzbek and Russian. In English academic communication, apology is often concise and action-oriented: "I apologize for the delay. Please find the revised file attached". In Uzbek communication, apology and gratitude may be more relationally elaborated and connected with respect, goodwill and recognition of assistance. In Russian official communication, conventional formulas such as "Приношу извинения", "Благодарю Вас" and "Выражаем признательность" are widely used. The problem appears when the expected level of emotional and formal expression differs. A short "Thank you" may be enough in one context but too weak in another. A long expression of gratitude may be respectful in one language but too ceremonial in another.

Official correspondence is one of the most practical areas where pragmatic asymmetry becomes visible. Academic letters, e-mails, memoranda, invitations, protocols and project messages require not only correct grammar but also correct pragmatic framing. English academic correspondence usually values clarity, structure, politeness and conciseness. Uzbek official-academic correspondence often requires respectful introductory formulas, institutional justification and formal closing. Russian correspondence usually emphasizes formal address, clear administrative purpose and precise wording. If these conventions are ignored, even a grammatically correct message may be perceived as inappropriate.

The analysis shows that pragmatic asymmetry in multilingual academic communication has several sources. The first source is cultural difference in the understanding of politeness. The second is the difference in academic hierarchy and status recognition. The third is the difference in directness and indirectness. The fourth is the transfer of etiquette formulas from one language into another. The fifth is the insufficient development of pragmatic competence among participants of international educational programmes.

It should be emphasized that pragmatic asymmetry does not mean that one language or culture is more polite than another. English, Uzbek and Russian academic communication each possess their own mechanisms of respect, clarity and institutional order. The task of comparative-pragmatic analysis is not to evaluate them hierarchically, but to reveal how they function and how misunderstanding can be reduced when these systems interact.

For this reason, pragmatic competence should be treated as an essential component of academic communicative competence. A participant of multilingual academic communication should know not only vocabulary and grammar, but also how to address a professor, how to ask for a document, how to refuse an invitation, how to disagree in a seminar, how to apologize for delay and how to write an official e-mail. These skills are especially important in internationalized higher education, where communication directly influences academic mobility, project management, institutional reputation and educational cooperation.

The development of pragmatic competence may include several practical directions. First, students and staff should be introduced to the main differences between English, Uzbek and Russian academic etiquette. Second, academic writing and speaking courses should include speech acts such as request, refusal, apology, gratitude and disagreement. Third, international offices and project coordinators should develop model letters and communication templates adapted to different languages. Fourth, teachers should explain not only what expression is grammatically correct but also when and why it is pragmatically appropriate.

Thus, multilingual academic communication requires a shift from language accuracy to communicative appropriateness. Accuracy answers the question whether the sentence is correct. Appropriateness answers the question whether the

sentence is suitable for this interlocutor, this institution, this culture and this academic situation. In modern higher education, both dimensions are necessary.

Conclusion

Pragmatic asymmetry is one of the important but often hidden factors of misunderstanding in multilingual academic communication. It appears when participants understand the literal meaning of utterances but interpret their social and cultural meanings differently. In academic environments where English, Uzbek and Russian interact, such asymmetry may occur in forms of address, requests, refusals, apologies, gratitude, disagreement and official correspondence.

The study shows that English academic communication often relies on indirectness, mitigation and concise politeness; Uzbek academic communication gives special importance to respect, status, age

hierarchy and contextual politeness; Russian academic communication combines formal address, institutional directness and official clarity. These differences should not be viewed as obstacles, but as pragmatic resources that need to be understood and adapted.

The main conclusion is that successful multilingual academic interaction depends not only on language proficiency but also on pragmatic competence. In the context of international academic mobility, English-medium instruction, joint programmes and institutional cooperation, the ability to choose appropriate politeness strategies becomes a necessary professional skill. Therefore, pragmatic competence should be included in the preparation of students, teachers, researchers and university administrators who participate in international educational programmes.

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