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Cross-Cultural Courtesy: An Examination of How Bengali Speakers and US English Speakers Differ in Politeness

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Abstract

This study explores the nuances of politeness across two linguistic and cultural contexts: Bengali and US English. Politeness, a fundamental aspect of social interaction, is deeply influenced by cultural norms and values, shaping how individuals navigate relationships and maintain harmony. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, the research investigates, through structured interviews assessing perceptions of politeness, how the principles of "face" are applied in these languages. The findings reveal significant cultural contrasts. Rooted in a collectivist culture, Bengali speakers often emphasize respect, deference, and indirectness, particularly when addressing elders or authority figures. In contrast, US English speakers, influenced by individualistic values, tend to prioritize directness and clarity, valuing equality and informal interaction. Additionally, power dynamics are crucial in shaping polite behavior among Bengali speakers but less so among US speakers. Politeness Theory highlights how power dynamics influence the strategies employed to maintain or threaten face, shaping perceptions of face-saving or face-losing acts. The results of this study reveal that cross-cultural interactions often lead to misunderstandings due to perceived face-threatening acts (FTAs). These misinterpretations stem from culturally influenced differences in linguistic expressions, perceived status and hierarchy, and contrasting cultural orientations, such as collectivism versus individualism.

1. Introduction

> "All communication is more or less cross-cultural. We learn to use language as we grow up, and growing up in different parts of the country, having different ethnic, religious, or class backgrounds, even just being male and female- all result in different ways of talking."
>
> – Deborah Tarren, Professor of Linguistics, Georgetown University.

There is broad acknowledgment that a creative dance exists between language and culture. Some researchers (Al-Sheikh Hussein, 2012) adhere to the linguistic relativity hypothesis developed by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, which emphasizes language's strong influence on thought and perception. Culture also immensely influences our language (Chowdhury & Hossain, 2022), impacting our views of polite and impolite behaviors and speech (Lanteigne, 2007). What is considered polite in one culture is impolite in another (Mills, 2009). Numerous cultural factors can affect our language usage, including how politeness is expressed (Kasper, 1990). Sodah (2019) demonstrated how linguistic shifts accompany status changes, and Irvine (1985) noted that lower-status groups often imitate language forms of higher-status groups. Likewise, the language forms of lower-status groups become stigmatized and avoided. Imitation and stigmatization result in the restructuring and distribution of linguistic variables, a principal mechanism of language change (Friðriksson, 2009).

Status and rank can also affect polite behavior and speech. Samransamruajkit's (2014) work on politeness in refusal situations offers a good example. One Bangladeshi interviewee noted that if he has to refuse superiors at work, he "will start with apologies and then 'gratitude'" (p. 147). On the other hand, in American culture, people tend to

express their thoughts directly (Evason, 2022; Park et al., 2012). The difference between the two cultural approaches can create cross-cultural misunderstandings. H. P. Grice's (1913–1988) cooperative principles offer a model for understanding how an indirect linguistic approach can be ambiguous in other cultures. Grice divided his maxims into four categories: quality, quantity, relevance, and manner. Each focuses on a different aspect of how utterances are used in cooperative discourse. In the example given by the Bangladeshi interviewee, from an American cultural viewpoint, beginning a refusal with apologies and gratitude could violate Grice's maxims of quantity and relevance because the interviewee gives too much non-relevant information.

In globalization, people come from different cultures and traditions and live in shared communities (Matthews & Thakkar, 2012; Hassi & Storti, 2012). That sets up a 'perfect storm' for experiencing different types of courtesy or lack thereof. According to Holmes and Schnurr (2005), it is difficult to be sure whether a particular utterance will be perceived as polite or impolite, even within our cultural communities. That begs the question, how can we hope to achieve cross-cultural politeness? A global way of approaching politeness is from the angle of social appropriateness, as illustrated by the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, where politeness is defined as "having or showing good manners, consideration for others, and correct social behavior" (Proctor, 2022). Leech (2014) introduces eight characteristics of politeness:

1) Politeness is not an obligation,

2) There are varying gradations of polite and impolite behavior,

3) There is often a sense of normality,

4) How far politeness will occur depends on the situation,

5) There is a reciprocal asymmetry in polite behavior between two parties,

6) Politeness can manifest itself in repetitive behavior,

7) It involves some transaction of values and

8) It preserves a balance of values between participants.

Linguists give different definitions of politeness according to their perspectives. Lakoff (1975) states that politeness is a notion "developed by societies to reduce friction in personal communication" (p. 64), while Ide (1989) states that politeness is a "language associated with smooth communication" (p. 22). Similarly, Brown and Levinson (1987) view politeness "as a complex system for softening face threats" (p. 1). Sifianou (1992) defines politeness as "the set of social values which instructs interactants to consider each other by satisfying shared expectations" (p. 86). Eelen (2001) takes a more general approach: "to be polite is always 'to act appropriately'… according to the hearer's expectations" (p. 128). For Nwoye (1992), being polite means that an individual is conforming to what are the agreed upon codes of good conduct within a particular culture, and for Watts et al. (1992), politeness is used to help us live effectively in a social environment. Yule (2010) believes that cultures differ in identifying polite behavior. Lakoff (1990) identifies three types of politeness. The first is distance politeness, which refers to a civilized human strategy that is similar to other animals making physical boundaries to mark their territory. Humans do the same in a symbolic way that shows equality between the participants. This strategy was typical among Europe's middle and upper classes for many years.

The second type of politeness is deferential politeness, which is adopted to avoid the possibility of conflicts (Gumartifa, 2022; Brown, 2015). This strategy avoids conflict by considering that it is the other person in a conversation who determines how meaning is construed (Overton & Lowry, 2013). This strategy works on the assumption that neither participant in a conversation will be debased. It is a strategy common to many Asian cultures, where it is the preferred conversation style for women, particularly when they are conversing with men. Finally, camaraderie is the third type of politeness, and this is based on the concept that interaction and connection are socially positive and openness is the major sign of courtesy (Daulay et al., 2022). That is to say that being open and friendly equates to being desirable and adorable (Lakoff, 1990; Yule, 2010).

Being a collectivist society, Bangladeshi people are less direct in communication and think being direct is not a sign of politeness. While that does not necessarily mean it is impolite, it may be considered as such in some cases (Rabbani et al., 2024; Scroope, 2017). There are examples of how different cultural values on directness affect cross-cultural communications. Istvan Kecskes (2017) discusses the example of a Japanese businessman trying to negotiate with an American counterpart. The American businessman was more straightforward, and the Japanese businessman needed to be more direct, which ultimately caused a misunderstanding. Unlike Japan and Bangladesh, American culture is individualistic, where people are more direct (Tamimy et al., 2022; Park et al., 2012). They tend to express their feelings and thoughts without, as many Americans would say, 'beating around the bush.' This

does not seem impolite to them at all. Although much research has been done on cross-cultural courtesy in numerous cultures, very few studies have been done based on Bengali culture. This paper will discuss the cross-cultural differences in politeness between Bengali and US English speakers within the context of adding to the knowledge base of how collectivist cultural perceptions of politeness differ from individualistic cultural perceptions as well as how face-threatening acts as defined by Brown and Levinson (1987) affect the perception of politeness. I will strive to answer the following research questions:

1) What are some of the direct linguistic differences in politeness between Bengali and US culture?

2) What are some of the indirect paralanguage elements (e.g., body language) that affect the perception of politeness in each culture?

3) How can these differences result in misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication?

2. Data and Methods

To gather data on politeness in the Bengali and US cultures, I interviewed ten participants in total from Bangladesh ($n = 5$) and the United States ($n = 5$). The small sample size reflects an initial sampling. Each participant was asked whether asking someone their age or salary would be considered impolite. Following that, each participant was asked about their perceptions of other polite and impolite behaviors and language. Depending upon their answers, I followed up with non-structured questions designed to solicit more information. The interviews were conducted in person and were 5–15 minutes long. Table 1 presents the demographic information for each participant.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Study Participants

Age	Sex	Ethnicity
35	M	Bangladeshi
32	F	Bangladeshi
25	F	Bangladeshi
26	M	Bangladeshi
25	F	Bangladeshi
59	F	US
27	F	US
23	M	US
22	M	US
23	F	US

In addition to the interviews, I conducted an extensive literature review into sociocultural research on polite behavior in both cultures. This included the cultural factors, such as rank and status, that affect polite behaviors and the linguistic expressions associated with what is considered polite. The text on cross-cultural politeness that I applied to my analyses of the results is Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory.

3. Results

3.1 The Concept of Face According to Brown and Levinson (1987)

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness is essential in today's interactions and for the socialization of people in different situations. In communication, people consider certain variables either consciously or unconsciously. Therefore, for a clear understanding of the theory, it is crucial to note that these two theorists borrowed the idea of "face" from Goffman (1967). Goffman (1967) held that the variables that people consciously or subconsciously adopt in their interactions are meant to positively influence their contact with their colleagues. There are two categories of faces: positive face and negative face. A positive face describes a participant's desire for approval and their need to be liked. It is associated with a need for connection and to be considered as a member of the group. For instance, "let us do it together" is a common collaborative phrase exemplifying a positive face. On the other hand, a negative face describes a member's need to be independent and not to impose on other people. An example of an expression of a negative face is "I am sorry to bother you."

Brown and Levinson (1987) define face as the public self-image that every individual in a given society wants. It is, under this definition, something that can be lost, preserved, or even optimized, and it is something that is ever-present in any interaction. In most conversations, the participants collaborate to preserve each other's individual face since both are equally vulnerable to a loss of face. When a conversation is perceived as polite in social distance or closeness situations, it is because it respects the norms of conversation space, and in doing so, it respects face. Consider the example of someone from a culture where the norm is for more distance between interlocutors, who

might say, “Get out of my face” if they feel the other person is too close. In other words, they perceive impoliteness as a possible loss or threat to face. Respect and deference show awareness of another person’s face when the individuals involved are not close, perhaps just acquaintances. Solidarity, camaraderie, or friendliness can be expressed to demonstrate understanding of another person’s face when the individuals involved are close, such as family members.

According to Yule (1996), if a speaker is concerned about another speaker’s face, they must then care about both the other speaker’s negative and positive face needs. It is important to note that ‘negative’ in this context does not mean bad; it simply means the opposite of ‘positive.’ If a speaker needs help but is concerned about imposing on others or losing their independence, they will adopt a negative face. Threatening negative faces occur in situations where the participants’ freedom might be damaged, and it involves orders, requests, suggestions, and advice. If, instead, a speaker wants to be liked, accepted, and considered part of a group where they recognize that others share their wants, they adopt a positive face. That reflects the speaker’s need for connection. Threatening positive faces diminish social discretion and involve expressions of disapproval as well as disagreements, accusations, and interruptions. Normally, face-threatening acts, known as FTAs, happen when a speaker intentionally or unintentionally damages the hearer’s face through their words. Another way that speakers may threaten their face is by using expressions of apologies and confessions (Hamza, 2007).

Brown and Levinson (1987) illustrate a strategy where they introduce five different options to avoid face-threatening acts. The options are 1) baldly without redress and with redress, 2) positive politeness, 3) negative politeness, 4) off-record and on-record clarifications, and 5) do not do the FTA and do the FTA. When we say something directly to someone, such as “Give me the address of the bus station,” this is considered as FTA on record baldly without redress. In other words, itt is an order without any additional polite expressions. This act can be done both using positive politeness and negative politeness. An example of the FTA on record with redress using positive politeness would be, “You have such beautiful teeth, but I wish I couldn’t see them while you are eating.” It is positive because it reflects a desire to remain connected while expressing a need. In positive politeness, the speaker emphasizes the other’s positive face by complimenting them even though they also note an impolite act.

On the contrary, in negative politeness, the speaker recognizes the other speaker’s independence. From the example above, an FTA on record with redress using negative politeness would be, “I am sorry to bother you, but could you tell me where the bus station is?” In the FTA off-the-record situation, the speaker indirectly hints at a face-threatening act. For instance, “Do you use the bus regularly? I do not know how far I am from the bus station.” To avoid doing an FTA altogether, people simply choose not to communicate. Using this structure, we can now examine the results from my interviews.

From my interviews, I gathered the following data, which are divided according to my research questions and into categories regarding polite behavior and linguistic expressions.

3.2 What Are Some of the Direct Linguistic Differences in Politeness Between Bengali and US Culture?

Below are several examples of direct linguistic differences in politeness noted between the Bengali and US participants I interviewed.

3.2.1 Politeness and Personal Questions

This refers to personal questions that would be considered impolite in some cultures but not others. Here are some of the more relevant answers given by participants.

> Interviewee #6: A 59-year-old American woman said asking a woman her age is considered impolite.
>
> Interviewee #10: A younger (23-year-old) American woman noted that it’s okay to ask a woman her age if she is under 30, but it becomes impolite when she gets older than that.
>
> Interviewee #3: A 25-year-old Bangladeshi woman said, “When a nurse asks about your sexual life during an examination, I feel it is impolite. In our culture, it is not done. The only time it is allowable is if you have a problem related to your sex life and the person inquiring is the doctor.”
>
> Interviewee #1, a 35-year-old Bangladeshi male, and Interviewee #8, a 23-year-old US male, indicated that asking about a man’s salary is impolite. However, the US male indicated this was not considered impolite if the man was under 30.

3.2.2 Polite vs. Impolite Wording

This refers to linguistic expressions considered polite or impolite. It can also include situations where polite expressions are omitted.

> Interviewee #1: A 35-year-old Bangladeshi male related his experience at the market. He said to a vendor, “Give me some tomatoes.” The vendor did not respond. It was not until the man utilized the polite wording, “Please give me some tomatoes,” that the vendor responded by filling his request.

> Interviewee #5: A 25-year-old Bangladeshi woman who is married is a US citizen. She related that her mother-in-law cooked dinner for them, but she kept returning to this woman, asking her, “Are you finished? Are you finished?” The woman found this to be impolite.

3.2.3 Polite Ways of Addressing Others

This refers to proper ways of addressing people, such as using words like sir or ma’am, and it also includes politeness around names that are difficult to pronounce.

> Interviewee #4: A 26-year-old Bengali man related that he found it difficult to address his professors by their names because, in Bengali culture, professors are addressed as ‘Sir’ and ‘Ma’am.’

> Interviewee #6: This older, professional woman is a professor, and she expressed that many of her students will address male professors as Dr., but though she has a Ph.D., they often address her as Mrs. or Ms. They do not even call her Professor. Though she allows her students to address her by her first name, she finds it impolite that those students who feel uncomfortable doing so do not use either Dr. or Professor when addressing her.

Several Bengali speakers indicated they felt that US speakers’ inability to pronounce their names correctly was impolite, particularly when they did not ask for the correct pronunciation. One interviewee related a story about a time when she was at the hospital, and a nurse approached her. Instead of asking how to pronounce her name, she simply said, “I do not know how to pronounce your name. Just come with me.”

3.2.4 Politeness and Slang Linguistic Expression

This refers to the general use of slang phrases or words in conversation.

> Interviewee #2: A 32-year-old Bengali woman has found that using slang words is common in American culture but needs to be more polite in Bengali culture.

> Interviewee #7: A 27-year-old US woman found it impolite when a Bengali woman told her, “You look tired today,” because she interpreted it as a statement about her beauty. She suggests Bengali women should use the word exhausted instead of tired.

3.3 What Are Some of the Indirect Paralanguage Dlements (e.g., body language) that Affect the Perception of Politeness in Each Culture?

The following are examples of indirect elements, such as paralanguage, that affect the perception of politeness in each culture.

3.3.1 Politeness and Non-Linguistic Cultural Factors

This refers to non-linguistic behaviors that people find polite or impolite because of cultural differences.

> Interviewee #9: A 22-year-old US male considered one of his Bengali friends’s behavior impolite when he did not clean the trash from the table after having food in a fast-food restaurant.

The Bengali males in this study considered it impolite that US males wear nothing in the gym’s locker room in front of others.

All US interviewees considered it impolite to refrain from making eye contact when talking to someone. This was particularly important when interviewing for a job. Many expressed that not making eye contact was seen as deceptive.

Several Bengali interviewees expressed that fidgety body language is impolite when conversing with older people. Interviewee #3 also stated that it was impolite to cross your legs, as many men do in the US, with an open-kneed position.

3.3.2 Politeness and Power Dynamics

The following is an example of how perceived power differences affect linguistic behaviors.

> Interviewee #1 is a Bengali speaker who related a story about demanding that a US vendor give him some tomatoes. Specifically, he stated, “Give me some tomatoes,” with no please or thank you attached.

This speaker felt justified in using this direct and assertive command, given that the vendor was perceived as someone of lower status and less power.

The interviewee stated that the vendor refused to even acknowledge the utterance until he (the speaker) asked in a polite form by adding the word 'please' to his stated request. It was clear to the interviewee that the vendor considered the initial demand impolite.

3.4 General Politeness Patterns Results

This refers to general gender or age-related patterns noted in the interviewees' observations.

None of the US women interviewed considered it impolite to ask about salary. In Bangladesh, many women do not work but consider asking about salary impolite. Many of the Bangladeshi women in this study expressed that among those women who are homemakers, they find the suggestion that they are not working impolite. This was also expressed among the US women in the study. While they were not necessarily homemakers themselves, they did express that those women who found that suggestion rude.

The men in the study expressed differing opinions about salary questions. Both Bangladeshi and US men over 30 expressed it as rude. American men under 30, however, did not find it impolite. They noted that young men often work part-time or multiple jobs to seek higher-paying, stable employment. They said they often share salary information during that time with one another. It should be noted that the Bangladeshi men explained that it generally takes them until they are 30 years old to finish their education and begin working.

Another notable gender difference the women in the study expressed was that of people asking them when they would have children. Both Bangladeshi and American women expressed that questions like that, when asked by people outside their immediate family, are considered rude. Interviewee #6 stated that, as a younger woman, people often asked her, "When are you going to start your family?" She found it rude that they assumed she would be having children. Interviewee #10, a 23-year-old American woman, stated that she felt it was more common for women to choose not to have children in the modern age. However, she expressed that if people assumed she would have children, as the older woman had stated, she would find that rude. She noted that she is commonly asked if she plans on having children, and she does not find that rude. The Bengali women also found questions that assumed they would have children impolite in that regard.

None of the Bengali or American men expressed this concern. Interviewee #9, a 22-year-old male, noted that his mother often pushed him to start thinking about getting married and having children. He did not find it rude, given that she wants grandchildren. The Bengali men noted that even their mothers would likely not ask them about this but would instead ask their wives.

Another notable gender difference was regarding the questions about age. Neither the Bengali nor the American men found someone asking their age to be rude. Both Bengali and American women found it impolite, although the American women noted it was not considered impolite if the woman was young. This represents another pattern related to age differences and perceptions of politeness. Both American women who were over 30 years old expressed that questions about their age were impolite. Among men, the notable age-related pattern was that American men under 30 did not find it rude to ask about their salary.

4. Discussion

Examining the difference between the Bengali and US cultural approaches is essential to fully understand the interpretations of polite and impolite behaviors and utterances. Bengali culture is considered a collectivist culture. According to Fatehi et al. (2020), a collectivist culture is one in which the community is the primary focus while individuals are considered secondary. This directly opposes individualistic cultures, where the individual is the primary consideration. In a collectivist society like Bangladesh, people are shy and tend to suppress their feelings and thoughts in front of people to preserve group tranquility (Rabbani et al., 2024). However, in American society, which is considered individualistic, people are more open and expressive because the individual is the primary focus (Fatehi et al., 2020). In their article, Chen et al. (2013) focus on the differences and similarities between Eastern (i.e., primarily collectivist cultures) and Western (i.e., primarily individualistic cultures) cultures in the form of polite requests. Individuals in China are more prone to make indirect requests, while those in the United States and Japan are more likely to make direct requests. The authors speculate that this disparity may be attributable to these three groups' distinct cultural orientations. More collectivist cultures, like China, emphasize harmony and connections, while more individualistic cultures, like the United States, emphasize individual rights and liberty. Fatehi et al. (2020) note that Japan is a moderately collectivist culture, which might explain why they lean more toward direct requests (Anglesjournal, 2021; Dennis, 2023; Fatehi et al., 2020), but perceived power differences also come into play in these interactions.

Morand (1996) found that polite behaviors, including language, are sensitive to power differences between speakers. The research highlights that individuals in positions of authority tend to use more direct, assertive, and

commanding language, reflecting their control and dominance in interactions. Conversely, those in subordinate roles often employ more tentative, deferential, and accommodating speech patterns. This disparity in linguistic styles underscores how power hierarchies shape not only what is communicated but also how messages are framed and delivered, reinforcing social structures. The study also reveals that power dynamics affect not just verbal expressions but also nonverbal cues, such as tone, pace, and body language, which align with linguistic utterances to signal authority or submission. For example, leaders may adopt a more assertive tone and slower pace to emphasize their points, while subordinates might hesitate or use a questioning intonation to mitigate perceived challenges to authority. These patterns of speech and behavior serve to maintain the status quo of power relations, as they create and reinforce expectations about how individuals in different roles should interact.

Regarding cultural differences, power significantly influences language use differently in collectivist and individualistic cultures, reflecting the core values of each cultural orientation. In collectivist cultures, such as that of Bangladesh,, communication often emphasizes harmony, respect for hierarchy, and group cohesion (Hofstede, 1984). Power is typically expressed through indirect language, honorifics, and deference to authority figures to maintain social order. For instance, subordinates in a collectivist culture may use mitigating language, express agreement even when they privately disagree, or avoid confrontation to preserve group harmony (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). These linguistic choices reflect the collectivist priority of upholding relationships and respecting social hierarchies. In contrast, individualistic cultures, such as those in the United States, Canada, and much of Western Europe, prioritize self-expression, equality, and individual achievement (Triandis, 1995). Power in these cultures is often communicated through assertive and direct language, with a focus on clear and efficient information exchange. While authority figures may still use commanding language, subordinates in individualistic cultures are more likely to challenge or question authority, reflecting the cultural emphasis on personal autonomy and democratic values (Kim & Markus, 1999). This divergence highlights how cultural values shape not only the content of linguistic exchanges but also the way power is negotiated and expressed, resulting in distinct communication norms across cultural contexts.

Power dynamics play a vital role in expressing polite behavior for Bengali people because their politeness depends on with whom they are talking in any given interaction. Specifically, their politeness differs depending on the status and rank of the individuals involved. If we discuss the examples in light of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, we can see how the power dynamic affects the perception of saving or losing face. An example of this is seen in the interaction related by interviewee #1, a Bengali speaker, in which he demands that a US vendor "Give me some tomatoes." Rather than saying, "Can you please give me some tomatoes," the customer's demand reflects his lack of concern about the vendor losing face. He disrespects the cultural norms in an individualistic culture where the power dynamic is not valued as much as in a collectivist culture. He was, therefore, directly threatening the vendor's face. The vendor responded by not acknowledging his request until he used a polite linguistic expression by adding the word please to his demand.

For interviewee #1, the interaction threatened the vendor's face because it was a bald, on-the-record, without redress utterance, where the speaker does not make any effort to reduce the impact of a face-threatening act (FTA). In this case, the speaker was unconcerned about whether he was causing the interlocutor to lose face. He makes the vendor uncomfortable and shocked because he disrespects the cultural norms in an individualistic culture where the power dynamic is not as valued. By saying, "Give me some tomatoes," instead of saying, "Can you please give me some tomatoes," he was directly threatening the vendor's face. The vendor, therefore, responded by not acknowledging his request until he used a polite linguistic expression, that being the word, please.

Laver (1975) identifies two categories of interlocution: Self-oriented and other-oriented. Self-oriented refers to statements where the reference is personal to the speaker, such as in the statement, "My legs were not made for the hills." Other-oriented refers to statements referencing the listener instead of the speaker, as in the question, "How is your life?" Given this distinction, Laver (1975) asserts that the interactants' relative social status constrains the category choice. Specifically, he says:

> "The natural category remains available to a speaker of any relative social status. However, the conventional choice between the self-oriented and the other-oriented category is normally governed by the status differential between the two speakers. In an 'upwards' interaction, where a non-solidary inferior speaks first to an acknowledged superior, he may choose the self-oriented category but not the other-oriented category. In a 'downwards' interaction, where a non-solidary superior speaks first to an acknowledged inferior, he may choose the other-oriented category but not the self-oriented category" (p. 224).

That means a speaker superior in rank or status can ask questions of an inferior listener, but the reverse is not true. The inferior speaker must stay self-oriented. So, in the interaction between the Bengali interviewee, who perceived

himself as superior in this interaction, and the vendor, whom the interviewee perceived as inferior, the statement, "Give me some tomatoes," was downward, other-oriented as it was a command. He was saying, "*You* give me some tomatoes."

Chen (2010) takes this idea of status further when he demonstrates how people from different cultures respond to being complimented. He argues that between "interlocutors, compliments are paid mostly to people of equal status—colleagues, acquaintances, and casual friends—not nearly as frequently among intimates such as family members" (p. 80). Therefore, in the situation related by interviewee #7 regarding the statement, "You look tired," made to an acquaintance, it was perceived as a face-threatening act by the listener because she was expecting a compliment (or at least not a perceived insult) given that they are of equal status and acquaintances rather than intimates. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), this was another bald, on the record, without a redress statement that constitutes an FTA.

Another example from these results where the power dynamic plays a role occurs with interviewee #4, who expressed a reticence to call professors by their first or last name, even when invited. Instead, he expressed that the Bengali cultural custom addresses them as 'sir' or 'ma'am.' Here again, there is a perception of a superior status on the part of the professors vis-a-vis the student. In collectivist cultures, where harmony and connections are prized over individualism (Fatehi et al., 2020), recognizing the status of individuals is part of maintaining harmony. In individualistic cultures, however, students may not perceive a superior status on the part of the female professor. That is reflected in interviewee #6's statements about how students would address her as Ms. or Mrs. rather than Professor or Dr. In this case, there is also an element of inequality (i.e., sexism) given that they would address male professors as Dr. or Professor. According to her, the students were not the same status as her male colleagues, nor did they perceive a significant status difference between themselves and her. This reflects more of an individualistic approach.

In examining these differences using Brown and Levinson's (1987) model, when the students did not acknowledge the professor's education level by addressing her appropriately, they threatened her with a loss of face. Even though they were not insulting her with a bald statement, as Yule (1996) notes, it was negative because it was the opposite of a positive acknowledgment of her achievements. Thus, it constituted an FTA. Similarly, interviewee #5's story about the nurse who did not even attempt to learn how to pronounce her name, while not a direct insult, was a negative statement. It was the opposite of a positive interaction wherein she might ask how to pronounce the interviewee's name.

Finally, some of these models apply to non-linguistic cultural behaviors and politeness. For example, interviewee #9's interpretation of his Bengali companion's behavior of not clearing away his trash at the fast-food restaurant can be viewed in this light. The Bengali companion likely viewed that work as belonging to someone of a lower status. Likewise, it is not expected to tip in Bengali culture because the waitstaff is viewed as lower in status. On the other end of that argument, the expectation in US culture that speakers should maintain direct eye contact reflects an individualistic cultural orientation (Fatehi et al., 2020), in which status and rank do not play as much of a role.

Regarding paralanguage factors, US interviewees found it rude and possibly deceptive if speakers did not make direct eye contact. Akechi et al. (2013) note that empirical studies show that making direct eye contact facilitates quick detection and preferential processing of an individual's face. This appears to be a universal human phenomenon; however, the researchers also found that, while individuals from both Eastern and Western cultures experience heart deceleration responses that correlate to attention orientation, shorter looking times, and higher ratings of arousal, individuals from East Asian cultures evaluate direct eye contact differently. Specifically, they perceive another's face as being angrier, unapproachable, and unpleasant when making direct eye contact compared to people from Western cultures. That suggests that East Asian interlocutors may perceive direct eye contact as a face-threatening act, according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory.

Another paralanguage observation was that several Bengali speakers noted that fidgeting while conversing with older people is rude. This appears to be related to the perceived rank or status of an older individual in the Bengali culture, according to Chen's (2010) observations. Interviewee #3 also found it impolite for individuals to cross their legs in the common open-kneed position among many US men. This may be related to concepts of cultural politeness, which considers showing the soles of one's feet rude. Jumanto et al. (2017) note that such non-verbal gestures can significantly affect interactions between a speaker and the hearer. These paralanguage elements are an essential consideration in the cultural perceptions of politeness.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrate that interactions between speakers of different cultures quite frequently

involve misunderstandings because of perceived face-threatening acts (FTAs) based on culturally derived differences in linguistic expressions and wording, perceived status and rank, and different cultural orientations (collectivism versus individualism). We can determine the reason for the misunderstanding in light of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. When applying the theory's categories of FTAs in conjunction with understanding the cultural variations in power dynamics (Chen, 2010; Chen et al., 2020), we can dissect the origin of the misunderstanding. Using these models as a baseline for instruction in cross-cultural communication, we can minimize the chances of a misunderstanding.

Of course, the current study was limited by the small sample size from each culture. Future research should be expanded so that more people from each culture can participate. Although several researchers have done studies based on cross-cultural politeness and impoliteness, we need help finding research dealing with the Bengali language and how it differs from Western cultural politeness standards. More research, specifically into the Bengali culture and differences compared to other cultures worldwide, can further grow our knowledge base of differences in language use and how cultural standards affect our perception of courtesy. The current study illuminated several areas that are rich sources for more research. These include how rank and status impact language use and perceptions of politeness, paralanguage differences and how those affect perceived rude behavior, gender differences in language use and standards of courtesy, how age affects language interactions, and finally, how similarities between cultures can be utilized to enhance cross-cultural communication styles.

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