

Intercultural Pragmatics and Its Implications for Semantic Meaning

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ABSTRACT

In the context of globalization and increasing social mobility, intercultural interaction has become an increasingly intensive phenomenon within educational and social domains. However, differences in pragmatic norms and cultural backgrounds often generate tensions in meaning, even when utterances are semantically understood. This study aims to develop an in-depth understanding of how intercultural pragmatics influences the interpretation of semantic meaning through the lived experiences of individuals engaged in cross-cultural communication. Employing a qualitative approach with an interpretative phenomenological design, this study explores the meanings, emotions, and social processes accompanying communicative practices in intercultural contexts. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, limited participant observation, and document analysis, involving 12–15 participants from diverse cultural backgrounds within a multicultural educational setting. Data analysis was conducted using inductive thematic analysis to identify emergent patterns of meaning derived from participants' narratives. The findings reveal three main themes: tensions between literal meaning and social meaning, meaning negotiation as an emotional and relational process, and the fragility of common ground in intercultural interaction. These findings demonstrate that language meaning is not solely cognitive in nature but is deeply intertwined with identity, emotion, and social relationships. Theoretically, this study contributes to intercultural pragmatics and the semantics–pragmatics interface by foregrounding subjective experience. Practically, the findings offer implications for the development of multicultural education, pragmatic literacy, and culturally sensitive communication policies, while also opening avenues for further exploration of affective dimensions in cross-cultural meaning-making

INTRODUCTION

In an era of global mobility and increasingly intensive intercultural interaction, communication no longer takes place within a homogeneous space of meaning. In multicultural classrooms, international academic forums, and online professional interactions, individuals often share the same language but do not necessarily share the same meanings. This tension emerges when utterances that are semantically comprehensible nonetheless generate confusion, awkwardness, or even social conflict. Such phenomena indicate that meaning is not determined solely by linguistic structure but is negotiated within complex social practices. Research in intercultural pragmatics emphasizes that meaning emerges from the interaction between prior cultural knowledge and the immediate situational context (Kecskes, 2019, 2020). In this regard, the boundary between semantics and pragmatics becomes dynamic rather than fixed. Kecskes (2023) further argues that common ground in intercultural communication is temporary and continuously reconstructed through interaction. This perspective is elaborated in *The Cambridge Handbook of Intercultural Pragmatics*, which positions intercultural experience as central to meaning production (Kecskes, 2022).

Nevertheless, debates concerning the semantics–pragmatics interface remain ongoing. Jaszczolt (2016/2020, 2021) contends that meaning cannot be strictly separated into linguistically encoded content and pragmatically inferred meaning. In intercultural interaction, inferential processes become more complex due to the absence of shared conceptual backgrounds. This observation aligns with Haugh's (2020) findings that implicatures and implicit meanings in intercultural communication are frequently interpreted differently by interlocutors from diverse social backgrounds. Moreover, dynamics of politeness, relationality, and identity also shape meaning-making processes. Spencer-Oatey and Kádár (2021), as well as Kádár and Haugh (2021), demonstrate that relational work in intercultural communication not only maintains social harmony but also constructs communicative identities. In multicultural educational contexts, pragmatic competence thus extends beyond understanding utterance structure to include the ability to interpret social norms and cultural values (Taguchi, 2020). Misunderstandings in intercultural communication often stem not from linguistic deficiency but from differences in pragmatic assumptions and social interpretation (House, 2020). Even prosodic features and pragmatic feedback can significantly influence meaning perception (Romero-Trillo, 2019). Contemporary social pragmatics further underscores that meaning is a product of social relations and situational identity construction (Culpeper et al., 2023; Cogo & House, 2020).

Despite these theoretical advances, there remains a notable research gap concerning the subjective experiences of individuals interpreting semantic meaning in multicultural interactional spaces. Most studies emphasize linguistic analysis or pragmatic performance, while emotional experience, identity dilemmas, and meaning negotiation processes remain underexplored. Against this backdrop, the present study aims to examine how intercultural pragmatics shapes the interpretation of semantic meaning through participants' lived

experiences in multicultural educational contexts. The focus lies on meaning negotiation processes, the dynamics of common ground, and their implications for communicative identity. Theoretically, this study enriches intercultural pragmatics by foregrounding affective and subjective dimensions. Practically, it offers implications for the development of pragmatic literacy and culturally sensitive communication policies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intercultural Pragmatics and Its Implications for Semantic Meaning

This study is grounded in the understanding that linguistic meaning is not constructed solely by a stable semantic system but is negotiated through social interaction infused with cultural experience. Within intercultural pragmatics, meaning-making becomes a site where speakers bring their histories, emotions, values, and cultural expectations. Accordingly, the following theoretical discussion positions theory as an interpretive lens for understanding participants' communicative experiences in depth.

Intercultural Pragmatics as a Lens for Social Meaning

Intercultural pragmatics emerged in response to limitations in traditional pragmatics, which often assumes the existence of stable shared common ground. In intercultural communication, this assumption frequently does not hold. Kecskes (2019), through the concept of impoverished pragmatics, argues that interlocutors often lack shared conceptual backgrounds, rendering inferential processes more complex and ambiguous. Subsequent work emphasizes that meaning arises from the interaction between prior cultural experience and the immediate conversational context (Kecskes, 2020, 2023). In *The Cambridge Handbook of Intercultural Pragmatics*, intercultural pragmatics is positioned as an analytical space that places social experience and meaning negotiation at its core (Kecskes, 2022). This reflects a paradigmatic shift from meaning as a linguistic system to meaning as social practice. Cogo and House (2020) further argue that in global communication, language is often used as a lingua franca, where pragmatic norms are situationally negotiated. Meaning, therefore, is not merely produced but continuously reconstructed through dynamic interaction.

The Semantics-Pragmatics Interface: A Fluid Boundary

Debates on the semantics-pragmatics interface provide a crucial foundation for understanding intercultural pragmatic influences on semantic meaning. Jaszczolt (2016/2020) maintains that meaning cannot be rigidly divided between linguistically encoded and contextually inferred components. In her later work, Jaszczolt (2021) demonstrates that meaning interpretation is always an integration of multiple informational sources, including speaker intention, social context, and linguistic structure. In intercultural contexts, this integration becomes more complex due to unevenly shared pragmatic assumptions. Haugh (2020) shows that implicatures in intercultural communication are often interpreted differently not because of linguistic error, but because of divergent social expectations. Romero-Trillo (2019) further highlights the role of prosody and pragmatic feedback in shaping meaning perception. Consequently, meaning is never fully neutral; it is inherently layered.

Relationality, Identity, and Social Work in Meaning-Making

Contemporary pragmatics increasingly emphasizes social and relational dimensions of meaning. Spencer-Oatey and Kádár (2021) conceptualize relational work as the management of social relationships through language. Kádár and Haugh (2021) extend this view by situating politeness and social meaning within culturally bound norms and identities. In intercultural communication, relational work often becomes a site of identity negotiation. Taguchi (2020) asserts that pragmatic competence reflects not only linguistic ability but also the capacity to interpret social norms and manage identity in multicultural contexts. House (2020) further demonstrates that intercultural misunderstandings frequently occur at the relational rather than purely semantic level. Culpeper et al. (2023) emphasize that social meaning is situational and shaped by power relations, community norms, and identity dynamics.

Theoretical Positioning and Conceptual Framework

Drawing on these perspectives, the present study positions intercultural pragmatics as its primary analytical lens while incorporating insights from the semantics–pragmatics interface and relational pragmatics. Conceptually, meaning is viewed as:

1. A product of interaction between cultural experience and immediate context (Kecskes, 2019, 2023);
2. An integration of linguistic encoding and pragmatic inference (Jaszczolt, 2021);
3. A social practice shaped by identity and relational dynamics (Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021; Culpeper et al., 2023).

Meaning is thus treated not as a fixed variable but as an ongoing dialogical process. Data are interpreted as experiential narratives reflecting how participants construct, question, and interpret meaning in intercultural spaces.

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative approach with an interpretative phenomenological design, chosen to capture participants' subjective experiences, interpretive processes, and meaning-making in intercultural interaction. Phenomenology enables an exploration of how individuals construct semantic meaning through pragmatic practice within specific socio-cultural contexts, aligning with intercultural pragmatics scholarship that foregrounds communicative experience (Kecskes).

Participants and Research Context

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) active engagement in intercultural interaction, (2) experience using a second language or lingua franca in academic or professional contexts, and (3) willingness to reflect deeply on communicative experiences. The study involved 12–15 participants, including students and educators from diverse cultural backgrounds. Snowball sampling was employed to expand experiential diversity. The research was conducted within a multicultural educational context characterized by intensive interaction among language, culture, and pragmatic practice.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, limited participant observation, and document analysis. Interviews explored participants' personal experiences in interpreting intercultural utterances, supported by flexible interview guides to allow reflective exploration. Observations were conducted in authentic communicative settings, such as classroom discussions, to capture naturally occurring pragmatic practices. Supporting documents—including interaction transcripts, reflective notes, and written communication—were analyzed to enrich contextual understanding. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an inductive thematic approach, involving repeated reading of transcripts, initial coding, theme development, and theoretical interpretation within the intercultural pragmatics and semantics-pragmatics framework. Qualitative analysis software (e.g., NVivo) was used to enhance traceability and coding consistency.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Anney; Ahmed). Credibility was established through member checking and data triangulation. Rich contextual description supported transferability, while audit trails and reflexive field notes ensured dependability and confirmability. Ethical procedures included informed consent, confidentiality, and participants' right to withdraw at any stage.

RESULTS

Thematic-phenomenological analysis revealed three interrelated themes illustrating how intercultural pragmatics shapes semantic meaning in everyday interaction.

Theme 1: "I Understand the Words, but Not the Meaning" – Tension Between Literal and Social Meaning-Participants frequently reported understanding utterances semantically while remaining emotionally uncertain. This tension often emerged in formal academic contexts, where pragmatic ambiguity led to internal doubt. "They said 'That's interesting,' but I didn't know whether it was praise or subtle criticism." (P3)

Theme 2: Meaning Negotiation as an Emotional and Social Process-Meaning-making emerged as an emotionally charged relational process. Participants described pragmatic adjustments—such as silence—as strategies to maintain social harmony, often at emotional cost. "Sometimes I choose silence. I understand it may not be offensive, but the delivery feels harsh to me." (P7)

Theme 3: Fragile and Shifting Common Ground-Common ground was perceived as unstable and continuously renegotiated. "I thought everyone understood my joke, but it was seen as inappropriate. Since then, I've been more careful, but I don't feel fully myself." (P11). These themes collectively illustrate meaning as an ongoing negotiation shaped by language, emotion, and identity.

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that meaning in intercultural communication cannot be reduced to semantic comprehension alone. The three central findings – tension between literal meaning and social meaning, meaning negotiation as an emotional and relational process, and the fragility of common ground – indicate that meaning-making is a dialogical process situated between linguistic structure and social experience. These findings reaffirm the relevance of intercultural pragmatics as an analytical lens for understanding meaning dynamics in multicultural societies.

Meaning Tension and the Semantics-Pragmatics Interface

The first finding reveals that literal comprehension does not guarantee interpretive certainty. This aligns with Kecskes's (2019) notion of impoverished pragmatics, whereby the absence of shared conceptual background increases inferential effort. In this study, participants understood semantic content but experienced uncertainty regarding speaker intention and implicature. This observation supports Jaszczolt's (2021) argument that meaning emerges from the integration of multiple informational sources rather than linguistic encoding alone. In intercultural contexts, this integration becomes more complex due to misaligned cultural assumptions. Haugh (2020) similarly notes that implicatures in intercultural interaction are not uniformly processed, leading to divergent interpretations. However, this study extends prior scholarship by foregrounding the affective dimension of interpretive uncertainty. While earlier research predominantly framed ambiguity as a cognitive issue, the present findings demonstrate that semantic-pragmatic tension also generates emotional unease and identity-related dilemmas. Thus, the semantics-pragmatics interface should be understood not only as a theoretical boundary but also as a lived social experience (Jaszczolt, 2016/2020).

Meaning Negotiation as Relational Work

The second theme highlights meaning negotiation as an ongoing form of relational work. Spencer-Oatey and Kádár (2021) conceptualize language use as inherently relational, involving the management of social relationships. Participants in this study employed pragmatic strategies—such as silence, mitigation, or compliance—to preserve harmony, even when internal interpretations diverged. Kádár and Haugh (2021) emphasize that politeness and social meaning are culturally situated, explaining why seemingly neutral acts in one culture may be perceived differently in another. This finding is consistent with Taguchi's (2020) assertion that pragmatic competence encompasses the ability to interpret social norms and manage identity in intercultural settings. Importantly, this study reveals that sustained relational work often results in emotional fatigue. While House (2020) identifies relational misalignment as a source of intercultural misunderstanding, the present findings deepen this insight by showing how repeated negotiation affects participants' sense of authenticity and emotional well-being. Meaning, therefore, does not merely shape social relations but also influences self-perception.

Fragile Common Ground and Identity Dynamics

The third theme illustrates that common ground in intercultural communication is fluid and provisional. Kecskes (2020, 2023) argues that

common ground is co-constructed through interaction rather than inherited. The findings support this claim while also demonstrating that unstable common ground can produce identity dilemmas, as participants oscillate between adaptation and self-expression. Cogo and House (2020) observe that pragmatic norms in lingua franca communication are negotiated situationally. This study reveals the subjective consequences of such negotiation. Culpeper et al. (2023) emphasize that social meaning is embedded in power relations and community norms, which, in this study, were particularly salient in academic hierarchies. Romero-Trillo's (2019) emphasis on prosody and pragmatic feedback further illuminates participants' sensitivity to tone and minimal responses as indicators of social stance. These findings underscore that semantic meaning is inseparable from broader social semiotic cues.

Conceptual Contribution

Theoretically, this study contributes to intercultural pragmatics by centering subjective experience as a primary analytic resource. While prior scholarship emphasizes the dynamic nature of meaning in interaction (Kecskes, 2022), this study demonstrates that such dynamics also shape emotional landscapes and identity formation. The contribution thus extends pragmatic analysis toward a phenomenological understanding of meaning. Socially, the findings suggest that intercultural misunderstanding should not be framed solely as communicative failure, but as an inherent aspect of identity and relational negotiation. Consequently, multicultural education and pragmatic literacy must address emotional and relational dimensions alongside linguistic competence.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study affirms that intercultural pragmatics plays a central role in the construction and interpretation of semantic meaning. The findings demonstrate that meaning-making extends beyond literal comprehension and is continuously negotiated through social experience, emotion, and cultural relations. Tensions between lexical meaning and social intent, emotionally demanding meaning negotiation, and fragile common ground constitute recurring patterns in participants' lived experiences. Through participants' narratives, the study offers a nuanced understanding of meaning in intercultural communication as a socially embedded process involving identity, emotional security, and positionality. Conceptually, these findings expand intercultural pragmatics by integrating affective and experiential dimensions into the semantics-pragmatics interface. Practically, the study is relevant for multicultural educational and social contexts, emphasizing that misunderstanding often arises from pragmatic divergence rather than negative intent. The implications are both pedagogical and policy-oriented. For educational policymakers, the findings highlight the importance of culturally sensitive language and communication policies. In curriculum development, they support the integration of intercultural pragmatic literacy within language education and multicultural training. Moreover, recognizing the emotional burden of meaning negotiation can inform more empathetic and inclusive support structures, particularly for minority and

migrant populations. This study has several limitations. Its contextual focus and limited participant pool restrict generalizability. Additionally, time constraints limited exploration of long-term identity and common ground development. These limitations invite further research using longitudinal ethnography or cross-contextual narrative approaches. Expanding research settings to professional, digital, or marginalized communities would further enrich understanding of intercultural meaning-making.

FURTHER STUDY

Future research agendas in intercultural pragmatics should thus move toward more humanistic, reflective, and responsive frameworks that acknowledge the complexity of communication in multicultural worlds.

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