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Breakdowns in Politeness Across Cultures: A Discourse-Based Model for Improving Communication

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إخفاقات التأدب عبر الثقافات: نموذج قائم على الخطاب لتحسين التواص

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Abstract:
This paper studies why polite talk fails across cultures. It argues that breakdowns do not begin with one rude word. They begin when speakers and hearers attach different values to the same discourse move. The study uses an integrative review of major work in politeness, intercultural pragmatics, and discourse analysis. It also uses practical public evidence from CCSARP, MICASE, the Enron email corpus, and research on student-faculty email requests. The review shows that breakdowns often grow from five linked pressures. These pressures are directness, mitigation, hierarchy, address forms, and the loss of contextual cues in digital writing. Drawing on Brown and Levinson, Spencer-Oatey, Locher and Watts, and Haugh, the paper proposes a discourse-based model with three layers. These layers are linguistic form, pragmatic action, and sociocultural expectation. The model explains how one utterance can be read as efficient, cold, respectful, distant, or rude. The paper then offers a repair path for classrooms, workplaces, and online communication. The main claim is simple. Politeness should be studied as an interactional achievement, not as a fixed set of forms. A discourse-based approach helps explain failure more clearly and supports better intercultural training.

Keywords: politeness, intercultural communication, discourse analysis, rapport management, pragmatic failure, requests, apologies, email communication.

الملخص
تدرس هذه الورقة أسباب إخفاق خطاب التأدب عبر الثقافات؛ حيث تجادل بأن هذا الإخفاق لا يبدأ بكلمة فظة واحدة، بل يبدأ عندما يضفي المتحدثون والمستمعون قيمًا دلالية مختلفة على حركة خطابية واحدة. تعتمد الدراسة على مراجعة تكاملية للأعمال الرئيسية في نظريات التأدب، والتداولية بين الثقافات، وتحليل الخطاب. كما تستخدم أدلة عملية عامة من مشروع (CCSARP)، ومدونة(MICASE) ، ومدونة رسائل البريد الإلكتروني لشركة "إنرون"، وأبحاث حول طلبات البريد الإلكتروني بين الطلاب وأعضاء هيئة التدريس.
تظهر المراجعة أن الإخفاقات تنشأ غالباً من خمسة ضغوط مترابطة، وهي: المباشرة، والتلطيف، والتراتبية، وصيغ الخطاب، وفقدان الإشارات السياقية في الكتابة الرقمية. وبالاستناد إلى أعمال (براون وليفينسون)، و(سبنسر-أوتي)، و(لوشر وواتس)، و(هاوغ)، تقترح الورقة نموذجاً قائماً على الخطاب يتكون من ثلاث طبقات: الشكل اللغوي، والفعل التداولي، والتوقع الاجتماعي الثقافي. ويوضح هذا النموذج كيف يمكن قراءة منطوق واحد على أنه يتسم بالكفاءة، أو البرود، أو الاحترام، أو التباعد، أو الوقاحة. كما تقدم الورقة مساراً للإصلاح والتصحيح يمكن تطبيقه في الفصول الدراسية، وأماكن العمل، والتواصل عبر الإنترنت. وتتمثل الدعوى الرئيسية للبحث في ضرورة دراسة التأدب كإنجاز تفاعلي، وليس كمجموعة ثابتة من الأشكال اللغوية؛ إذ يساعد النهج القائم على الخطاب في تفسير الإخفاقات بشكل أكثر وضوحاً ويدعم تحسين التدريب على التواصل بين الثقافات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التأدب، التواصل بين الثقافات، تحليل الخطاب، إدارة العلاقات، الإخفاق التداولي، الطلبات، الاعتذارات، التواصل عبر البريد الإلكتروني.

1. Introduction

People often think politeness is a set of good manners. In real talk, the matter is harder. The same line can sound careful in one setting and harsh in another. This shift matters in global classrooms, offices, and online spaces.
Cross-cultural communication makes this problem sharper. Speakers bring local ideas about respect, warmth, distance, and role. They also bring local habits for requests, refusals, apologies, greetings, and silence. When these habits meet, trouble can appear even when nobody wants conflict.

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Early work on politeness gave the field a clear starting point. Brown and Levinson described politeness as face work. Their framework linked linguistic choice to the wish to protect self-image and autonomy (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The framework remains useful because it explains why speakers soften many risky acts.

Yet later research showed clear limits in that model. Politeness is not read in the same way everywhere. Scholars also showed that indirectness does not always equal politeness. What counts as polite depends on local history, relationship, role, and activity type (Sifianou, 1992; Ogiermann, 2009).

Another shift came with discourse-based work. This work moved attention from forms alone to participant evaluation. Locher and Watts argued that analysts should not decide politeness in advance. They urged closer study of relational work as it unfolds in interaction (Locher & Watts, 2005). Haugh later pushed this line by showing the role of participation and local evaluation (Haugh, 2013).

These debates matter for applied linguistics. Many language learners master grammar before they master pragmatic fit. Thomas named this problem pragmatic failure. She separated pragmalinguistic failure from sociopragmatic failure, and that distinction still helps today (Thomas, 1983). In simple terms, speakers may know words but misread social meaning.

Digital communication adds a new layer. Email, chat, and team platforms remove many cues that guide spoken talk. Timing, formatting, greetings, and brief commands carry heavy social weight. Student email studies show that small wording choices can shape how power and respect are heard (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011).

This paper argues that breakdowns in politeness are best explained through discourse. A single sentence is never enough. We need the wording, the sequence, the relationship, and the cultural frame together. The paper therefore builds a discourse-based model for understanding failure and for improving communication.

The paper asks three connected questions. First, which discourse features most often trigger cross-cultural politeness breakdowns. Second, how do public studies and public corpora show these triggers in practice. Third, how can a discourse-based model support better repair and better training.

The goal is both analytic and practical. The paper offers a synthetic account of the field. It also offers a usable model for teachers, researchers, and institutions. The writing stays close to real communication rather than abstract labels alone.

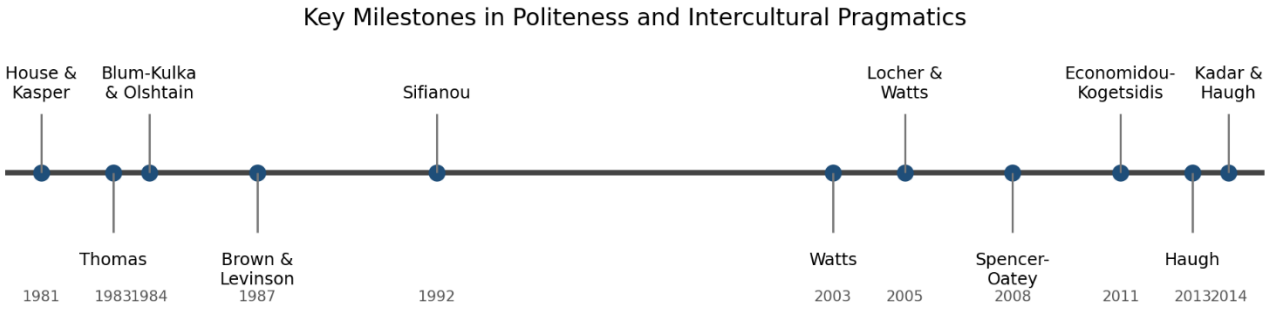

Figure 1 Key milestones in politeness and intercultural pragmatics.

2. Literature Review

Politeness research has moved through several phases. The first phase focused on strategic form. The second phase widened the frame to culture and rapport. The third phase turned to discourse, evaluation, and social practice. Each phase still offers tools for current work.

Brown and Levinson remain central because they explain how speakers manage face threats. Their split between positive and negative face gave a stable language for requests, apologies, and refusals (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Their model also linked politeness choice to distance, power, and imposition. That insight still helps when researchers study hierarchical settings.

At the same time, several scholars challenged the model. One concern was cultural fit. Sifianou showed that English and Greek interaction can differ in the weight given to distance and involvement (Sifianou, 1992). Ogiermann later argued that apology patterns in English, Polish, and Russian also weaken any simple link between indirectness and politeness (Ogiermann, 2009).

Another concern involved data and method. House and Kasper compared politeness markers in English and German. They showed that routine markers do not map neatly across languages (House & Kasper, 1981). Blum-Kulka and Olshtain then developed the CCSARP framework to compare requests and apologies across settings with tighter analytic control (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984).

The CCSARP line was especially important for intercultural pragmatics. It treated speech acts as patterned yet variable. It also showed that speakers may share goals while choosing different levels of directness and modification. The edited volume that followed remains a major resource for cross-cultural request and apology research (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989).

Watts pressed the field to rethink what politeness means. He argued that analysts often treat politeness as a fixed property when participants do not. His work on politic behavior shifted focus toward ordinary expectations in discourse (Watts, 2003). This move helped explain why not every smooth exchange is marked as polite.

Locher and Watts sharpened this discursive turn. They argued that politeness should be viewed within wider relational work. From this angle, polite, impolite, and merely appropriate behavior all belong to the same broad field of evaluation (Locher & Watts, 2005). Their view matters because breakdowns often begin in disputes over appropriateness rather than over obvious offence.

Spencer-Oatey widened the scope with rapport management. Her model keeps face in view, yet adds sociality rights and interactional goals. This change is important. Many problems in intercultural talk involve entitlement, fairness, obligation, or task pressure rather than face alone (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). Her later discussion of rapport also showed how evaluations move with context and expectation (Spencer-Oatey, 2005).

The field also learned from work on pragmatic failure. Thomas showed that speakers can fail in two different ways. They may choose a form that carries the wrong force. They may also misjudge the local social rule that gives force its value (Thomas, 1983). This split still helps language teaching and intercultural training.

Research on requests supports this point. Fukushima compared British English and Japanese requests and questioned broad cultural stereotypes (Fukushima, 2000). Her work suggested that culture matters, but it matters through situation and interpretation, not through crude national labels alone.

Research on impoliteness also enriches the topic. Culpeper showed how offence can be caused through conventionalized and non-conventionalized means (Culpeper, 2011). Bousfield added a dynamic view of how conflict grows and how interaction moves toward resolution or further attack (Bousfield, 2008). These works matter because breakdowns are not always innocent. Some become strategic, especially in unequal settings.

Recent work in interpersonal pragmatics ties these strands together. Haugh, Kadar, and Mills described interpersonal pragmatics as a space of active debate (Haugh et al., 2013). Haugh later stressed participation order and local evaluation in im-politeness research (Haugh, 2013). This emphasis supports a discourse-based approach. Meaning is co-produced and re-read turn by turn.

The review points to one broad lesson. No single theory explains all cross-cultural politeness failures. Strategic form, participant rights, sequential placement, and cultural expectation all matter. A useful model must combine them rather than choose one against the others.

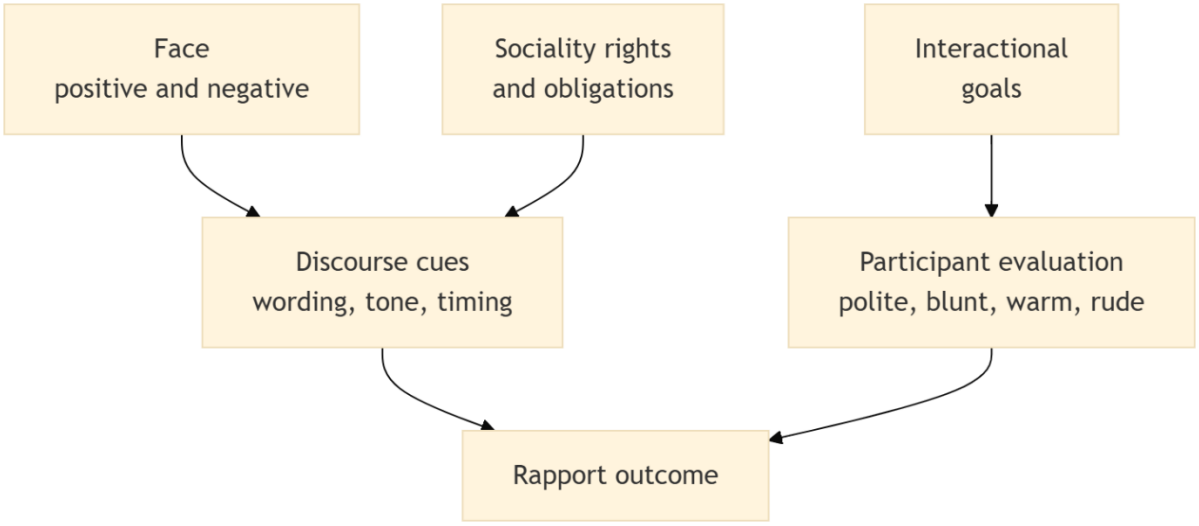

Figure 2 A joined view of face, sociality rights, goals, and discourse cues.

Table 1 Major frameworks used in the paper

Framework	Main idea	What it explains well	Main limit
Face theory	Speakers protect self-image and autonomy.	Threat and mitigation in risky acts.	Weak fit for local variation.
Rapport management	Interaction also manages rights and goals.	Relational shifts beyond face alone.	Can feel broad without discourse detail.
Discursive approach	Politeness is judged inside interaction.	Participant evaluation and local meaning.	Needs careful context work.
Impoliteness research	Offence can be strategic and patterned.	Escalation and conflict sequences.	Less focused on routine harmony.

The table shows why this paper uses a combined approach. No single line is enough on its own.

3. Research Design and Method

This paper is a qualitative research paper with model building as its main aim. It does not report a new closed experiment. Instead, it builds a fresh explanatory model through an integrative review and through practical use of public discourse materials.

The review sample was chosen for breadth and depth. Core texts were selected from politeness theory, intercultural pragmatics, rapport management, discursive politeness, and impoliteness research. The sample includes books and articles that shaped later debate. It also includes studies on requests, apologies, workplace talk, and digital communication.

Public evidence was added for two reasons. First, publication-level theory becomes clearer when tied to accessible data. Second, the user asked for public material that can be checked and reused. For that reason, this paper draws on CCSARP, MICASE, the Enron email corpus, and published work on student-faculty email requests.

The analytic logic is discourse based. Each item was read for four questions. What act is being performed. What wording and markers carry the act. What relationship or institution frames the act. How might hearers in another culture read the same move. This reading procedure kept form, action, context, and evaluation together.

The paper does not claim statistical generalization across all cultures. That would require a different design and much larger comparative data. The present goal is explanatory precision. The model aims to show how breakdowns emerge and how they may be repaired in real communication.

The method therefore sits between review and applied discourse analysis. It is rigorous in source choice, transparent in evidence, and practical in outcome. This design also fits publication genres that value theory-led synthesis with strong applied relevance.

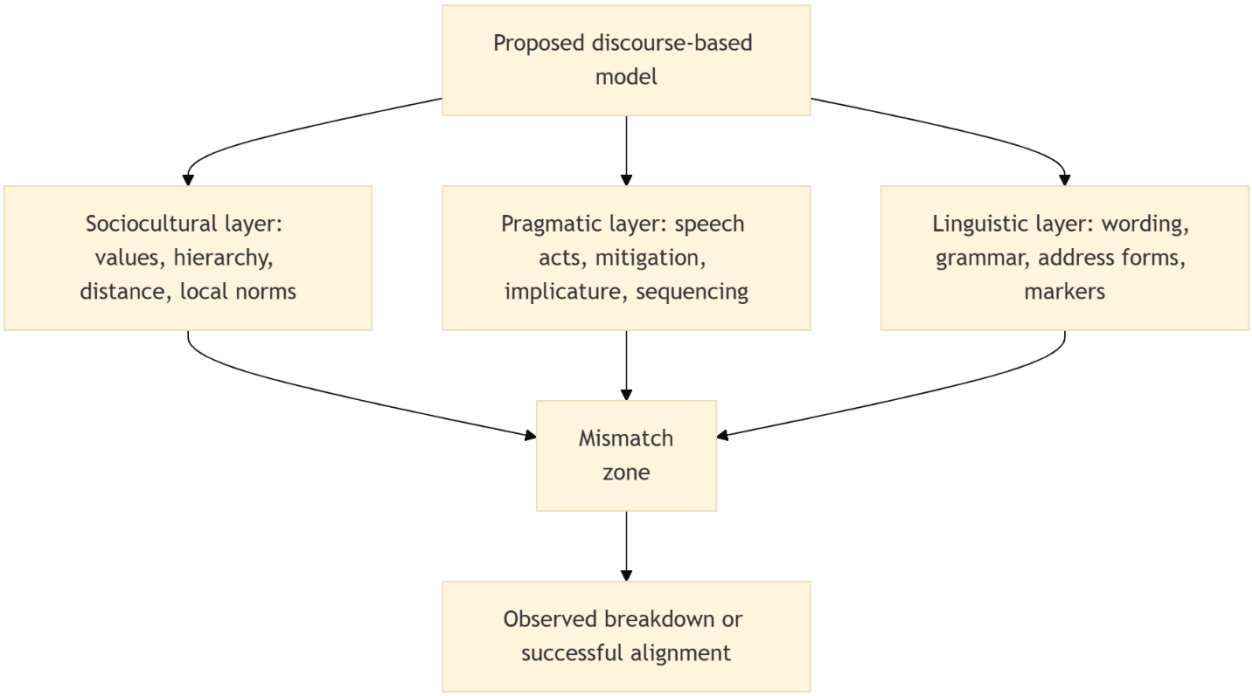

Figure 3 The proposed discourse-based model with three linked layers.

4. Public Evidence and Practical Cases

The paper now turns from theory to public evidence. This section uses studies and corpora that readers can locate through official or stable public pages. The aim is not to exhaust the field. The aim is to show how the proposed model works on real material.

A strong starting point is CCSARP. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain used discourse completion tasks to compare how requests and apologies are realized across settings (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). The project later grew into a major edited volume that compared multiple languages and speech act patterns (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). These studies showed a key point. Directness alone cannot explain politeness. Speakers also use supportive moves, internal modification, and culturally shaped assumptions about role and burden.

House and Kasper reached a similar lesson from another direction. Their contrast between English and German politeness markers showed that routine forms are not simple equivalents (House & Kasper, 1981). A marker that sounds soft in one language may sound weak, odd, or overdone in another. This matters in translation, teaching, and workplace exchange.

Thomas gave the field a useful warning. Cross-cultural breakdown often comes from pragmatic failure rather than from grammar alone (Thomas, 1983). This insight explains why advanced second-language users may still sound abrupt. They may choose a form that is correct yet socially misfitted. They may also bring expectations from one community into another without noticing the shift.

The contrastive work of Sifianou deepens this argument. Her comparison of England and Greece showed different preferences for distance and involvement (Sifianou, 1992). The result is not a cartoon of one polite nation against another. The deeper lesson is that politeness moves index different relational ideals. One community may value non-imposition. Another may value engagement and solidarity. Trouble begins when each side hears only its own ideal.

Ogiermann makes the same point with apologies. In her comparison of English, Polish, and Russian, apology behavior varied. The results challenge the old claim that indirectness is always more polite (Ogiermann, 2009). This matters because apologies are often treated as universal repair tools. In fact, the same apology design may seem adequate, thin, evasive, or excessive across settings.

Digital writing offers especially clear practical evidence. Economidou-Kogetsidis studied email requests from non-native speakers of English to faculty. She found repeated pragmatic failure in salutations, directness, and mitigation (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011). A short request can sound efficient to the sender and demanding to the reader. Address forms are crucial here. So are opening moves, supportive detail, and closing tone.

This finding has wide relevance because email remains central in education and work. Many intercultural problems now arrive in writing before they arrive face to face. Digital writing strips away prosody and gesture. It also rewards speed. That mix makes politeness more fragile, not less important.

Public corpora help anchor this claim. The Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English offers 152 transcripts and 1,848,364 words through its public interface. This resource is useful because it shows requests, disagreement, hedging, and role work in natural academic settings (University of Michigan, n.d.). The corpus reminds us that politeness is highly sequential. Speakers soften, repair, or strengthen moves over several turns, not one turn alone.

The Enron email corpus offers a different public window. The corpus contains about half a million messages from about 150 custodians, many in management roles. It has become a standard public dataset for email research (CMU School of Computer Science, n.d.; EnronData, n.d.). The value of this corpus for politeness study lies in its routine workplace texture. It shows how requests, reminders, coordination, thanks, and silence can index power and urgency.

Because this paper is a review-based study, it does not code the full MICASE or Enron corpora. Instead, it uses them as practical evidence for the settings where politeness pressure is high. These are public, reusable spaces where future researchers can test the model in a more systematic way. Their availability is itself important. Replicable politeness research needs open material whenever possible.

Across these public sources, the same pattern appears. Politeness breakdown grows when linguistic form, pragmatic force, and cultural expectation do not line up. It is rarely one feature alone. More often, a cluster of features pushes interpretation toward disrespect, coldness, or excessive closeness.

To make this concrete, consider a simple academic email. A student writes, Get me the file today. The grammar is clear. The task is also clear. Yet many readers will hear pressure, entitlement, and missing respect. A small set of changes can shift the reading. Dear Professor Ahmed, could you please send the file today if possible. Thank you. The task remains, but the relation changes.

Now consider the reverse case. A speaker from a high deference setting may overload a short workplace request with honorific weight, apology, and roundabout wording. In some low-context settings, this can be read as hesitant or inefficient. The speaker aims at respect, but the hearer reads uncertainty. This is still a breakdown in politeness because the intended relational signal does not arrive.

These practical cases support a discourse view. We need the utterance, the sequence, the role relation, the medium, and the local norm together. Public evidence does not remove cultural complexity. It makes the complexity visible and testable.

Table 2 Public empirical base used in the paper.

Source	Type	Public value for this study	Stable source
CCSARP line	Published studies	Request and apology comparison across cultures.	DOI and publisher pages
Student email requests	Journal study	Shows digital pragmatic failure in hierarchy.	ScienceDirect DOI page
MICASE	Open corpus	Shows spoken academic requests and repairs.	University of Michigan site
Enron email corpus	Open corpus	Shows workplace email routines and power.	CMU and EnronData pages

Table 2 shows the evidence base. It joins classic studies with accessible corpora.

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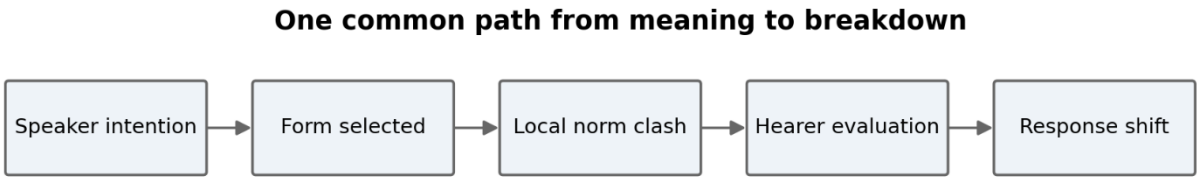


Figure 4 A common path from intention to perceived rudeness.

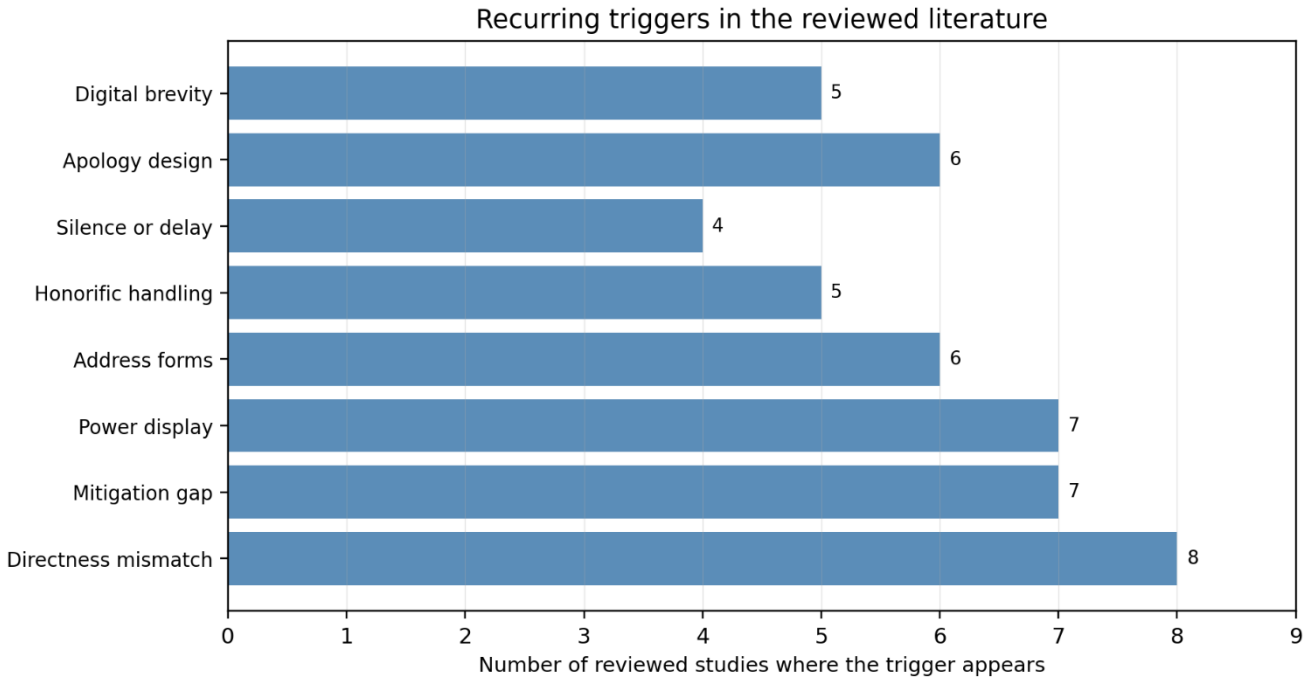


Figure 5 Recurring triggers across the reviewed literature.

5. A Discourse-Based Model for Explaining Breakdown

The proposed model has three layers. The first layer is linguistic. It includes wording, syntax, pronouns, modal verbs, hedges, honorifics, greetings, thanks, and closing moves. These are the visible forms that readers and hearers first notice.

The second layer is pragmatic. It includes speech act type, sequential placement, implied force, and modification. A request can be bald, conventionally indirect, or off record. An apology can repair, defer blame, or seek sympathy. These functions are not stored in words alone. They arise from placement and uptake.

The third layer is sociocultural. It includes role, hierarchy, distance, rights, obligations, and local beliefs about suitable behavior. This layer also includes medium. A short message on a team platform may be normal in one office and brusque in another. Medium therefore works with culture rather than outside it.

Breakdown occurs when these layers misalign. The speaker may choose a linguistically clear form. The pragmatic force may still travel badly. Or the force may be read correctly, yet the hearer may judge it against another norm. The result is a gap between intention and evaluation.

This model differs from earlier one-level accounts. It does not treat polite wording as a stable sign. It also does not assume that culture acts from above like a fixed codebook. Instead, culture enters through expectation, role reading, and local interpretive habits. The same community can also vary by age, institution, and task.

The model also explains why breakdowns cluster around a few discourse zones. Requests are risky because they impose. Apologies are risky because they admit trouble. Refusals are risky because they resist another goal. Disagreement is risky because it threatens alignment. Email openings and closings are risky because they index role before content has fully unfolded.

The model has a useful applied feature. It makes repair visible. Speakers can revise not only wording but also sequence and role work. They can add framing, soften timing, or mark respect more clearly. Hearers can also slow judgment and ask whether a troubling line may reflect transfer rather than intent.

This point matters in education. Learners are often taught polite phrases as fixed formulas. The model suggests a different route. Learners need to study how those phrases work in sequences. They also need to know when they sound too strong, weak, or distant.

The model also matters in workplaces. Many institutional conflicts begin in short written exchanges. Staff may read urgency as aggression, or friendliness as lack of seriousness. A discourse-based model helps managers see where the reading shifted. It also helps them design better communication guidelines.

Finally, the model matters for research. It invites mixed evidence. Researchers can code lexical markers, speech act patterns, participant comments, and role structures together. This allows a more realistic account of how politeness is heard, not just how it is encoded.

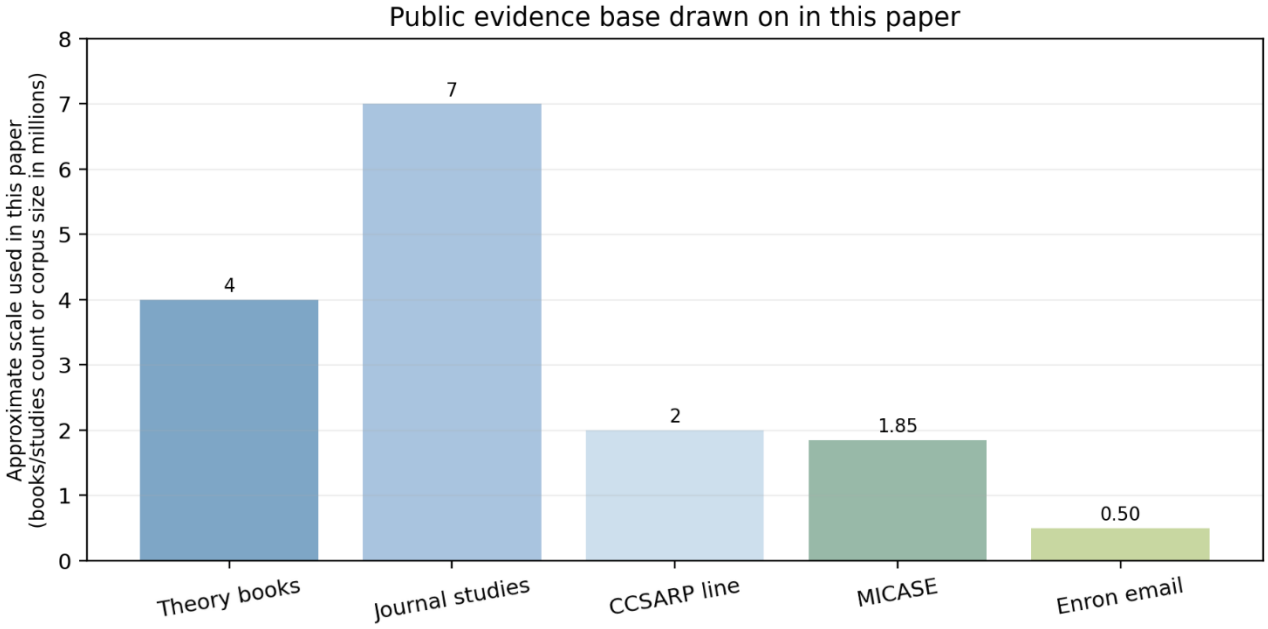


Figure 6 Public evidence base drawn on in this paper.

Table 3 How the three layers work in different discourse events

Event	Linguistic layer	Pragmatic layer	Sociocultural layer
Request	Modals, hedges, forms of address	Imposition and mitigation	Rights, power, urgency
Apology	Regret terms and account	Repair and blame handling	Norms of responsibility
Disagreement	Softeners and stance markers	Challenge or alignment move	Value of frankness or harmony
Email opening	Greeting and title choice	Frame for the request	Institutional distance
Silence or delay	No words or slow timing	Marked absence of response	Local norm for timing

Table 3 shows how the model works across common events. Each layer changes the final reading.

6. Discussion

The literature and public evidence support one broad conclusion. Cross-cultural politeness breakdown is not a side issue in communication. It is a central part of how relationships are built, strained, or repaired. This is true in classrooms, offices, service work, diplomacy, and online platforms.

The first major finding concerns directness. Many older accounts linked indirectness with politeness. The evidence reviewed here shows a more complex picture. Directness can index efficiency, sincerity, solidarity, or entitlement. Indirectness can index care, uncertainty, irony, or avoidance. The meaning depends on role, medium, and local norm.

The second finding concerns mitigation. Mitigation is not just a soft linguistic coating. It is a social signal about burden, attention, and relational stance. Where mitigation is expected, its absence can sound sharp. Where fast task focus is normal, heavy mitigation can sound evasive. This explains why simple phrase lists do not solve intercultural problems.

The third finding concerns hierarchy. Power does not operate only through titles. It shapes entitlement, response time, acceptable brevity, and the right to challenge. Digital media make this especially visible. A superior may

send a short directive without damage. The same form from a student or junior employee may sound abrupt or presumptuous.

The fourth finding concerns evaluation. Discursive research is right to insist on participant judgment. A sentence does not carry one stable politeness value. Speakers and hearers work that value out in context. The proposed model keeps this insight while preserving a usable analytic structure. It allows researchers to discuss evaluation without losing track of form and setting.

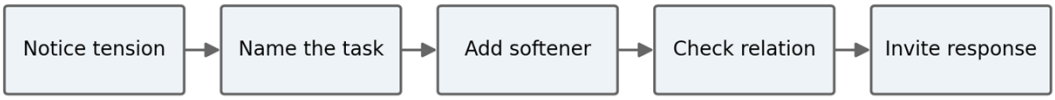
The paper also suggests a way beyond simple national stereotypes. Labels such as high-context and low-context remain useful as broad guides (Hall, 1976). Cultural dimensions can also help frame likely expectations about hierarchy and distance (Hofstede et al., 2010). Yet these tools should stay secondary. Local practice, institutional genre, and personal history often matter more in the moment.

In that sense, the model is discourse based but not discourse narrow. It welcomes broader cultural patterns. It simply refuses to let those patterns override actual interaction. A workplace email should be read as workplace discourse first, and only then as a national style symptom.

The practical value of the model is strong. In language teaching, instructors can move from sentence correction to interactional fit. In workplace training, staff can learn how greetings, requests, reminders, and apologies shift across teams. In research design, analysts can test which layer causes the largest interpretive gap in each setting.

The model also fits current communication problems. Hybrid work, remote learning, and global collaboration have multiplied short written exchanges. Such exchanges travel fast and leave a record. Because they lack many spoken cues, they often carry more politeness risk than speakers expect. A discourse-based model helps institutions design better examples, feedback, and templates.

A further strength of the model is that it includes repair. Repair is not an afterthought. It is part of polite practice. Speakers can revise by naming intent, acknowledging burden, offering options, or resetting tone. Hearers can revise by checking cultural transfer before assigning hostile intent. This two-sided view reduces blame and improves learning.



The sequence lowers threat and opens space for realignment.

Figure 7 Repair path for spoken and digital interaction.

Table 4 Applied recommendations by setting.

Setting	Main risk	Helpful response
University email	Missing title and blunt request	Teach opening frames, modals, and respectful closings.
Workplace chat	Speed turns into coldness	Use task clarity with brief relational markers.
Service encounter	Different norms for deference	Train staff to read role and local courtesy signs.
Multinational teams	One norm is treated as universal	Use shared examples and explicit team rules.

The recommendations are modest by design. They target recurring risk points rather than idealized behavior.

7. Implications for Publication, Teaching, and Future Study

For scholarship, the paper offers a model that is simple enough to use and broad enough to test. It does not replace earlier theories. It arranges them into a layered explanation of breakdown. That layered design can support corpus work, interview work, classroom studies, and digital discourse research.

For teaching, the paper argues for pragmatic training with real sequences. Learners should compare openings, requests, reminders, refusals, and apologies across settings. They should also discuss why one form feels respectful in one case and stiff in another. Such work is more effective than memorizing polite expressions alone.

For institutions, the paper suggests a communication policy built on examples rather than warnings. A short guide with paired examples can reduce friction in email, supervision, student support, and client exchange. This is especially useful in multilingual settings where staff share tasks but not discourse expectations.

Future study should test the model with larger open corpora and with participant interviews. It should also compare how the same message is judged by readers from different cultural backgrounds. Another useful path would study repair itself. Many corpora show breakdown, but fewer studies trace how speakers recover from it.

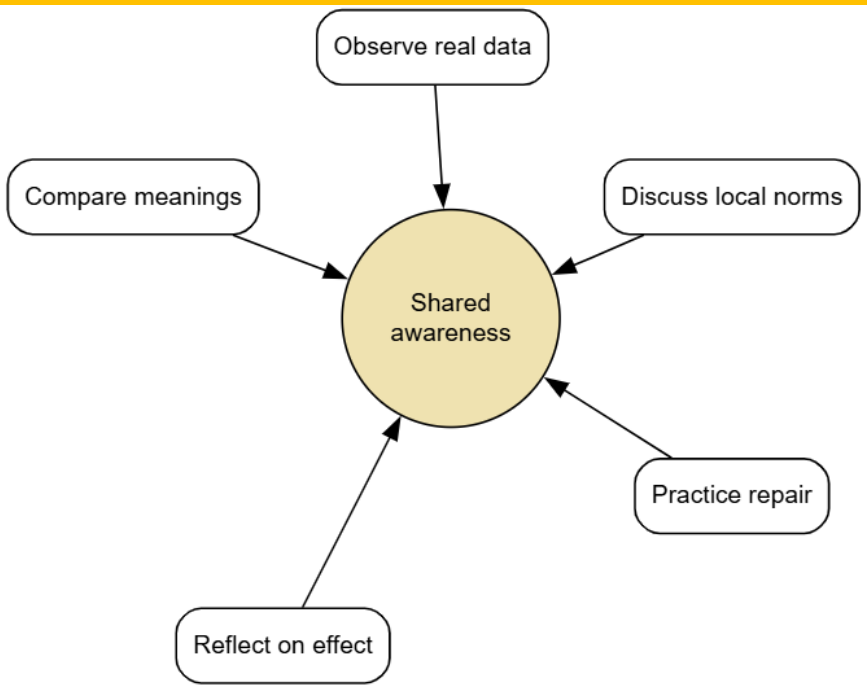


Figure 8 Training cycle for better cross-cultural communication.

8. Limitations

This paper has limits. It is a theory-led study with public evidence, not a fresh multi-site experiment. It also draws more heavily on English-centered scholarship than on all language traditions equally. That reflects the shape of public and widely cited research rather than an ideal balance.

The model should therefore be treated as a strong proposal, not a final map. Its value now lies in explanatory clarity and practical reach. Its long-term value depends on further testing with richer multilingual data.

9. Conclusion

Breakdowns in politeness across cultures are not minor accidents. They sit at the heart of intercultural communication. The reviewed literature shows that such breakdowns arise when linguistic choice, pragmatic force, and sociocultural expectation do not align.

A discourse-based model explains this process better than form-only accounts. It shows how the same utterance can carry different values in different settings. It also shows why repair must address relation and sequence, not wording alone.

The paper contributes a clear model, a practical evidence base, and an applied path for teaching and institutions. Its main message is simple. Better communication across cultures begins when we treat politeness as interactional work, not as a fixed list of polite forms.

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