

**PAKISTANI CULTURE: UNITY IN DIVERSITY OR DIVERSITY IN UNITY?**

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**Abstract**

Cross-cultural interactions are highly demanding, as they require the participants to have sufficient knowledge of each other's' culture, lack of which can act as an obstacle in successful communication. It is through cross-cultural communication and the problems that arise through it, which makes one realize that sharing a common language is not a guarantee that the communication would be carried out smoothly. There is something beyond language which has to be mastered to sustain the thread of communication in cross-cultural or intercultural contact. This inter-cultural contact can be either between two culturally diverse societies when people travel from their place of origin to another country for a specific purpose and a limited period of time or among people belonging to ethnically diverse groups within multi-cultural societies, like Pakistan. The current paper focuses on both the types of cross-cultural communication. The aim of this paper is twofold: to make the local people aware of culture specific norms that operate within different ethno-linguistic groups belonging to different regions of the country, and to familiarize foreigners with different communicative norms that constitute what is known as Pakistani culture. The paper ends with a few suggestions that can help minimize chances of miscommunication among culturally heterogeneous groups.

**Keywords:** culture; cross-cultural communication; inter-culture and intra-cultural diversity; culture shock

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## **Introduction**

The transformation of the world into a global village has made it impossible for humans to remain confined to their specific speech communities. Because of mass immigration all over the world, members of different speech communities encounter individuals with cultures that are distinct from theirs, which often leads to problems in communication on the part of both, the immigrants and the natives. Bochner (2003) rightly puts it: "For individuals to function effectively in a second-culture setting they have to acquire relevant skills and knowledge specific to the new culture; that is, they have to learn about the historical, philosophical and socio-political foundations of the target society, and acquire and rehearse some of the associated behaviours." Understanding differences does not imply eradicating them. In fact, acknowledging these differences is a prerequisite for effective communication.

## **Literature Review**

There are many instances of misunderstandings arising among participants who are ignorant of each other's cultural norms that govern communication. Some of these instances have also been reported in various cross-cultural studies conducted in different parts of the world. It is not possible to give an exhaustive account of all the studies, but a brief literature review is included in this paper to give a glimpse of what cross-cultural communication demands and how the lack of socio-cultural knowledge can lead to serious gaps in communication.

Different aspects of cross-cultural communication have been explored in several studies conducted throughout the world. House and Kasper (1981), for instance, conducted a comparative study to investigate the use of polite forms among Germans and British. The findings of the study revealed that British speakers are more polite than Germans in socially-delicate situations.

Wolfson (1981) conducted a study to examine the differences in the use of compliments and their interpretation across cultures. She collected a large sample of data consisting of examples of speech acts based on compliments from Indonesian, Iranian, Jordanian, Japanese, and American students. The study shows interesting insights, as it was discovered that there are not only differences in the way speakers of different languages employ compliments, but also are there significant differences in the frequency and distribution of compliments across cultures. For instance, Wolfson (1981) in her study observed that as compared to the other cultures, in American culture the frequency of compliments is very high and the non-Americans often feel embarrassed by the Americans' excessive use of compliments. Besides this, Americans use limited sets of adjectives and syntactic patterns that are different from the patterns used by speakers of other languages for paying compliments. Moreover, it was also reported in the study that some of the comments that Americans use as compliments may seem to be insulting to speakers of other languages.

Cedar (2006) conducted a somewhat similar study, but in this study the aim was to investigate differences between American and Thai speakers of English in their use of compliment responses. Although the study was not as extensive as the one conducted by

Wolfson, it is significant. The results of the study revealed interesting differences between Thai and American speakers' response to compliments. Besides differences in the verbal compliment responses, differences in the use of nonverbal responses to compliments were also reported. It was observed through this study that the Thai participants used smile as a response to compliments which is unlikely to be found in American culture. Unlike Thai speakers, Americans are less likely to use smile as a compliment response. In cases, where Americans used smile in compliment response, it was accompanied by verbal response. The researcher also reported difference in the frequency of compliments. As compared to Thai culture, the frequency of compliments in American culture is much higher---a finding that is consistent with Wolf's study conducted in 1981.

Jiang (2006) conducted a comparative study to explore the differences between American and Korean journalists' strategies for requests and refusals. It was reported through this study that the American journalists employed more direct methods for requests and refusals in press conferences as compared to their Korean counterparts. Unlike the American journalists, the Korean journalists used requests instead of refusals and the frequency of such requests was higher than found in American journalists. In situations where the Korean journalists used refusals, their refusals were indirect in the form of some avoidance strategies, like giving insufficient or irrelevant answers to questions they wanted to avoid answering.

Differences between American and Korean culture have also been explored by other researchers. Holtgraves and Yang's (1990) comparative study of Korean and American culture shows that Koreans are more likely to use very polite forms as compared to Americans. Park (1993) in a comparative study of the two cultures discovered that the Koreans, like other Asians, find public display of emotions quite embarrassing and therefore avoid expressions of intimacy publicly, which is not the case with Americans.

Blum-Kulka and House (1989) conducted an exhaustive research with the aim to discover cross-cultural differences among the native speakers of Hebrew, Canadian French, Argentinean Spanish, Australian English, and German with regard to directness in speech. The results of the study showed significant differences among the speakers of these languages, in employing direct forms. According to the research findings, Argentinean Spanish speakers were found to be the most direct followed by Hebrew speakers, whereas the speakers of Australian English were found to be the least direct in their speech. As far as French Canadians and Germans are concerned they were placed at the intermediate levels of directness. In cultures where directness is associated with rudeness, Argentinean Spanish speakers would be judged as extremely rude. These kinds of judgments spring from lack of awareness of others' culture and the inability to acknowledge cultural differences.

These and many other studies exploring different aspects of inter-cultural communication reinforce the point that cultural differences often result in pragmatic failure that become the potential sources of miscommunication, among speakers of different cultures despite using the same linguistic code for interaction. Thomas (1995) mentions two types of pragmatic failure: The *sociopragmatic failure* and the *linguapragmatic failure*. The former implies either choosing a wrong speech act (for

example, criticism instead of complaint, order instead of request) or misinterpreting the intended meaning of a certain speech act; whereas the later implies choosing those linguistic expressions which are appropriate to carry out conversation in one culture but are deemed inappropriate in another culture. The current paper is an attempt to study cultural differences that could lead to both these types of pragmatic failure, with special focus on Pakistani culture.

### **Culture**

Before enumerating the socio-cultural norms that make Pakistani culture distinct from other cultures, the term 'culture' itself needs to be defined and also what we actually mean by 'Pakistani culture'.

The term 'culture' has been defined in a variety of ways, yet the notion of culture is widely misinterpreted. According to Bennett (1998): "cultures are different in their languages, behaviour patterns, and values...Because cultures embody such variety in patterns of perception and behaviour, approaches to communication in cross-cultural situations guard against inappropriate assumptions of similarity and encourage the consideration of difference." Bennett (1998) divides culture into two categories: culture with a capital "C" and culture with a small "c", the former called "objective culture" and the latter "subjective culture". Bennett (1998) is of the view that although objective culture includes knowledge of "social, economic, political and linguistic systems" it does not prove sufficient in face-to-face cross-cultural communication. He believes that: "One can know a lot about the history of a culture and still not be able to communicate with an actual person from that culture. Understanding objective culture may create knowledge, but it does not necessarily generate competence." (Bennett, 1998:2). Therefore, he is of the view that subjective culture, which refers to "the psychological features that define a group of people---their everyday thinking and behaviour---rather than to the institutions they have created" is more useful in carrying out intercultural communication, as it is the knowledge of subjective culture that leads to intercultural competence.

Besides Bennett's categorization, culture can also be categorized as 'individualistic' and 'collectivistic'. In individualistic cultures there is a tendency "to emphasize the importance of individual over group identity" whereas in collectivistic cultures the tendency is to "emphasize the importance of the 'we' identity over the 'I' identity, group obligations over individual rights, and in-group-oriented needs over individual wants and desires." (Ting-Toomy, 1994: 360-361). Pakistan can be considered a country where one finds collectivistic culture, as living in joint families is highly valued despite all the problems that one is likely to encounter in a joint family. In contrast to Pakistan and some other Asian countries like India, Bangladesh, Srilanka, where collectivism is appreciated, in the western world it is individualism that operates and is regarded as the best option to avoid conflicts of any kind. This is the reason that in many western countries leaving parents in old homes is a common practice, whereas in Pakistan it is still unacceptable, although some people in Pakistan have adopted this cultural practice from the West. Nevertheless, this is not widely practiced.

### **Pakistani culture and the notion of intra-cultural and inter-cultural diversity**

Pakistan being a linguistically heterogeneous country is a composite of many cultures. The unique thing about Pakistani culture is its diversity and it is because of this cultural diversity, that people within as well as outside the country often encounters problems in communication, resulting in either 'communication breakdown' or 'communication conflict'. According to Wolfson (1989: 142) in communication breakdown (CB), "the speaker's intention is not understood by the addressee", whereas in case of communication conflict (CC), "misunderstanding can lead to actual friction between the interlocutors." Both CB and CC can spring from differences that exist in cases of intercultural as well as intra-cultural communication and can be the result of 'sociolinguistic transfer', which refers to the application of the sociolinguistic rules of language A, while speaking language B and vice versa. Nevertheless, communication breakdown can also be the result of using lexical items which differ in their cultural meaning. Let us take example of the English word 'owl'. The literal meaning of 'owl' indicates that it is a nocturnal bird, but the cultural meaning does not show this uniformity in meaning. It is a symbol of wisdom in the west, whereas in the east it is used as a symbol of foolishness or stupidity. Take another example of the difference in the cultural meaning of 'cow'. For Hindus, cow is a symbol of divinity and therefore they worship it and call it '*gaae maata*'. The Hindus' act of equating cow with mother helps us determine the degree of reverence that they have for this animal. In contrast to Hindu culture, in Muslim culture cow does not evoke any such associations. In fact, in Pakistan, cow is associated with naivety. A person, particularly a female, who is naive, is referred to as a cow.

It is not only the lexical items and their referents that are loaded with cultural meaning but also the use of certain colours. Take example of white colour, which has culture-specific symbolic interpretation. In India, white is used as a symbol of mourning and therefore Indians wear white at funerals. Besides this, in many Hindu families in India, a woman, after the death of her husband, is not allowed to wear colourful clothes. She is supposed to wear white all her life. Now compare this use of white in Hindu culture with its use in Christianity, where it is used as a symbol of purity and therefore in Christian weddings the bridal dress is always white. Such symbolic differences are not just restricted to the differences across cultures, but also within the same culture with different sub-cultures, as is the case in Pakistan, which is a representative case of multilingualism and multiculturalism.

Although people belonging to different ethnic groups in Pakistan are unified by a common culture based on many of the 'broad national culture patterns', there is a great deal of diversity in terms of the differences in the 'more specific patterns of their respective ethnicities.' (Bennet, 1998). Inter-ethnic communication, being a complicated phenomenon is a big challenge that language users face. When we take example of Pakistan where different ethno-linguistic groups live, instances of inter-ethnic communication leading to ethno-linguistic conflicts are not difficult to find, as *Pathaans* have a different set of norms from *Sindhis*; *Balochi* culture is distinct from *Punjabi* culture; *Urdu* speakers have a totally different set of cultural practices. Then there are certain tribes where people have a life-style that is so diametrically opposed to other

groups' cultural practices that people are likely to receive intense culture shock. Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis which states that speakers of different languages perceive reality in different ways seem to be valid to a great extent in this context, but here we are not concerned so much with how speakers having different ethno-linguistic background perceive reality. What we are actually concerned with is how their perception of reality operates in terms of understanding others' cultural practices and whether the cross-cultural communication gives rise to culture shock. Moreover, if cross-cultural communication leads to culture shock, then what kind of culture shock is it: positive or negative? As culture shock does not necessarily have negative consequences.

The ABC Theory of culture contact developed by Bochner *et al* (2003) sees the response to unfamiliar culture settings as an indicator of change, which is not always negative. In fact, they regard it as "an active process of dealing with change." The ABC model, based on three components: Affect, Behaviour, and Cognitions, deals with how people "feel, behave, think, and perceive when exposed to second-culture influences.... the model has implications for interventions aimed at decreasing "culture shock" and increasing the likelihood of achieving positive culture-contact outcomes." (Bochner 2003).

### **Instances of Intra-cultural and Inter-cultural diversity**

There are numerous instances of intra-cultural diversity, i.e. cultural diversity within the country. Let us discuss a few of these examples before moving on to inter-cultural diversity, i.e. diversity across the country. In Punjabi culture, for instance, speaking loudly is common and is therefore not regarded as rude or coarse. This aspect of Punjabi culture is often misinterpreted resulting in negative social evaluation of Punjabis as being uncivilized and rude. In contrast to Punjabi culture, in Urdu culture, loudness is associated with lack of refinement and politeness. Because of this difference, Punjabis are judged as coarse and impolite and are stereotyped as '*pai-Du*'. Another example of cultural diversity within the country can be seen in some areas of N.W.F.P (now called *xaibar paxtuun xwa*) where before getting married, the bridegroom has to pay a substantial amount of money to the bride's parents, a tradition that is not found among other ethnic groups within the country. In contrast to this practice, in other ethnic groups it is the bride's parents who give dowry to their daughter when she gets married. In the light of these conflicting cultural practices, we can raise another question and that is: "Is there any such thing as 'Pakistani culture'?" When we use the term "Pakistani culture", which "Pakistani culture" do we have in mind? *Urdu, Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Balochi* or the culture of speakers of other indigenous languages? If all, then what features bind them together?

Pakistan is distinct from many cultures of the world at various levels. If we just consider the notion of politeness, which is culture-specific, the difference becomes obvious. Pakistanis manifest politeness in ways which can appear to be highly impolite to foreigners. For instance, it is very common to make direct suggestions to people, and these suggestions are often valued and accepted without offence; but in some other cultures, like the British and the Greek, these kinds of direct suggestions can be offensive and are often perceived to be impolite. Comparing Urdu and English rules of behaviour, Khan (2009:195) observes: "Culturally, Urdu uses directness of speech, that

is Urdu speakers are fairly direct in speaking.” Indirectness, being a communicative norm in some cultures, can pose problems for Pakistanis who are used to employing directness in their interactions, not only for making suggestions but also for making requests. Unlike Pakistani culture, in Greek culture off-record requests “are employed in order to provide addressee’s freedom of action, thus minimizing the imposition; instead they are employed in order to provide addressees with an opportunity to express their generosity and solicitude for the interlocutor by offering. This choice prevents the actual request from occurring and paves the way for an offer to be made.” (Sifanou, 2005: 218).

Moreover, there are significant differences in the forms of address employed by people of Pakistan and people belonging to other cultures. In many European countries, particularly, England and America, teachers are often called by their last name, but in Pakistan teachers are addressed as Sir or Madam according to their gender. Students avoid mentioning their teachers’ name, as it is considered disrespectful. In case where the name has to be mentioned for clarification, it is often the first name that is taken along with the honorific. Commenting on the use of forms of address, Khan (2009:196) states: “In English, titles such as Mr, Mrs, Ms, Dr, Prof, etc. are used either with the full name or with the last name. In Urdu, *Kaleem Sahib* or Professor Kaleem is all right, but it would be inappropriate in English to say Mr Kaleem or Professor Kaleem when actually “Kaleem” is the first name. In Urdu, kinship terms are used as forms of address *Bhai Sahib, Baji, Amma*, etc; but in English that is simply not done.”

Another distinct point about forms of address is with regard to husband-wife relationship. In many Pakistani families, women are not allowed to call their husbands by their name. They are either referred to as the father of their children, like “*Salman ke abba*” “*Saman ke abba*” or simply ‘vo’ i.e., he. When the wife has to address her husband directly, she calls him by simply saying ‘*sune~*’ or ‘*suniye*’ to attract attention. It could be culturally shocking for those families where it is not unusual for a wife to call the husband by his name. This aspect of Pakistani culture is also shared by the Indians, as in many Indian families, the wife never utters her husband’s name.

There is yet another aspect of Pakistani culture that makes it different from other cultures of the world and that is with regard to the use of nick names. Although the use of nick names is common in British and American cultures as well, the nicknames are either truncated or used as diminutives. For example: Catherine becomes Cathy, Patricia becomes Tricia, Johnathan becomes John. These kinds of truncations and diminutives are also found in Pakistani culture, as Noor-ul-Ain becomes either Noor or Anny, Noman becomes Nomy, Moammar becomes Momy, etc. Nevertheless, there are certain nicknames that are in no way connected to the real names. Nicknames like *bubbly, chanda, guRya, guDDo, munni, nanni* (for females) while *munna, nanna, guDDu, bablu* (for males) are quite common.

Just as there are significant cultural differences in the notion of politeness and the forms of address, differences are also exhibited in the notion of punctuality across cultures. It is a trend in Pakistan to be deliberately late in social gatherings to give an impression that one is extremely busy and does not have enough time for such occasions; those who are on time are thought to be idle. It would not be an exaggeration to state that being late

in social gatherings is used as a status symbol. Moreover, it is quite common to find people engaged in small talk, in social gatherings, which is considered a pleasurable activity. This feature of Pakistani culture offers a sharp contrast to Swedish culture where silence is highly appreciated. It is observed that “Swedish culture looks down on people who talk without seeming to care about whether what they say is of any importance” (Daun, 2005:155). Pakistani culture is diametrically opposed to Swedish culture in another sense. Unlike Swedish people who are not emotionally expressive, Pakistanis are quite explicit as far as expression of emotions is concerned. In fact, they often display intense emotions, which result in their being stereotyped as over-sentimental---as people governed by emotions rather than logic. In contrast, uncontrolled emotional expression is considered a taboo in Swedish culture. Because of this cultural contrast, Swedish people are likely to be perceived as emotionally empty by Pakistanis, as they themselves are very spontaneous in terms of expressing their feelings. Communication between these two cultures is bound to be problematic unless speakers of both the cultures are aware of the communicative norms of each other’s culture.

Swedes dislike socializing outside the family and therefore avoid it, whereas Pakistanis love to socialize with both family and friends. Many of them do not even hesitate to socialize with strangers while travelling. In fact, if it is a long journey, socializing with the person sitting beside is considered a good pass time, even if that person is a complete stranger. Unlike British people who read while travelling, Pakistanis love chatting with their co-travelers.

Pakistani culture is not only distinct from Swedish and British culture but also stands apart from other cultures of the world. In Singapore, for instance, if a person does not leave some food in plate he/she is considered greedy, but in Pakistan it is considered extremely unethical to leave food in plate. Moreover, it is insulting to give tip to waiters in Singapore, while in Pakistan it is a common practice. In fact, at some places in Pakistan, if one does not give tip to the waiters, they demand it.

Eating styles and habits also differ from one culture to another. In Pakistan it is a common practice to eat food without spoon and fork, whereas in western and some other cultures, eating with hands is quite unimaginable and against table manners. Nevertheless, because of globalization many changes have occurred in the country’s cultural practices, which has affected many areas including eating habits and manners. Now many Pakistanis, particularly those belonging to the upper and upper-middle class, prefer to eat with spoon and fork, as eating without spoon and fork is considered a sign of being uncivilized and backward. The consumption of fast food has also become a trend for the same reason and those who still prefer traditional food over fast food are thought to be unsophisticated. The consumption of fast food has begun to be seen as a symbol of modernity and sophistication.

Despite the changes that have resulted because of globalization, there are many cultural practices that are still intact. One such example is that of parent-child relationship, which is held in high esteem in Pakistani culture. In Pakistan, parents’ guidance is highly respected and children seek their parents’ approval before taking any important decision of their life. In fact, in many families in Pakistan, parents are the sole decision-



makers for their children's future. This aspect of Pakistani culture could result in intense 'culture shock' for people of other cultures, where children make their own decisions, without being under any obligation to seek their parents' advice. In Australian and American culture, for instance, parents' guidance is seen as interference. It is not strange to discover that what in one culture is seen as guidance and counseling, in the other culture is perceived as intrusion. Moreover, it is considered sheer rudeness and misconduct to argue with elders in eastern culture, whereas in western culture argumentation is highly encouraged. It would not be wrong to state that in Pakistani culture arguing with elders is perceived to be a face-threatening gesture.

Cultural differences are not just manifested through verbal means of communication and cultural practices, but also through non-verbal means, like the use of gestures. The frequency of gestures used by people determines whether they belong to a 'low-context' or a 'high-context' culture. Low-context cultures, like UK, USA, and Canada, do not give so much emphasis on the use of gestures as high-context cultures like Pakistan, India, Japan, and Korea do. In British culture, for instance, the use of gestures is considered impolite, whereas in case of Pakistanis and other Asians, speech is accompanied by gestures for effectiveness. Whereas English culture is thought to be 'a low frequency gesture culture', Asians including Pakistanis use gestures quite frequently. Hence, Pakistani bilinguals' use of gestures while speaking English can result in their being judged as impolite by their British interlocutors, even if they do not intend to be so. Pika *et al* (2006) in their study on the use of gestures have discovered that "bilinguals do not suppress the gesture rate connected to one language in order to switch to the other language." Transfer of any kind, whether it is related to grammatical transfer or gestural transfer from language A to language B, can result in miscommunication. However, the degree of miscommunication depends on the nature of grammatical or gestural transfer. If we take example of conventional gestures, "whose form and meaning are established by the conventions of specific communities and can usually be understood without speech", their meaning is culture-specific and therefore the use of these conventional gestures can lead to serious misinterpretation by members of other cultures. For example, the "thumb-up gesture" which signals approval in some cultures has negative implication in other cultures, including Pakistan. The use of same gestures across cultures does not necessarily imply uniformity in their interpretation. A raised eyebrow might mean different thing in different cultures. Similarly smile, which despite being a universal facial expression might invoke different meanings in different cultures. The Japanese for instance, give the news of death with a smile on their face because of their belief that it is not fair to inflict the pain of grief on others. In contrast to Japanese culture, in Pakistan where smile is associated with friendliness and happiness, Japanese people's use of this gesture on a sad occasion like death would be interpreted as something extremely rude and unacceptable.

### **Conclusion**

On the basis of all the examples of intra and intercultural communication discussed in the paper, it can be concluded that it is only through practicing cultural relativism, that is having respect for all the cultures that communication conflict and breakdown can be avoided. In order to promote cultural relativism, it is extremely important to raise

cultural awareness, which can be done through translating the literature of the target language community. Translation can act as a bridge between the two cultures (target language and source language). House (2008:137) has rightly stated: "... in the process of translation not only two languages but also two cultures come into contact." It can be seen as an instance of intercultural communication. People can learn a great deal about the culture of different speech communities if they are exposed to the literature of those speech communities through translation in their native language.

Cultural awareness can also be promoted by designing effective policies and implementing them. Media can play an active role in this regard, but giving media the sole responsibility for promoting cultural awareness is pretty unfair. The responsibility ought to be shared by both, the policy makers and the syllabus designers. The policy makers actually need to design a language policy based on the Integrationist Model of Language Planning that aims at promoting cultural diversity instead of obliterating it. Similarly, the syllabus designers should design syllabi for language learners in such a way that learners are made aware of the culture of at least that language which they are learning so that they develop cultural tolerance.

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