Book Review


In line with the increasing understanding of language use as a culturally situated resource for social interaction, Juliane House and Dániel Kádár draw on their research interests in the contrastive study of language use to produce an intriguing and enlightening analysis of cross-cultural issues through the lens of pragmatics. After offering an overview of theory and practice in cross-cultural pragmatics, they provide a ground-breaking, language-anchored, strictly empirical and replicable framework for the study of different data types and situations. This framework is illustrated with case studies drawn from a variety of linguacultures, such as English, Chinese, Japanese, German and Hungarian, allowing the authors to conduct contrastive analyses of language use in important contexts such as globalised business, politics and classroom settings. The book is divided into three parts, with a total of fourteen chapters, and offers thought-provoking insights for reinvigorating the field of cross-cultural pragmatics that was pioneered by the CCSARP Project (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), by going back to the Politeness Principle and the Cooperative Principle, and integrating these principles into present-day pragmatic theories and practice.

First, Chapter 1 offers definitions of key terms, the criteria for engaging in cross-cultural pragmatics and the rationale for the research. Part 1 (Chapters 2–5) is then devoted to an overview of the foundations of the field. Specifically, Chapter 2 provides a reader-friendly overview of the chronological background of cross-cultural pragmatics, while revisiting the ground-breaking CCSARP Project (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) as well as its developing connection with present-day cross-cultural pragmatics, with both practical and ethical challenges being highlighted. Chapter 3 offers a useful discussion on the issues surrounding the scope of the data, by arguing that not everything can be contrastively examined. The term tertium comparationis deserves a special
mention; it has been highlighted in order to frame House and Kádár’s approach to cross-cultural pragmatic issues, revealing their commitment to describing, documenting and contextualising the criteria for measurement and contrastive tools. This is repeatedly underscored as the core ambition of the book—it is designed to act as an enlightening guide to aid in the search for comparative equivalence between elements in different linguacultures.

Chapter 4 summarises the data types covered in cross-cultural pragmatics and the fundamental methodologies used in the field, outlining a fine-grained ‘methodological’ perspective on cross-cultural pragmatic studies, while directing its focus to the relationship between the data, aim and rationale of the research. Chapter 5 is centred around linguistic politeness and impoliteness, which are particularly relevant to cross-cultural pragmatic research. This chapter serves as an invaluable illustration of how pragmatic issues can be uniquely and originally explored from the perspective of cross-cultural pragmatics.

Part II (Chapters 6–9) sketches out the analytic framework of the book. This framework serves as a toolbox for researchers engaging in cross-cultural pragmatics. To be more specific, Chapter 6 summarises the cross-cultural pragmatic analytic framework that breaks down cross-cultural pragmatic data into three units of analysis, namely, expressions (Chapter 7), speech acts (Chapter 8) and discourse (Chapter 9), all of which are investigated to demonstrate how they are deployed and combined in complex configurations with other units in interpersonal communication in a diverse set of linguacultures.

House and Kádár’s approach to expressions in Chapter 7 differs from previous approaches in that it considers them as the ‘lowest’ unit of analysis in their model by focusing on pragmatically salient conventionalised expressions which indicate the interactants’ rights and obligations in a particular context. In this sense, this chapter can be read as a link between the methodological concerns of the previous chapters and the central concerns of the book in the ensuing chapters.

Chapter 8 discusses how their framework can be operationalised in cross-cultural pragmatic research involving speech acts. While addressing the issue of how people manage to do things with words, House and Kádár set out with the explicit aim of presenting a new typology of speech acts, whilst simultaneously demonstrating the ways in which participants re-orient the trajectories of interactions in response to local interactional contingencies. In other words, House and Kádár focus on how speech acts offer new ways to investigate cross-cultural pragmatics, through the lens of cross-cultural pragmatics, they examine how speech acts bring about a particular construction of interpersonal meaning and concomitant mode of engagement within a certain set of affordances and constraints.
Chapter 9 provides an in-depth examination of discourse, the highest analytic unit. The argument is made that discourse can only be approached rigorously across linguacultures, by demonstrating how discourses are constructed culturally and how they are explored as interpersonal resources for relationship management and activity engagement. Moreover, via a contrastive discourse analysis, House and Kádár successfully emphasise the centrality of the ‘crossness’ of language use in the contextualisation of cultures, which is constructed for interactional goals and theorising core concepts including ‘discourse’ and ‘cross-culturality’.

As the book’s most illustrative contribution to cross-cultural pragmatic research, Part III (Chapters 10–13) introduces various case studies to demonstrate the operation of the analytic framework, which involves each unit of analysis proposed in Part II. While Chapters 10 and 11 both focus on expressions, the former focuses on cross-cultural pragmatic differences in the way British learners of Chinese and Chinese learners of English evaluate a set of pragmatically important expressions in their target language. The latter chapter ventures into the realm of translation by examining the ways in which translated IKEA catalogues handle (or fail to handle) potential cross-cultural irritations triggered by the translation of the English pronoun you. Chapter 12 turns to the cross-cultural pragmatic application of speech acts by contrastively examining how historical documents are conventionally closed in three different linguacultures: Chinese, German and English. Similarly, Chapter 13 provides a case study involving the cross-cultural examination of war crime apologies made by representatives of the German and Japanese governments.

Finally, Chapter 14 offers a summary of the book in a constructive and proactive manner and proposes directions for future research, with a glossary included as an appendix.

The book is full of enlightening ideas, cases studies and methodological engagement. Its contrastive perspective provides an excellent contribution to the cross-cultural issues of language use. While its theoretical reflections focus primarily on unit analysis, its methodological veins are varied across three levels of discourse analysis. In this sense, this book can be taken as a timely follow-up to Blum-Kulka et al.’s (1989) research, as it extends the research line of cross-cultural pragmatics by empirically highlighting ‘cross-culturality’ and ‘contrastivity’ in a systematic framework. Meanwhile, it highlights the need to revisit a number of notions, namely, speech acts, discourse analysis and cross-cultural pragmatics.

With an engaging style of writing and the inclusion of further reading lists, the book serves as an accessible entrée into the nuanced critiques of cross-cultural pragmatics. As language use is now interactively understood as all
forms of meaningful semiotic human activity, which are considered “in connection with social, cultural and historical patterns and development of use” (Blommaert, 2005: 3), a contrastive exploration into such issues from a cross-cultural pragmatic perspective is a timely contribution to the interactional turn in the field.

Despite its theoretical and empirical richness, readers might prefer to read more about ‘cross-culturality’ and ‘contrastivity’ through the lens of cross-cultural pragmatics, both as topics and as contexts, particularly given the recent engagement in the field of pragmatics of ‘emerging and emergent’ aspects and related notions in contemporary language use. Moreover, those readers would expect to find a more consistent theoretical thread throughout the book, with in-depth explanations that enable the reader to connect comparable ideas. This would promote a clearer and more coherent theoretical thread to guide research and facilitate findings. Therefore, it calls for extra effort to be made by ambitious readers to explore these issues along the lines House and Kádár have developed, using cases from different languages and cultures, to understand more fully the complexity of cross-cultural pragmatics in the context of globalisation. Finally, as many previous studies have attempted to investigate how multimodal approaches can contribute to research findings in the field of cross-cultural pragmatics, the interface between verbal and non-verbal conduct might be another area that deserves further in-depth and systematic exploration from the perspective of cross-cultural pragmatics, in the interests of comparison and contrast.

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References


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