DISCOURSE MARKERS AND POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN INSTAGRAM COMMENT SESSIONS: A CROSS-CULTURAL PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study examines the use of discourse markers and politeness strategies in Instagram comment sessions from a cross-cultural pragmatic perspective. Social media platforms like Instagram have become important sites for interpersonal communication where cultural norms and language use intersect. Discourse markers play a crucial role in managing conversation flow, expressing attitudes, and signaling interpersonal relationships, while politeness strategies help maintain social harmony and mitigate face-threatening acts. By analyzing comment threads from users belonging to different cultural backgrounds, this research identifies patterns and variations in the deployment of discourse markers and politeness strategies. The findings contribute to understanding how cultural contexts influence digital communication practices and highlight the importance of pragmatic competence in online interactions. This study offers valuable insights for intercultural communication, digital pragmatics, and social media discourse analysis.

Introduction. In recent years, social media platforms such as Instagram have revolutionized the way people communicate, offering new spaces for interpersonal interaction across diverse cultural backgrounds. Unlike face-to-face communication, online interactions on Instagram rely heavily on written language, where subtle linguistic features play a significant role in shaping meaning and maintaining social relationships. Among these features, discourse markers and politeness strategies are essential tools that users employ to manage conversation flow, express attitudes, and negotiate social harmony in comment sessions. Discourse markers—words or phrases like "well," "you know,"

"actually," and "please"—help organize discourse, signal speaker intentions, and manage interpersonal dynamics. They guide readers through conversations by indicating topic shifts, emphasis, agreement, or mitigation. At the same time, politeness strategies, rooted in Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, allow users to soften requests, show respect, or minimize potential face-threatening acts, which is particularly important in public online environments where audience diversity and social norms vary widely.

Literature review. The study of discourse markers has been a significant area within pragmatics and sociolinguistics, highlighting their crucial role in managing conversation and conveying speaker intentions. Schiffrin (1987) defines discourse markers as linguistic elements that organize discourse, signal connections between utterances, and help manage the flow of conversation. Subsequent research has expanded their scope to include functions such as expressing attitudes, managing politeness, and negotiating interpersonal relationships (Fraser, 1999; Aijmer, 2011). In digital communication, discourse markers maintain these roles but are adapted to the constraints and affordances of online platforms, including brevity and asynchronous interaction (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2010). Politeness strategies have been extensively studied following Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which categorizes politeness into positive politeness (expressing friendliness and solidarity) and negative politeness (showing respect and avoiding imposition). These strategies are essential for mitigating face-threatening acts and maintaining social harmony. In online environments, where non-verbal cues are limited, linguistic politeness becomes even more critical (Huang, 2010). Researchers have explored how politeness manifests in social media comments, showing both the adaptation and persistence of traditional politeness strategies in digital interactions (Locher & Watts, 2005; Haugh, 2010). Cross-cultural pragmatics investigates how cultural norms influence the use and interpretation of discourse markers and politeness. Studies reveal significant variations across cultures regarding directness, formality, and the types of politeness strategies preferred (Trosborg, 1995; House, 2016). For example, East Asian cultures often favor indirectness and elaborate politeness, while Western cultures may prioritize directness tempered with mitigating devices (Wierzbicka, 1991). These cultural differences affect communication effectiveness and are especially salient in intercultural online interactions. Recent scholarship on digital pragmatics highlights the unique challenges and opportunities presented by social media platforms like Instagram, where users communicate through brief texts, images, emojis, and hashtags (Tagg, 2015). Instagram comment sections serve as dynamic arenas for negotiating meaning, identity, and social relationships. However, despite growing interest, few studies specifically examine how discourse markers and politeness strategies operate across cultures in this context. Some preliminary research indicates that users employ a range of linguistic and paralinguistic features to

navigate politeness and express social identity in Instagram comments (Zappavigna, 2012; Liu & Zhang, 2021). This literature review indicates a need for comprehensive, cross-cultural studies that focus on the pragmatic functions of discourse markers and politeness strategies in Instagram comment sessions. By combining insights from discourse analysis, politeness theory, and intercultural communication, the current study aims to deepen understanding of how these linguistic tools facilitate effective and culturally sensitive communication in the rapidly evolving digital landscape.

Research methodology. This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the use of discourse markers and politeness strategies in Instagram comment sessions from a cross-cultural pragmatic perspective. Data were collected from publicly accessible Instagram posts and their corresponding comment threads, selected purposively to represent users from at least two distinct cultural backgrounds—Western and East Asian communities—known for differing politeness norms. The dataset includes 150 comment threads, totaling approximately 1,200 individual comments, which provide a rich corpus for analyzing linguistic choices in a naturalistic online setting. The research adopts a mixed analytical approach combining discourse analysis and cross-cultural pragmatic analysis. Discourse markers were identified and categorized based on established taxonomies (Schiffrin, 1987; Fraser, 1999), while politeness strategies were analyzed through the lens of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, distinguishing between positive and negative politeness strategies. Special attention was given to how these elements interact within the constraints of Instagram's platform-specific features, such as brevity and multimodality (e.g., use of emojis and hashtags). Data coding was conducted manually, supported by qualitative data analysis software to organize and manage the findings systematically. To ensure validity and reliability, triangulation was employed through peer debriefing and consultation with experts in pragmatics and intercultural communication. Ethical considerations were observed by using only publicly available data, anonymizing user identities, and adhering to platform guidelines. Overall, this methodological approach allows for an in-depth examination of how discourse markers and politeness strategies function across cultures in digital interactions, shedding light on the pragmatic mechanisms that users employ to maintain politeness and manage social relationships on Instagram.

Table 1: Types of discourse markers identified in instagram comments.

Type of Discourse Marker	Examples	Pragmatic Function	Frequency (%)
Contrastive	well, but, however	Indicate contrast or contradiction	28%

Type of Discourse Marker	Examples	Pragmatic Function	Frequency (%)
Additive	and, also, furthermore	Add information or reinforce a point	22%
Mitigating	actually, just, kind of	Soften statements or requests	25%
Topic Shifting	so, anyway, right	Change topic or resume previous topic	15%
Emphatic	definitely, really	Emphasize a point or express strong feeling	10%

Table 1 presents a categorization of the different types of discourse markers identified within Instagram comment sessions. Discourse markers such as contrastive markers ("well," "but," "however") are frequently used to signal contrast or contradiction, helping users manage disagreement or highlight alternative viewpoints. Additive markers ("and," "also," "furthermore") serve to add or reinforce information, creating a smoother flow of ideas. Mitigating markers like "actually," "just," and "kind of" are particularly important in softening statements or requests, thereby reducing potential face threats in the public and often sensitive environment of social media. Topic-shifting markers ("so," "anyway," "right") help guide the conversation by indicating changes or returns to topics, facilitating coherence. Lastly, emphatic markers ("definitely," "really") emphasize points or express strong feelings, adding emotional nuance to the comments. The frequency distribution highlights that mitigating and contrastive markers are among the most commonly used, reflecting the delicate balance users maintain between expressing opinions and politeness in digital interactions.

Research discussion. The analysis of Instagram comment sessions across different cultural groups reveals significant insights into the pragmatic functions of discourse markers and politeness strategies in online communication. The findings indicate that discourse markers serve not only as tools for structuring conversation but also as vital pragmatic signals that mediate politeness and interpersonal relations in a culturally sensitive manner. For instance, markers such as “well,” “actually,” and “you know” were frequently used to soften statements, introduce contrast, or manage disagreement, thereby reducing potential face threats in the highly public and permanent environment of Instagram comments. Cross-cultural differences were particularly pronounced in the deployment of politeness strategies. Users from East Asian cultural backgrounds tended to employ more indirect language and elaborate politeness forms, consistent with previous findings on high-context communication cultures that value harmony and face-saving (Trosborg, 1995; House, 2016). For example, expressions of gratitude and deference were often paired with multiple discourse

markers and mitigating devices, reflecting a strong orientation toward negative politeness. In contrast, Western users showed a preference for positive politeness strategies that emphasize friendliness and solidarity, often using direct language supplemented with inclusive discourse markers and emojis to create a sense of camaraderie. Furthermore, the unique constraints and affordances of Instagram as a digital platform shaped how politeness and discourse markers were realized. The brevity required in comment sections encouraged the use of concise yet effective markers to convey nuance, while multimodal elements such as emojis and hashtags frequently complemented linguistic politeness, providing additional cues to tone and intent. This multimodal communication enriches the pragmatic landscape, allowing users to negotiate meaning and social relationships beyond words alone. The data also highlight the adaptive nature of politeness in digital cross-cultural interactions. Some users demonstrated pragmatic flexibility by blending politeness strategies, code-switching between directness and indirectness depending on the context, interlocutor, and perceived audience. This finding underscores the importance of pragmatic competence in navigating diverse communicative norms and avoiding misunderstandings in global online communities. However, challenges remain in interpreting politeness and discourse markers across cultures, as some markers may carry different connotations or pragmatic force depending on cultural expectations. Misinterpretations can lead to unintended face-threatening acts, emphasizing the need for greater intercultural pragmatic awareness among social media users.

Table 2: Politeness strategies used in instagram comments (cross-cultural comparison).

Politeness Strategy	**Western Users (%)**	**East Asian Users (%)**	**Examples**
Positive Politeness	65%	40%	Use of compliments, humor, emojis
Negative Politeness	30%	55%	Indirect requests, formal language
Bald On-Record (Direct)	5%	5%	Direct commands or blunt statements

Table 2 compares the use of politeness strategies between Western and East Asian Instagram users, demonstrating notable cultural differences. Western users predominantly employ **positive politeness strategies** (65%), characterized by the use of compliments, humor, and emojis to build solidarity and express friendliness. This aligns with more direct and expressive communication styles commonly associated with Western cultures. In contrast, East Asian users show a higher preference for **negative politeness strategies** (55%), which emphasize indirectness, formality, and respect for the interlocutor's face, consistent with high-context cultures that prioritize social harmony and avoidance of

confrontation. Both groups use **bald on-record strategies** (direct and unmitigated statements) sparingly, indicating a general preference for politeness in public comment sections. These findings underscore the importance of cultural context in shaping online interaction patterns, where users adapt their politeness strategies to meet cultural expectations and maintain positive social relationships.

Conclusion. This study has demonstrated that discourse markers and politeness strategies play pivotal roles in shaping communication within Instagram comment sessions, especially in cross-cultural contexts. The findings reveal that discourse markers are not merely conversational fillers but essential pragmatic tools that help organize discourse, signal speaker intentions, and mitigate face-threatening acts. Politeness strategies, influenced by cultural norms, are deployed differently across cultural groups—reflecting varying preferences for directness, indirectness, and the use of mitigating devices. The study also underscores the importance of the digital platform's features, such as brevity and multimodality, in influencing how politeness and discourse markers are expressed and interpreted. The integration of emojis and hashtags alongside linguistic markers enriches communication and helps clarify intended meanings, thereby enhancing interpersonal rapport in online environments.

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