

MODESTY IN DISCOURSE ANALYSIS. A COMPARATIVE STUDY
OF ENGLISH AND UZBEK LANGUAGES

Shodieva Maftunabonu Adizovna

Asia International University, English chair

Email: shodiyevamaftunabonuadizovna@oxu.uz

Abstract

This study examines the manifestation of modesty in discourse within English and Uzbek languages, highlighting its linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic dimensions. Modesty is defined and contextualized as a politeness strategy that helps maintain harmonious communication by discouraging self-praise. A comparative analysis reveals how English and Uzbek speakers employ modesty strategies, including specific syntactic constructions and lexical choices, to fulfill cultural expectations of humility. The paper discusses how gender and cultural norms shape the use of modesty in each language, with women often displaying stronger modesty norms in both contexts. Empirical examples from real conversations are provided to illustrate modesty expressions in practice. The findings underscore that while modesty is a universal communicative principle, its linguistic realizations and social significance vary across languages and cultures, carrying important implications for cross-cultural communication and discourse analysis.

Key Words: modesty, discourse analysis, politeness, pragmatics, english language, uzbek language, gender, culture, face-saving.

Introduction

Modesty in communication refers to the tendency of speakers to downplay their own achievements or qualities in order to appear humble rather than boastful. In linguistic pragmatics, modesty is closely tied to the **politeness principle**, serving as one way to maintain respect and avoid social friction. Classic politeness theories emphasize that effective communication often requires attending to the interlocutor's **face** (public self-image) and avoiding behaviors that could be seen as arrogant or self-promoting. Modest speech thus functions as a **face-saving** strategy: by minimizing praise of oneself, a speaker shows regard for others' feelings and adheres to norms of

humility . At the same time, notions of modesty are deeply influenced by sociocultural context. What is considered an appropriately modest statement in one culture may be perceived differently in another . This paper explores the concept of modesty in discourse from three perspectives – linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic – and compares how English and Uzbek speakers realize modesty in their speech. We examine common syntactic and lexical markers of modesty in each language, and discuss the role of gender and culture in shaping modest communication. Finally, real conversational examples are analyzed to illustrate how modesty is expressed in practice. The goal is to shed light on the similarities and differences in modesty norms between English and Uzbek discourse, thereby contributing to a better understanding of cross-cultural communication and politeness strategies.

Defining Modesty in Linguistic and Pragmatic Frameworks

In linguistic and pragmatic terms, **modesty** can be defined as a communicative norm that discourages self-praise and excessive emphasis on one's own merits . Leech's politeness framework formally captures this in the **Modesty Maxim**, which states: *"Minimize the expression of praise of self; maximize the expression of dispraise of self."* . In other words, speakers are expected to avoid boasting and to remain humble about their accomplishments. For example, instead of saying *"I did a great job,"* a modest speaker might say *"Oh, it wasn't anything special."* This principle aligns with the broader pragmatic goal of maintaining **politeness** and positive interpersonal relations. By downplaying one's achievements, the speaker shows respect and prevents potential resentment or discomfort in the listener . Pragmatically, modesty serves to protect the speaker's and hearer's face: the speaker avoids coming across as arrogant (which could harm the speaker's own face and the hearer's comfort) and demonstrates regard for the hearer's status and feelings . As a result, modest utterances contribute to smoother, more harmonious interactions.

It is important to distinguish linguistic modesty from other uses of the term *"modesty."* In everyday language, *modesty* can also refer to conservative behavior or

dress. However, in discourse analysis and pragmatics, modesty specifically refers to **verbal humility** – the rhetorical downplaying of one’s abilities or possessions in communication. This modesty is often realized through **speech acts** such as self-deprecating remarks, mitigated assertions, polite refusals of praise, or qualified statements of ability. For instance, a speaker might respond to a compliment by saying, *“I don’t want to sound conceited, but it was really a team effort,”* thereby acknowledging the praise but redirecting credit away from themselves. Such strategies fulfill the modesty norm by **mitigating self-credit** and highlighting others’ contributions or external factors. In sum, within linguistic and pragmatic frameworks, modesty is seen as a key component of politeness that varies by context but generally functions to maintain **respect, collaboration, and social equilibrium** in conversation

Sociolinguistically, modesty is a **culturally contingent** value – different societies place different emphasis on humble speech. While the inclination to avoid boastfulness appears in many languages, the extent and manner of its expression can diverge significantly. In some cultures, modesty in speech is strongly enforced as a sign of good upbringing and respect, whereas in others a certain degree of self-assertion is tolerated or even expected in specific settings. These cultural nuances mean that modesty must be understood in context: what one culture considers polite humility, another might misconstrue as lack of confidence or, conversely, as false humility. Discourse analysts thus approach modesty not only as a grammatical or lexical phenomenon, but also as a **sociopragmatic** phenomenon – one that reflects the norms, values, and interpersonal expectations of a speech community. This comparative perspective is essential when examining English and Uzbek, as these languages encapsulate different cultural attitudes toward modesty while also sharing some universal pragmatic tendencies.

Modesty Strategies in English and Uzbek Discourse

Both English and Uzbek employ modesty as an important discourse strategy, but the **ways in which speakers enact modesty differ in line with cultural norms and communication styles**. In English discourse, particularly in Western anglophone cultures, speakers are generally expected to be modest to avoid appearing arrogant, yet also to remain sufficiently confident. This creates a subtle balance in conversation. English speakers often use modesty in contexts like responding to compliments,

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discussing personal achievements, or expressing opinions. For example, an English speaker who receives praise might respond, *“Thank you, but it was really a team effort. I couldn’t have done it without my colleagues’ help.”* – a response that graciously accepts the compliment while deflecting credit to others. Such a strategy aligns with Anglo-American norms of **modest self-presentation**, where overt boasting is discouraged, but outright denial of one’s role is not required either. In professional settings, English discourse permits some self-promotion (e.g. during job interviews or performance reviews), but even then it is often couched in modest terms (for instance, using phrases like “I’m pleased with the result” rather than “I’m the best”). This indicates that **individualistic** cultures like mainstream English-speaking ones still value modesty, though they balance it with individual achievement. Speakers try to appear confident yet **unassuming**, a dual goal achieved by moderate self-praise tempered with qualifiers or acknowledgments of others

In contrast, **Uzbek discourse** is deeply influenced by the culture’s collectivist values and strong emphasis on humility and respect. Modesty is a highly esteemed virtue in Uzbek communication, and speakers typically go to great lengths to avoid any impression of boastfulness. Even more so than in English, an Uzbek speaker will often reject or soften praise directed at them. It is common in Uzbek conversations to attribute success to external factors (community, God’s will, teamwork) rather than one’s own ability. For instance, if someone compliments an Uzbek speaker on an accomplishment, a typical reply might be *“Xudo nasib qildi”* – meaning “God granted it,” implying that the outcome was due to blessings or fate rather than personal merit. Another illustrative example comes from an intercultural study: when an Iranian person told an Uzbek speaker *“You spoke very beautifully,”* the Uzbek responded *“Rahmat, harakat qildik,”* which translates to “Thank you, we tried.”. This response exemplifies Uzbek modesty; by saying “we tried,” the speaker downplays the success of the speech (implying *we made an effort, whether it was truly successful or not*) and uses the inclusive “we” instead of “I,” thereby avoiding singular self-credit. Only someone familiar with Uzbek culture recognizes this as humility, as a literal interpretation might wrongly suggest self-congratulation. These examples show that in Uzbek discourse, **self-effacement** is the default polite response to praise: rather than explicitly accepting the accolade, the speaker diverts or diminishes it.

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Despite these differences, there are also **commonalities** in how English and Uzbek speakers handle modesty. In both languages, outright bragging tends to be viewed negatively, and conversational participants expect a certain degree of humility as part of polite interaction. For example, both English and Uzbek speakers often respond to compliments with *gratitude plus a downplaying remark*. An English speaker might say, “*Thanks, but it was nothing really,*” while an Uzbek speaker might say, “*Rahmat, arzimaydi,*” meaning “Thank you, it’s not worth (praise)” (essentially “no need to thank me, it was nothing”). Each of these responses follows the modesty norm of **minimizing one’s contribution or qualities**. Furthermore, neither culture favors *excessive* modesty to the point of awkwardness. In English, if a person denies a compliment too strenuously, it might be taken as insincerity or fishing for more praise. Likewise, in Uzbek culture, humility is valued but sincerity is paramount; formulaic or exaggerated modesty (such as ritual refusals that feel hollow) can be recognized as mere etiquette. Therefore, successful modesty strategies in both languages strike a balance: **acknowledging the social act of compliment or praise, but modestly reframing the speaker’s own role**. The key difference lies in how far this reframing goes – with Uzbek discourse often carrying it further due to cultural norms that idealize humility and communal credit more strongly than typical Western English norms do .

Syntactic and Lexical Markers of Modesty

Modesty in discourse is signaled through various **syntactic constructions and lexical choices** that communicate hesitation, self-deprecation, or transfer of credit. In English, one common syntactic marker of modesty is the use of **downtoners** and hedging structures. Phrases like “just” and “only” are frequently inserted to minimize the impression of magnitude in a statement. For example, instead of saying “I solved the problem,” a modest speaker might say “*I just tried to solve the problem*” or “*I only did what anyone would do.*” The inclusion of *just/only* subtly downplays the speaker’s agency or skill. Similarly, English speakers often use **modal verbs** and tentative language to avoid sounding too certain or proud. Using modals such as “*could,*” “*might,*” “*would*” and phrases like “I think,” “I guess,” or “perhaps” softens assertions and makes one’s statements appear more humble or cautious . **Tag questions** can also serve as a modesty marker; for instance, saying “*It turned out pretty well, didn’t it?*” seeks confirmation and implies the speaker isn’t arrogantly assuming their work is great. Linguists have observed that women in English-speaking contexts, in particular,

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tend to use more tags and hedges – a pattern that has been interpreted as reflecting social conditioning to appear modest and avoid assertive boasts . Lexically, English has a wealth of polite disclaimers that introduce modest statements. Phrases like “*I don’t mean to brag, but...*”, “*Not to toot my own horn, but...*”, or “*I’m not an expert, however...*” signal that the speaker is aware of modesty norms and is deliberately trying not to violate them . Even when a speaker must mention their strengths or achievements, these prefatory phrases and a humble tone help maintain an appearance of modesty.

Uzbek employs its own set of linguistic devices to convey modesty, many of which are deeply embedded in cultural etiquette. A prominent strategy is the use of **inclusive or impersonal constructions** to avoid singular self-reference. As noted, an Uzbek speaker might use “we” (inclusive first person plural) when talking about something they did alone, e.g., “*harakat qildik*” (“we made an effort”) instead of “*harakat qildim*” (“I made an effort”), to reduce self-focus . This plural self-reference is a form of collective modesty, sharing any credit with others or simply not highlighting oneself. Another syntactic strategy is using **passive or agentless expressions**. For instance, rather than saying “I built this house,” an Uzbek speaker could say “*Uy qurildi*” (“The house was built”), leaving the agent implicit and thereby not overtly claiming credit. Lexically, Uzbek has specific polite expressions that embody modesty and humility. The word “*kamtar*” means modest or humble, and one might describe oneself in diminutive terms (e.g., “*kamtarona fikr*” meaning “a humble opinion”) when offering a viewpoint. In everyday interactions, a very common modesty strategy is coupling **thanks with deflection**. Upon receiving congratulations or compliments, Uzbek speakers often say “*Rahmat*” (thank you) followed by a humbling phrase. For example, if told “*Your dress is gorgeous!*”, an Uzbek reply might be “*Bo’ladi*” – literally “It is okay” – to downplay the compliment’s object as nothing extraordinary. Similarly, after being thanked for help, one might respond “*Arzimaydi*,” which translates to “It’s not worth (mentioning),” analogous to “You’re welcome” but literally minimizing the deed’s value . Additional lexical markers include offering **blessings or wishes to the complimenter** in return, which is a distinctive feature of Uzbek politeness. Instead of focusing on themselves, Uzbek speakers might say “*Sizga bundan ham yaxshilari nasib qilsin*,” meaning “May even better things be granted to you,” when praised for something they have (such as a nice home) . This response both

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thanks the interlocutor and re-directs the positive focus onto the interlocutor's future, embodying modesty by not dwelling on one's own possession or achievement. The use of religious or fateful attributions (e.g., invoking God's will) is another lexical means to deflect personal credit, consistent with the cultural norm of humility. In summary, Uzbek modesty is signaled through **inclusive pronouns, understaters, passive constructions, ritual polite phrases, and deferential blessings**, all of which serve to reduce the appearance of self-centeredness in speech. These markers in both languages clearly indicate to interlocutors that the speaker intends a modest stance, thus fulfilling the cooperative expectation of politeness in discourse.

Modesty in Gender and Cultural Contexts

Expressions of modesty in discourse are not only a matter of individual choice or grammar; they are also shaped by **gender norms and cultural values**. Sociolinguistic research has long noted that gender can influence how and when speakers employ modesty strategies. In many English-speaking contexts, women are traditionally expected to be more modest in their communication. This expectation stems from broader societal norms that have linked femininity with traits like humility, gentleness, and politeness (often described in earlier literature as “women's language” norms). Empirical studies (e.g., Holmes 1988) have shown that women tend to reject or mitigate compliments more frequently than men, and use more self-deprecating humor or apologies, which aligns with the modesty maxim. Men, on the other hand, may feel slightly more license to accept praise or assert their abilities openly, as masculinity has often been associated with confidence and pride. **However, these are tendencies rather than absolute rules** – context matters greatly. As Mills (2003) and others have argued, simplistic generalizations can be misleading; men can also be very modest, and women can be assertive, depending on situational demands and personal style. That said, gender socialization plays a role. For instance, English-speaking girls might be subtly encouraged with phrases like “Don't brag” or “Be humble,” whereas boys might be more frequently praised for being “competitive” or “the best,” potentially affecting how they learn to present themselves linguistically. Such social conditioning is reflected in adult speech: one study notes that female speakers often employ more mitigating phrases and tag questions in mixed-gender discussions, possibly to avoid seeming domineering, which can be interpreted as a form of gendered modesty. Meanwhile, male speakers in Western contexts may worry less about adding

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these qualifiers, especially in competitive or task-oriented dialogues, though they still observe basic politeness. The result is that perceptions of what counts as “modest enough” speech can differ: a statement considered appropriately humble when uttered by a man might, if uttered by a woman, be perceived differently due to gender stereotypes, and vice versa . Scholars of language and gender emphasize that these differences are culturally constructed and are gradually changing, but they remain a relevant factor in discourse analysis.

In Uzbek culture, **gender roles and modesty** are also intertwined, reinforced by the cultural and sometimes religious expectations of behavior. Uzbekistan’s society places a high value on **adab** – courteous comportment – for both men and women, but often in gender-specific ways. Women in traditional Uzbek contexts are expected to embody modesty not just in speech, but also in dress and demeanor. This expectation translates into conversational behavior: women are often more self-effacing and deferential in mixed company, aligning with ideals of being bashful or *hayoli* (shy/modest). A sociolinguistic observation by Shodieva (2024) indicates that both Uzbek men and women adhere to the modesty maxim, but the **nuances differ** . Uzbek women might demonstrate modesty by emphasizing collective effort and showing deference – for example, a woman might say “*Men faqat o’z hissamni qo’shdim*” (“I only added my part”) when acknowledged for a success, thereby stressing that she was just one contributor among others . This reflects an expectation for women to be humble and not overly promote themselves. Uzbek men also practice modesty, especially in scenarios that call for it (like showing respect to elders or receiving compliments from peers). However, traditional masculine norms may allow men to exhibit a bit more open pride in certain achievements, particularly those that benefit their family or community, without being seen as immodest. The research suggests that **male modesty in Uzbek** is often achieved through subtle downplaying rather than overt self-denial . For instance, a man might acknowledge an accomplishment but phrase it in a way that implies it was not solely his doing or not a big deal, thus maintaining a humble posture. Culturally, direct self-praise is frowned upon for both genders, but the **social penalty** for a woman appearing boastful might be higher than for a man, given conservative expectations of female modesty. Conversely, a man who is too modest might sometimes be prodded to “have more confidence,” though outright arrogance would still be criticized. Hence, gender norms modulate the expression of

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modesty: **both English and Uzbek show that women's discourse tends to contain more overt modesty markers** (as society often imposes a stronger modesty requirement on women), while men's use of modesty can be more situational. It's important to note that these patterns are influenced by changing cultural attitudes – for example, younger generations and urban professionals in Uzbekistan might adopt a more egalitarian communication style, and Western cultures have increasingly encouraged women to speak confidently about their achievements. Nonetheless, in current discourse practices, gender remains a salient factor in how modesty is performed and interpreted .

Culture is the broader canvas on which these gender differences play out. The English and Uzbek modesty norms discussed are embedded in each culture's values. Anglo-American culture (broadly speaking) promotes **individualism** and **personal achievement**, but it also has a long-standing ethic of fairness and anti-boastfulness – encapsulated in idioms like “Don't toot your own horn too loudly.” Uzbek culture, influenced by Central Asian and Islamic traditions, emphasizes **community, hospitality, and respect**. Being boastful not only reflects poorly on an individual in Uzbek society but can also be seen as disrespectful to others. Modesty is therefore a core part of what it means to be polite and well-mannered in Uzbek. Cross-cultural studies illustrate these contrasts: for example, direct responses to compliments in Western English contexts (like “Thank you, I really love it” when someone is praised for their home) may sound overly self-satisfied to an Uzbek ear, while the indirect, effusive Uzbek responses (like extending blessings or insisting “it's all thanks to God”) might strike a Western English speaker as excessive or oddly sidestepping the compliment . Misunderstandings can arise if one is not attuned to these cultural discourse conventions. Thus, the role of culture is paramount – it defines the **social meaning** of modesty. What counts as modest behavior is learned from a community's social norms. English and Uzbek cultures both value the concept, but calibrate it differently. Recognizing this helps interlocutors navigate intercultural communication more effectively, ensuring that intended politeness is correctly perceived as such by people from different backgrounds.

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Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of modesty in English and Uzbek discourse reveals both universal principles and culture-specific realizations of this politeness strategy. Modesty, defined pragmatically as minimizing self-praise and adopting a humble communicative stance, emerges as a crucial component of polite interaction in both languages. The comparative examination showed that **English speakers** typically manifest modesty through linguistic devices like hedges, qualifiers, and deflection of credit, maintaining a polite balance between confidence and humility. **Uzbek speakers**, guided by a cultural ethos that highly values humility and respect, often take modesty a step further – using collective pronouns, religious or deferential phrases, and elaborate courteous responses to ensure they do not appear self-aggrandizing. Despite these differences, the core function of modesty in discourse is consistent across both languages: it works to **protect face and foster harmonious social relations** by signaling that the speaker respects others and does not wish to elevate themselves at others' expense.

Key findings from this study include the observation that **gender dynamics and cultural context critically shape modesty norms**. Women in both English and Uzbek settings are generally expected (and often observed) to employ more modesty strategies than men, reflecting traditional gender socialization, although these expectations are gradually evolving. Culturally, what counts as polite modesty in one community may be interpreted differently in another – a reminder that pragmatic norms are not universal. For example, an Uzbek turn of phrase intended to be modest might be misconstrued as pride by an outsider if taken literally, and vice versa. Such nuances underscore the importance of culturally informed discourse analysis. Understanding modesty in a bilingual or cross-cultural context is not merely an academic exercise; it has practical implications for intercultural communication, second language learning, and even international business or diplomacy. When communicators are aware of the modesty conventions in their own and others' languages, they are better equipped to avoid miscommunication and to show respect in ways that will be appreciated by their conversation partners.

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Broadly, this study highlights that **modesty in discourse is a reflection of deeper social values**. In English, the tug-of-war between individualism and politeness yields a modesty that is present but moderate; in Uzbek, communal values and etiquette elevate modesty to a central communicative principle. Both approaches have their logic and beauty in context. Future research could fruitfully expand on this comparison by examining modesty in other communicative domains (such as social media or public speeches) and in other languages, to see how digital communication or formal rhetoric might influence modesty norms. Additionally, exploring how younger generations in English and Uzbek settings uphold or challenge traditional modesty norms could provide insight into the evolution of politeness strategies amid globalization and changing gender roles. By continuing to investigate modesty across languages, scholars and practitioners can gain a richer understanding of how humans everywhere use language to negotiate identity, display respect, and connect with one another on respectful terms. Ultimately, the modest words we choose in conversation carry significant weight in building rapport and mutual respect – a testament to the power of small linguistic choices in the fabric of social life.

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