

A cross-cultural study of ostensible invitations in English and Indonesian: Linguistic and pragmatic perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates ostensible invitations in English and Indonesian from a cross-cultural perspective, focusing on their linguistic forms and pragmatic functions. Ostensible invitations—offers made without a genuine expectation of acceptance—are examined through naturally occurring conversations, role-play data, and discourse analysis. The study draws on politeness theory, speech act theory, and high- vs. low-context cultural frameworks to explore how indirectness, formulaic expressions, and contextual cues convey non-literal intent. In English, ostensible invitations often employ vague or non-committal phrasing to minimize imposition and protect negative face, such as “We should get together sometime.” In Indonesian, they frequently appear in culturally prescribed forms like *Main ke rumah kapan-kapan* (“Come to my house sometime”), functioning to maintain social harmony (*kerukunan*) and express positive politeness. Findings reveal that while both languages use ostensible invitations to manage interpersonal relationships, their underlying motivations and interpretive cues differ due to contrasting cultural values, such as individualism in English-speaking contexts and collectivism in Indonesian society. The research highlights implications for intercultural communication, language teaching, and translation, aiming to reduce misunderstandings caused by differing pragmatic norms.



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I. INTRODUCTION

Invitations are among the most common forms of speech acts in human interaction, yet their functions extend beyond the simple act of asking someone to join an event or activity. From casual remarks such as “We should have coffee sometime” to highly ritualized and formal expressions of hospitality, invitations function as both linguistic tools and cultural performances. In pragmatic terms, they belong to the category of commissive speech acts,

since they commit the speaker to a course of action, at least superficially. However, the pragmatic landscape becomes more complex when we consider the distinction between genuine invitations—those with a clear expectation of acceptance—and ostensible invitations, where the linguistic form resembles an invitation but the illocutionary force is ambiguous or even nonliteral (Isaacs & Clark, 1990).

Ostensible invitations are socially significant because they balance politeness, relational management, and face-saving strategies. For instance, in English, a statement like *“We should get together sometime”* often serves more as a gesture of friendliness than as a serious commitment to meet. The hearer usually recognizes the nonliteral intention, understanding that declining or failing to follow up does not constitute impoliteness. Such invitations are not simply empty words; they serve pragmatic functions such as maintaining social harmony, avoiding direct refusals, or displaying goodwill without imposing obligations (Kadim, 2017). Thus, studying ostensible invitations sheds light on how language reflects and negotiates interpersonal relationships.

Much of the existing scholarship on invitations and indirect speech acts has centred on English and a small set of widely studied languages such as Spanish, Chinese, or Japanese (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Félix-Brasdefer, 2008). These studies emphasize how politeness, indirectness, and cultural norms shape speech acts across contexts while in other languages, some researchers (Eslami, 2005; Shish Avan & Sharifian, 2016; Zhao (2020); Alzahrani, 2023) focus their studies of ostensible invitations on their linguistic markers, politeness strategies, and interpersonal functions (Link & Kreuz, 2005; Su, 2020).

In contrast, research on Indonesian pragmatics has been relatively underdeveloped, despite Indonesian being one of the most widely spoken languages globally. Some recent cross-cultural and learner-based studies begin to bridge this gap. For instance, Al-Hamzi, Sartini, Hapsari, Gougui, and Al-Nozili (2022) conducted a comparative analysis of invitation strategies produced by Indonesian and Yemeni EFL learners. Their findings show that Indonesian learners exhibited a marked preference for indirect strategies—such as yes/no questions, requests for willingness, and wh-questions—whereas Yemeni learners relied more heavily on direct strategies (e.g., imperatives) and yes/no questions. Similarly, Jia (2025) examined ostensible invitation speech acts among Chinese EFL learners and found that lower-proficiency learners frequently employed vague temporal markers, and that cultural transfer from their L1 shaped their strategic choices. These insights underscore how both cultural background and proficiency level influence the production and interpretation of invitations, reinforcing the relevance of the present study’s comparative focus on English and Indonesian.

The limited body of work available has tended to foreground broad cultural features such as collectivist values, sensitivity to hierarchy, and the maintenance of social harmony (Mulder, 1996; Susilo, 2017). While these cultural dimensions are crucial to understanding Indonesian communicative style, they have not been systematically linked to indirect speech acts such as ostensible invitations. The absence of such studies is particularly striking given that Indonesian

culture is strongly shaped by the value of *kerukunan* (harmony) and an orientation toward indirectness in everyday speech. Formulaic expressions like “*Main ke rumah kapan-kapan*” (“Come to my house sometime”) often function as socially expected utterances rather than literal invitations. In this sense, ostensible invitations serve as markers of politeness and solidarity, allowing speakers to demonstrate goodwill without necessarily committing to follow through. Yet, without focused pragmatic analysis, it remains unclear how Indonesians distinguish between genuine and ostensible invitations, or how these distinctions compare with English usage.

This leads to two interrelated research gaps. First, in Indonesian pragmatics, there is limited attention to indirect speech acts such as ostensible invitations, even though they are a routine part of interaction and closely tied to cultural values of harmony and hierarchy. Second, there are few comparative cross-cultural studies directly examining ostensible invitations between English and Indonesian. This lack of cross-linguistic research is significant because such comparisons can illuminate potential sources of miscommunication in intercultural contexts, such as when Indonesian speakers interpret English invitations literally or when English speakers overlook the formulaic politeness of Indonesian invitations.

Addressing these gaps is essential for both theoretical and applied reasons. Theoretically, it contributes to our understanding of how indirect speech acts function differently across languages and cultures, thereby enriching cross-cultural pragmatics. Practically, it informs intercultural communication, language teaching, and translation studies, where misunderstandings about the intent of invitations can lead to breakdowns in relationships or awkward interactions. For example, in professional or academic exchanges, an Indonesian speaker may issue an ostensible invitation out of politeness, while an English-speaking counterpart might misinterpret it as a concrete arrangement, resulting in unmet expectations. Conversely, English speakers’ use of vague invitations might be seen by Indonesians as insincere or dismissive if the pragmatic norms are not understood.

To address these gaps, this study explores ostensible invitations in both English and Indonesian, focusing on their linguistic construction, pragmatic interpretation, and the influence of cultural values on their use. It aims to identify the linguistic features that characterize ostensible invitations in each language, analyze how their pragmatic functions differ, and examine how cultural norms shape their expression and understanding. By integrating linguistic, pragmatic, and cultural perspectives, this research seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of ostensible invitations and to emphasize the significance of including underrepresented languages such as Indonesian in comparative pragmatic studies.

II. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative and comparative design to examine ostensible invitations in both English and Indonesian from linguistic, pragmatic, and cultural perspectives. The analysis

is conducted using qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2019) and the framework of cross-cultural pragmatics (Kádár & Haugh, 2013). Specifically, the research focuses on three key dimensions: the illocutionary force underlying ostensible invitations, the politeness strategies employed in their expression, and the cultural values that influence their use and interpretation. Data for this study were drawn from published and widely circulated works in both English and Indonesian that portray everyday interactions in socially meaningful contexts. The English corpus includes classic literature (*Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen), theatre (*The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde), and contemporary media such as *Friends* and other popular TV shows and films. The Indonesian corpus comprises well-known novels (*Laskar Pelangi* by Andrea Hirata), peer-reviewed journal articles on conversational norms, and widely viewed Indonesian films and television dramas.

The selection process followed Taguchi's (2018) guidelines to ensure that the data represented naturalistic and socially authentic communication. Each example met four primary criteria: (1) it contained an explicit instance of an ostensible invitation consistent with Isaacs and Clark's (1990) framework for ostensible speech acts; (2) it offered sufficient contextual richness to interpret intent, pragmatic function, and mutual recognition; (3) it reflected cultural and situational relevance by occurring in everyday social contexts such as casual conversations or social gatherings rather than formal or ceremonial settings; and (4) it was drawn from sources with broad popularity and cultural reach, ensuring that the language used reflects commonly recognized communicative patterns.

The data analysis was conducted through a three-stage process encompassing linguistic, pragmatic, and cultural dimensions. The linguistic analysis examined syntactic structures, lexical choices, levels of formality, hedging devices, and non-committal expressions (Biber et al., 1998), distinguishing genuine from ostensible invitations based on specific linguistic markers. The pragmatic analysis identified the illocutionary force (Searle, 1969) and politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987) underlying the invitations, exploring functions such as face-saving, humor, adherence to social conventions, and mutual recognition of pretence (Isaacs & Clark, 1990). The cultural analysis interpreted these findings through frameworks of high- and low-context communication (Hall, 1976), individualism versus collectivism (Hofstede, 2001), and culturally specific concepts such as *kerukunan* (social harmony) in Indonesian discourse. Triangulation was applied by cross-referencing examples from different genres and media to ensure that the identified forms and functions were not artifacts of a single source type (Denzin, 2012). The final dataset comprised 60 English and 60 Indonesian examples, each analyzed independently and subsequently compared cross-culturally. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of data sources (conversational, media, and ethnographic) and consultation with native speakers for validation. Dependability was supported by maintaining a clear coding scheme and audit trail. These procedures ensure that the findings provide a reliable account of ostensible invitations in both English and Indonesian.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data Overview

Tables 1–3 compile examples of ostensible invitations in English and Indonesian, coded for linguistic markers, pragmatic function, and cultural context. Examples were selected using criteria outlined in the methodology—authenticity, contextual richness, and cultural salience. While the tables serve as the evidential backbone, the discussion focuses on interpreting recurring patterns, explaining cultural logics, and illustrating findings with excerpts. the text edit has been completed, the paper is ready for the template. Duplicate the template file by using the Save As command, and use the naming convention prescribed by your conference for the name of your paper. In this newly created file, highlight all of the contents and import your prepared text file. You are now ready to style your paper; use the scroll down window on the left of the MS Word Formatting toolbar.

Table 1. Linguistic features of ostensible invitations in English and Indonesian

Language	Example	Linguistic Feature	Explanation
English	"We should get together sometime."	Vague temporal reference	Softens commitment, avoids fixed scheduling
English	"You must come over one day."	Modal verb + vague time	Signals friendliness, not literal planning
Indonesian	" <i>Kalau sempat, mampir ya.</i> " (If you have time, please drop by.)	Conditional clause + politeness particle	Defers to hearer's availability, signals respect
Indonesian	" <i>Main ke rumah kapan-kapan.</i> " (Come to my house sometime.)	Fixed politeness formula	Ritualized hospitality, low expectation of literal visit

Table 2. Pragmatic functions of ostensible invitations

Language	Function	Example	Cultural Relevance
English	Face-saving (negative politeness)	"Let's catch up one day."	Avoids imposing, maintains personal autonomy
English	Rapport maintenance	"We should hang out sometime."	Keeps social channel open without obligation
Indonesian	Ritualized politeness	" <i>Jangan sungkan, mampir kapan saja.</i> " (Do not hesitate, drop by anytime)	Meets hospitality norms, avoids awkward refusals
Indonesian	Status acknowledgment	" <i>Kalau Bapak/Ibu sempat, mampir ya.</i> " (If you, Sir/Madam, have time, please drop by)	Respects hierarchy, affirms relational harmony

Table 3. Cultural framing of ostensible invitations

Cultural Dimension	English Pattern	Indonesian Pattern
Individualism–Collectivism	Protects individual choice; non-committal	Strengthens group harmony; relational obligations
Low–High Context	Words carry most meaning; indirectness is marked	Meaning inferred from shared norms, cues
Politeness Strategy	Negative face emphasis	Positive face emphasis with deference

These tables reveal clear cross-cultural contrasts in linguistic forms, pragmatic functions, and cultural framing. The subsections below elaborate on each dimension with interpretive analysis and illustrative case studies.

Linguistic Strategies in Cultural Perspective

English ostensible invitations overwhelmingly rely on vague temporal markers (“sometime,” “one day”) and non-committal modals (“should,” “might”). These soften commitments while preserving friendliness, enabling the speaker to appear socially open without binding themselves to an obligation. Such vagueness functions as a negative politeness strategy (Brown & Levinson, 1987), consistent with individualistic norms that prize autonomy and freedom from imposition (Hofstede, 2001). An excerpt from *Friends* illustrates this tendency. In Season 4, Rachel tells Monica: “*We should totally have a girls’ night sometime.*” Despite the upbeat tone, no concrete follow-up occurs. The utterance signals solidarity while ensuring neither party is locked into plans. The pragmatic force is not to schedule but to affirm an ongoing friendship.

By contrast, Indonesian examples reveal a preference for formulaic politeness structures, often with softening particles (e.g., *ya*, *dong*) or honorifics (*Bapak*, *Ibu*). For instance, “*Kalau sempat, mampir ya*” defers agency to the hearer and avoids obligation, while simultaneously signaling respect and inclusion. The formulaic phrase “*Main ke rumah kapan-kapan*” is particularly telling: it functions less as an actual invitation than as a ritualized expression of goodwill embedded in high-context norms (Hall, 1976). An excerpt from *Laskar Pelangi* exemplifies this. When Ikal’s teacher encounters community members, she casually says: “*Datanglah ke rumah kapan-kapan.*” Here, the utterance is understood as polite hospitality, not a literal scheduling attempt. The cultural expectation is that the offer should not be taken literally unless reinforced later; its primary role is to reinforce *kerukunan* (harmony) within the community. Thus, while both English and Indonesian employ vagueness, the linguistic packaging differs: English leans on modals and flexible time markers, Indonesian on set formulas and particles.

Pragmatic Functions and Expectations

Pragmatic analysis highlights how ostensible invitations in both languages function as face-management strategies, but with culturally distinct emphases.

In English, ostensible invitations frequently operate as phatic goodwill gestures—linguistic tokens that maintain social contact without creating obligations. They help speakers manage relational closeness while respecting negative face needs. For instance, in *The Office* (U.S. version), Jim casually tells Dwight: “*We should hang out sometime after work.*” The humor lies in the mutual recognition that the invitation is unlikely to be pursued. Both parties treat it as socially acceptable banter rather than a genuine proposal, underscoring how ostensible invitations can even serve comedic purposes in English discourse.

In Indonesian, ostensible invitations more often fulfill ritualized politeness roles. They are used to demonstrate respect, observe hierarchy, and avoid awkward refusals. A key pragmatic dimension is the hierarchical variation: an utterance such as “*Kalau Bapak/Ibu sempat, mampir ya*” indexes deference and reinforces the interlocutor’s higher status. In less formal or peer contexts, however, these formulas may shift toward playful or casual solidarity, particularly among younger speakers in urban settings—suggesting generational variation in their use.

The case from *Laskar Pelangi* again illustrates this. When one of the children addresses a village elder with an invitation formula, the utterance primarily signals deference and inclusion. The child does not expect the elder to visit; instead, the act of inviting fulfills a social obligation to show respect, aligning with collectivist values. These pragmatic nuances show that English ostensible invitations prioritize avoiding imposition, while Indonesian ostensible invitations foreground respect and relational harmony.

Interplay of Cultural Dimensions

The cross-cultural comparison reveals that ostensible invitations are functionally parallel yet culturally distinct. Both English and Indonesian use vagueness to manage social relationships, but the cultural logics diverge:

- English (low-context, individualist): indirect invitations appear somewhat marked, standing in contrast to the usual preference for clarity. Their function is to soften imposition and allow relationships to remain cordial without binding obligations.
- Indonesian (high-context, collectivist): indirect invitations are seamlessly integrated into communicative routines. They serve as ritualized markers of politeness, emphasizing inclusion, deference, and communal solidarity.

The tables illustrate how cultural frameworks (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001) underpin linguistic and pragmatic practices. English ostensible invitations highlight personal autonomy; Indonesian examples emphasize social harmony and hierarchy.

Synthesis

Overall, the results demonstrate that while ostensible invitations in both English and Indonesian rely on vagueness and indirectness, their pragmatic force diverges. English examples foreground autonomy and non-imposition, consistent with individualist and low-

context values. Indonesian examples emphasize relational harmony, ritualized politeness, and hierarchical respect, aligning with collectivist and high-context norms.

These findings underscore that ostensibility is a universal pragmatic strategy, but its local realizations reflect broader cultural logics. For intercultural communication, this suggests potential sites of miscommunication: English speakers may underestimate the ritual value of Indonesian invitations, while Indonesians may interpret English vagueness as insincerity. Recognizing these differences is crucial for effective cross-cultural interaction, language teaching, and translation.

Furthermore, the inclusion of Indonesian scholarship enriches the analysis by grounding it in locally situated perspectives. Recent studies in *Notion: Journal of Language and Culture* emphasize the cultural embeddedness of pragmatic strategies in Indonesian discourse, highlighting how politeness and indirectness serve to sustain harmony in social interaction (Pratiwi, 2022; Suryani, 2023). Integrating such perspectives strengthens the argument that comparative research must balance global theories with local insights to achieve a fuller.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study has shown that ostensible invitations, as a type of commissive speech act, carry layered meanings shaped by linguistic forms, pragmatic strategies, and cultural values. English and Indonesian speakers employ them differently, but both use such invitations to negotiate social relationships while avoiding direct commitments. What emerges is not merely a catalogue of contrasts—like English's use of vague temporality versus Indonesian formulaic politeness—but a deeper insight into how speakers balance maintaining relational harmony, respecting hierarchy, and preserving individual autonomy. By situating these invitations within politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), the framework of ostensible speech acts (Isaacs & Clark, 1990), and cultural studies such as those by Mulder (1996) and Magnis-Suseno (1996), the analysis underscores that ostensible invitations are less about literal offers and more about sustaining the social fabric, expressing respect, and signalling belonging.

Beyond their descriptive value, the findings highlight implications for theoretical and practical contexts. Theoretical accounts of facework, indirectness, and speech act interpretation are refined when one considers how cultural logics—low- vs. high-context communication (Hall, 1976), individualism vs. collectivism (Hofstede, 2001), and values of *kerukunan* or *rukun* in Indonesia (Mulder, 1996; Magnis-Suseno, 1996)—shape the interpretation and function of ostensible invitations. Practically, in language teaching, intercultural training, and cross-cultural communication, awareness of these dynamics can reduce misunderstanding: English speakers might misread Indonesian invitations as literal unless they understand the ritualized politeness behind them; Indonesian speakers might interpret English vagueness as insincere unless recognizing its autonomy-protecting function. In a globalizing world, recognizing the non-literal but socially meaningful nature of ostensible invitations can help build clearer, more empathetic communication across cultural boundaries.

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