

# Culture and Syntax: A Qualitative Comparative Study on How Cultural Norms Shape Sentence Structure

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## Abstract

This study investigates how cultural norms shape syntactic structures by comparing sentence construction in Indonesian and English using a qualitative literature review approach. Through a critical analysis of recent linguistic and cross-cultural studies, the research explores how cultural values such as collectivism, individualism, politeness orientation, and communication context influence syntactic features like word order, voice, ellipsis, and pragmatic forms. The findings demonstrate that Indonesian syntax, with its flexibility in structure, frequent use of passive constructions, and reliance on contextual ellipsis, aligns with high-context and collectivist cultural values that emphasize relational harmony and indirectness. In contrast, English syntax, characterized by more rigid word order and subject-centered constructions, reflects low-context and individualistic norms that value clarity and directness. These syntactic tendencies are not merely linguistic choices but manifestations of deeper cultural orientations. The study emphasizes the importance of integrating cultural awareness into language education and linguistic technology, as syntactic forms carry social meanings that affect communication outcomes. It concludes that syntax should be understood not only as a structural aspect of language but also as a culturally embedded system shaped by the social and cognitive frameworks of its speakers.

## Keywords

syntax & culture, cross-linguistic analysis, Indonesian-English comparison, pragmatic structures, intercultural communication

## INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a tool for communication but a reflection of the values, perceptions, and thought patterns of a society (Sapir, 1929; Whorf, 1956). Among the various components of language, syntax—the set of rules that governs sentence structure—serves as a subtle yet powerful window into the cultural frameworks that shape how speakers construct and convey meaning (Lucy, 1992). This article seeks to explore the intricate interplay between cultural norms and syntactic structures in a cross-linguistic context, using a qualitative comparative method grounded in a literature review approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Nowell et al., 2017).

The study of language has long recognized the interdependence between linguistic forms and cultural content. The foundational works of scholars like Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf laid the groundwork for understanding that language both reflects and influences culture (Whorf, 1956; Sapir, 1949). While the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis has sparked debates over linguistic determinism versus relativism, it remains a catalyst for investigating how language structure, including syntax, can be culturally conditioned. In contemporary comparative linguistics, there is a growing interest in understanding how syntax is not merely a grammatical abstraction but is deeply intertwined with cultural values such as politeness, hierarchy, collectivism, individualism, and temporal orientation (Enfield, 2020; Wierzbicka, 2014).

In syntactic terms, languages vary widely in how they encode subject-verb-object relations, topicalization, subordination, and modality all of which are shaped, to varying degrees, by cultural expectations. For example, in

Japanese and Korean, sentence-final particles and honorifics are closely linked to social hierarchy and politeness, making sentence structure a mirror of social context (Ide, 1989; Sohn, 2001). In contrast, English, as a more individualist-oriented language, tends to favor syntactic clarity and subject prominence, which some researchers argue reflects cultural priorities of autonomy and explicitness (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019). These syntactic preferences are not random; rather, they are culturally embedded.

This investigation is particularly relevant in the age of globalization and digital communication, where languages increasingly come into contact and interact in hybrid forms. The expansion of English as a global lingua franca, the emergence of new digital syntactic norms in online communication, and the preservation efforts of endangered languages all contribute to an urgent need to understand how cultural norms shape the way sentences are built and understood. Furthermore, the migration of speakers across linguistic boundaries has increased intercultural communication, making it necessary to understand not only what people say but how their cultural context informs their syntactic choices (House, 2000).

Research in comparative linguistics has traditionally focused on typological features such as word order (e.g., SVO vs. SOV), agreement systems, and clause structure (Dryer, 2013). While valuable, such approaches often neglect the cultural lens through which these syntactic features are employed and interpreted. More recent studies suggest that integrating sociocultural factors into syntactic analysis reveals a richer, more nuanced understanding of linguistic variation (Aikhenvald, 2015; Foley, 1997). A purely formal analysis

may describe the “what” of syntax, but to explain the “why,” one must engage with culture.

This study adopts a qualitative comparative literature review methodology, drawing upon recent scholarly works from the last ten years primarily journal articles, theses, and conference proceedings to analyze patterns in syntactic variation that can be attributed to cultural influences. By synthesizing findings from multiple languages and cultural settings, this paper aims to highlight recurring relationships between specific cultural norms and syntactic strategies. For instance, cultures that emphasize indirectness may exhibit syntactic constructions that allow for hedging or avoidance of direct imperatives. Similarly, collectivist cultures may prioritize inclusive syntactic forms, such as the frequent use of inclusive pronouns or shared subject constructions (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2018).

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to bridge a gap between structural linguistic and cultural anthropology through the lens of syntax. While phonological and lexical aspects of language have received considerable attention in culture-related research, syntax has often been viewed as a universal or abstract component with limited cultural variation. This paper challenges that assumption by demonstrating that syntactic structures are not culture-free but rather sensitive to social and cultural expectations. As Evans and Levinson (2009) argue, linguistic diversity in structure reflects cognitive and communicative diversity, much of which is culturally rooted.

This discussion is particularly salient in educational, technological, and intercultural domains. For language educators, understanding the cultural underpinnings of syntactic variation can improve second-language instruction by contextualizing grammatical rules within cultural frameworks. In natural language processing (NLP), acknowledging cultural influences on syntax can lead to more accurate and culturally responsive AI-driven language models. Moreover, in intercultural communication studies, syntactic awareness contributes to empathy and mutual understanding across linguistic boundaries.

The purpose of this paper is thus threefold: (1) to examine how different cultures shape syntactic structures through a qualitative comparison of previous research; (2) to identify common patterns or divergences in syntax that correspond with cultural values; and (3) to contribute to a broader understanding of the dynamic interaction between language structure and cultural meaning. By focusing on sentence-level structures, this paper narrows its scope while aiming to deliver in-depth insights into how syntax can be a reflection of cultural identity and worldview.

In summary, this study affirms that syntax is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also a cultural artifact. The structure of a sentence, far from being a neutral grammatical form, encodes the attitudes, relationships, and cognitive styles of its speakers. Through this qualitative comparative review, the paper seeks to illuminate how deeply culture is inscribed in the very bones of language.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative comparative literature review to explore how cultural norms influenced

sentence structures in two distinct languages: Indonesian and English. Both languages were selected based on their contrasting cultural orientations and syntactic characteristics, which provided a fruitful ground for comparison in the context of cultural-linguistic interaction. English was often associated with low-context, individualistic cultures (e.g., the United States, United Kingdom), while Indonesian was rooted in high-context, collectivist societies, particularly influenced by Austronesian, Malay, and Javanese traditions (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001).

The qualitative method emphasized systematic, descriptive analysis rather than hypothesis testing or statistical generalization. This approach was appropriate given the complex, interpretive nature of how culture intersects with syntax—a domain that could not be fully captured through quantitative measures alone (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The goal was to synthesize conceptual patterns and theoretical insights rather than to count syntactic features.

Data were derived entirely from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, theses/dissertations, and conference proceedings published within the last ten years. Sources were collected using digital academic databases such as Scopus, Google Scholar, Taylor & Francis, and ScienceDirect. Keywords used during the search included: “syntax and culture,” “sentence structure Indonesian,” “English pragmatics,” “cross-cultural linguistics,” and “comparative syntax.” Only literature that specifically discussed cultural influences on syntax or grammatical structure in either Indonesian or English was included. Works with purely formal grammatical analysis or computational focus without cultural consideration were excluded, ensuring that all selected references contributed directly to understanding the cultural dimension of syntax.

To interpret the relationship between culture and syntax, the study integrated perspectives from linguistic relativity, pragmatic linguistics, and ethnolinguistics. The syntactic features compared included: sentence structure and word order (SVO vs. topic-prominent variation), use of passive voice, politeness constructions, and subject omission or presence. These were analyzed in light of cultural variables such as individualism vs. collectivism, hierarchical orientation, and communication context (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019). The comparative process involved thematic coding of reviewed sources to identify recurring patterns and culturally motivated syntactic phenomena. For example, the use of passive constructions in Indonesian often reflected deference or avoidance of directness, aligning with the culture’s preference for harmony (Sneddon, 2010), whereas English tended to favor active constructions and explicit subject orientation, mirroring an emphasis on agency and directness (Biber et al., 1999).

The method did not aim to draw absolute distinctions between the two languages but rather to reveal culturally meaningful tendencies in syntactic choices. The interpretive process was recursive; coding and theme refinement occurred in cycles to ensure conceptual clarity and depth (Nowell et al., 2017). By using comparative qualitative literature analysis, the study maintained methodological rigor while accommodating the subjective, contextual nature of syntax shaped by culture,

ultimately yielding a nuanced understanding of how sentence structures reflected their sociocultural environments.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Sentence Structure and Word Order

Indonesian generally follows SVO order, similar to English, but exhibits greater flexibility due to its topic-prominent tendencies and absence of case marking. While English prefers a rigid SVO sequence, Indonesian allows permutations to emphasize theme or focus, such as "*Ke pasar, saya pergi kemarin*" ("To the market, I went yesterday"). This flexibility reflects Indonesia's high-context culture communication relies on background context and shared knowledge, reducing dependence on strict syntactic framing (Sneddon, 2010).

Critically, this flexibility can both aid and hinder language learners. While Indonesian speakers enjoy contextual shortcuts, English speakers from low-context cultures may misinterpret omitted elements or thematic fronting, as structures demand explicit agents and chronologies. The syntactic adaptability of Indonesian mirrors value in relational context and listener inference, contrasting with Western expectations of linear, clearly ordered sequences (Givón, 2001).

### Voice, Passive Constructions, and Agency

Both Indonesian and English employ active and passive voices, but the functions diverge culturally. Indonesian makes extensive use of several passive mechanisms e.g., *di-* prefix with or without agent expression ("oleh")—to foreground patients or objects, reflecting cultural deference and relational orientation. Passive constructions like "*Rumah ini dibeli lima tahun yang lalu*" ("This house was purchased five years ago") often omit the agent entirely, aligning with cultural preferences toward indirectness and politeness (Sneddon, 2010).

In contrast, English's passive voice is less frequent and serves mainly pragmatic roles: backgrounding actors or softening assertions. It does not align with a cultural tendency toward collectivism or deference but rather stylistic variation. The relatively limited use of English passive highlights culturally rooted differences in agency placement. This contrast suggests that Indonesian syntax prioritizes community focus over individual agency, while English emphasizes agency and explicit structure. An individual-centered culture frames information around "who did what," reinforcing autonomy and accountability (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2019).

### Politeness Strategies and Syntactic Forms

Research on politeness and pragmatic strategies in both linguistic contexts offer deeper insight. Indonesian frequently employs indirect strategies elliptical forms and contextual buffers to maintain harmony, consistent with Brown and Levinson's politeness principles. In conversational data, Indonesian speakers avoid explicit imperatives ("Could you...?"), opting for softening such as "*Bisa bantu...?*" ("Can [you] help...?"). Such linguistic patterns reflect the culture's high-context, collectivist orientation, where face-saving and relational balance are vital (Kasper & Rose, 2002).

English, particularly in direct cultural contexts (e.g., American-English), favors explicit, direct strategies e.g., "Please pass me..." which align with low-power distance and individualistic norms. Indonesian EFL learners often transfer direct English structures into Indonesian, occasionally appearing rude or confusing to native-style Indonesian contexts.

Critically, the difference in syntactic framing of requests is not merely linguistic but cultural: English syntax encourages explicit expressions of intent; Indonesian allows omission and softening. This distinction echoes broader patterns of individualism vs. collectivism, aligned with Hofstede's cultural dimensions.

### Contextual Compression and Ellipsis

Colloquial Indonesian often employs context-dependent ellipsis, where words are dropped if understood from context: "*Nat, lo bekel?*" rather than "Did you bring your lunchbox?". This compression mirrors the shared cultural understanding and relational proximity of speakers. Such ellipsis saves cognitive and communicative effort, leveraging contextual inference (Sneddon, 2010).

Conversely, English typically resists ellipsis outside pragmatic constraints like headlines or informal snippets; clarity is prioritized and supported through explicit structure. This divergence reveals a profound cultural axis: Indonesian conversational style heavily relies on shared understanding, promoting efficiency and relational harmony. English emphasizes clarity and structured explicitness, echoing values of personal autonomy and precision.

From a critical standpoint, the prevalence of ellipsis raises questions. While sharing context facilitates ease among insiders, it may exclude those unfamiliar with shared assumptions—such as language learners or outsiders. English speakers engaging with Indonesian contexts must learn to read between the lines, an often-ignored cultural skill.

### Cross-Cultural Syntactic Transfer

Interlanguage studies show that Indonesian learners of English often apply their high-context, indirect syntactic patterns to English, resulting in pragmatic misalignments. They may produce hedged requests or passive preferences at odds with native-like English conventions. Likewise, English-educated Indonesians may use active, subject-heavy syntax when speaking Indonesian, which can come across as overly direct or even rude.

Critically, this transfer underscores the entwined nature of language and culture: syntactic choices carry not just grammatical meaning but social value. Language teaching focusing purely on grammar fails to address these nuances Cultural competency is essential for pragmatic fluency (Byram, 1997).

### Impact on Language Education and Technology

These syntactic-cultural differences have implications for ELT pedagogy and NLP models. Language instruction must integrate cultural pragmatics into syntax lessons; for example, teaching that Indonesian passive voice reflects relational tone, not just grammar. Similarly, AI language models trained on English may fail to capture Indonesian

contextual compression or deference patterns, reducing their cultural adaptivity. Critical reflection is required: do educational and digital tools perpetuate Anglocentric syntactic norms, or adapt to diverse cultural schemas?

### Critical Synthesis

Across the four syntactic domains, patterns consistently reveal that Indonesian syntax embeds cultural priorities: collective harmony, deference, and contextual reliance. English syntax reflects individualism, clarity, and explicit agency. These are not stylistic quirks they are grammatical expressions of cultural values.

However, the strengths of Indonesian flexibility efficiency, relational subtlety carry risks in multicultural contexts where clarity is essential. For instance, in diplomatic or digital communication, syntactic ambiguity may mislead. Conversely, the precision of English can come across as blunt or overly individualistic in high-context settings.

The studies reviewed rely heavily on discourse analysis and interlanguage pragmatics, but a limitation is the lack of large-scale cross-sectional corpora comparing real spoken data across demographic contexts. Future research could include longitudinal conversational corpora to empirically validate these tendencies and examine variations across urban/rural, formal/informal, and generational contexts.

### CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of Indonesian and English syntax reveals that sentence structure is not solely a linguistic phenomenon, but a culturally shaped expression of values, relationships, and communicative styles. Indonesian syntax, characterized by flexibility in word order, extensive use of passive constructions, and context-dependent ellipsis, reflects a high-context, collectivist culture where relational harmony and indirectness are prioritized. In contrast, English syntax tends to be rigid, explicit, and agent-focused, mirroring individualistic cultural norms that emphasize personal autonomy, clarity, and direct communication.

These findings affirm the view that grammar and culture are inseparably linked. Sentence structure, far from being a neutral tool, functions as a cultural artifact that shapes and is shaped by social expectations, power dynamics, and interactional norms. The syntactic preferences found in each language are deeply rooted in their respective cultural logic: Indonesian leans toward maintaining social cohesion through indirectness and implicit context, while English foregrounds subjectivity, agency, and unambiguous structure. This relationship is evident in how each language encodes politeness, authority, and social roles through grammatical choices.

The implications of this study extend to the fields of language education, intercultural communication, and language technology. Language instruction should not isolate grammar from its cultural context, as doing so risks producing syntactically accurate but pragmatically inappropriate speech. Educators and learners must be aware of the social meanings embedded in syntactic forms. Similarly, computational tools like AI-based translators and chatbots should be culturally adaptive, capable of processing the nuanced ways in which syntax reflects sociocultural values. Ultimately, understanding

syntax through a cultural lens enriches our appreciation of linguistic diversity and deepens our ability to communicate across cultural boundaries.

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