Lost in Translation: A Linguistic Exploration of Miscommunication and Intercultural Encounters in Film Dialogue

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural communication. The primary data were taken from dialogues in the film accessed via YouTube and analyzed using a qualitative approach through notetaking, selecting scenes involving communication conflicts, and interpreting linguistic elements related to the speakers' cultural backgrounds. A literature review was also conducted to support the contextual analysis. The findings reveal that the film effectively portrays various forms of communication conflict arising from cultural differences, such as contrasting communication styles between High Context and Low Context cultures, phonological differences between languages, and differing norms in service etiquette and the use of international languages. In addition to group-level conflicts, the film also highlights interpersonal communication issues, particularly those influenced by gender differences and ethnocentric perceptions. Therefore, Lost in Translation demonstrates that intercultural communication is not only shaped by language proficiency but also by understanding the values and worldviews embedded in different cultures. This film remains relevant as a reflection of the ongoing challenges in global communication.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication; Film; Culture; Language Conflict; Lost in Translation

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of technology has opened global communication spaces that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. People from diverse backgrounds can now interact directly through various digital platforms, making intercultural communication an inevitable part of modern life. However, each community has its own communication patterns, shaped by unique cultural values, norms, and practices. Therefore, understanding how a group communicates cannot be separated from understanding the culture that underlies it. In other words, communication and culture are deeply interconnected; learning about one also involves learning about the other. Film is one of the most effective media for introducing and exploring the culture of a society. As a representation of real life, film does not merely present fictional stories, but also reflects the social, economic, political, religious, and even scientific dynamics of a particular cultural context. Its

role as a cross-cultural medium is significant, as it can transmit cultural information and values across nations and continents, unrestricted by time and space. However, to fully grasp the messages conveyed through film, audiences must understand the social and cultural contexts in which the events take place. In this regard, the visual and auditory power of film can present such contexts more vividly—often evoking a deeper emotional engagement compared to other forms of media.

Film serves as a medium capable of representing the diverse forms of communication found in global societies. Understanding the culture behind a film's storyline plays a crucial role in determining how well viewers can grasp the intended meaning and message. This paper aims to examine patterns of intercultural communication in the film Lost in Translation, which portrays interactions between two culturally distinct groups—Japanese and American. The study focuses on communication events that either lead to conflict or successful understanding, particularly in relation to differences in cultural backgrounds. This analysis is expected to provide deeper insight into how culture shapes communication styles, the types of barriers that arise in intercultural exchanges, and how these conditions affect individuals as social beings navigating unfamiliar cultural and linguistic environments.

Intercultural communication is built upon two closely related core concepts: culture and communication. These two elements have a complex and reciprocal relationship—culture shapes the way individuals communicate, while communication helps reproduce, sustain, and even construct the cultural realities of a community. As Liliweri (as cited in Dewi, 2018) explains, every communication process is influenced by values, beliefs, social structures, worldviews, and self- and other-perceptions rooted in culture. Therefore, intercultural interaction requires a certain level of sensitivity and politeness in order to achieve effective communication. One of the main challenges in this context lies in the differing communication patterns between low-context cultures, which rely heavily on verbal clarity, and high-context cultures, which depend more on nonverbal cues and social context.

In intercultural communication settings, participants do not always share the same language. However, the challenges they face go beyond mere differences in vocabulary or word translation. This is because language and culture are deeply intertwined in conveying messages, both verbally and nonverbally. Nonverbal communication, in particular, is complex, multidimensional, and often occurs spontaneously (Robihim, as cited in Iqbal, 2018). Raharjo (as cited in Mawalia, 2017) emphasizes that intercultural interpersonal communication can influence the formation of stereotypes or labels toward other cultures. Even so, intercultural communication also holds the potential to reduce cultural conflicts and bridge social differences. In this context, social integration does not mean cultural uniformity, but rather the creation of communicative spaces that allow each group to maintain its cultural identity within diversity.

Research on intercultural communication has been widely conducted. One such study is by Maharani (2016), titled Narrative Analysis of Intercultural Communication in the Film La Tahzan, which highlights the process of cultural adaptation within the film's narrative. The study found that the main character's adaptation to a foreign culture is gradually reflected in the storyline, especially in the middle and final parts of the film, when the character begins to show understanding and acceptance of different cultural norms. These findings are relevant to the present study, which also uses film as a medium to observe the dynamics of intercultural communication, particularly in the context of misunderstandings and successful interactions between characters from different cultural backgrounds.

Another relevant study is by Astiana and Muliadiasa (2015), titled Intercultural Communication between Local Vendors and Foreign Tourists at Sanur Beach. This research shows that local vendors tend to rely on nonverbal communication—such as hand gestures, eye contact, and smiles—to initiate interactions with foreign tourists. In addition, they use simple English sentences to continue the conversation. Supporting factors in this communication include the vendors' friendly and open character, while a major obstacle lies in their limited mastery of the English language. This study illustrates that the success of intercultural communication is not solely determined by verbal language skills, but also by attitude, nonverbal expression, and readiness to adapt in multicultural situations.

The third study was conducted by Siregar (2017), titled Intercultural Communication between Malaysian and Indonesian Students at the Faculty of Da'wah and Communication, State Islamic University of North Sumatra. This research aimed to identify the patterns of communication between Malaysian and Indonesian students as well as their perceptions of each other's cultures. The findings revealed several shared attitudes between the two groups, including mutual respect, trust, and sportsmanship. However, communication was hindered by factors such as cultural differences, economic constraints, dietary habits, and a lack of social bonding. This study highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity in fostering harmonious communication within a multicultural academic environment.

There are several key differences that distinguish this paper from the three previous studies. First, the data in this paper consists entirely of spoken utterances or direct conversations between characters in the film. Second, the primary focus of the study is the interrelationship between language and culture as reflected in the verbal interactions of the speakers. Third, the analysis in this paper does not only highlight communication barriers or successes from the perspective of a single individual, but considers all participants involved in intercultural conversations. Thus, this paper aims to offer a new perspective on the dynamics of intercultural communication through a linguistically grounded analysis based on film discourse data.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The field of intercultural communication has garnered significant academic interest due to the increasing global interconnectedness brought about by technological advances. Scholars such as Liliweri (in Dewi, 2018) assert that communication is inherently shaped by cultural values, beliefs, and worldviews. This notion aligns with the theoretical framework utilized in studies like this, where communication breakdowns are not merely linguistic but stem from differing sociocultural assumptions. Films, as socio-cultural texts, provide fertile ground for analyzing these phenomena, acting as mirrors to real-life communication challenges.

One of the fundamental concepts underpinning intercultural miscommunication is Hall's theory of high-context and low-context cultures (as cited in Nurkamto, 2003). High-context cultures, like Japan, rely heavily on implicit cues and shared understandings, whereas low-context cultures, such as the U.S., emphasize direct and explicit language. This dichotomy has been explored in studies like Siregar (2017) and Maharani (2016), which examined how cultural communication styles shape interpersonal and group dynamics. These insights contextualize the communication gaps observed in Lost in Translation, where cultural assumptions obscure speaker intent and listener interpretation.

Another key area of exploration is nonverbal and phonological barriers in intercultural encounters. Robihim (in Iqbal, 2018) highlights how nonverbal cues often carry significant communicative weight, especially when verbal language proficiency is lacking. This is evident in the film where mispronunciations, such as the confusion between /r/ and /l/, and gestures compensate for linguistic limitations. These challenges reflect a broader linguistic phenomenon where language learning is hindered not just by grammatical rules, but by phonetic constraints embedded in one's native language system.

Supporting studies, such as Astina & Muliadiasa (2016), underscore the role of attitude and nonverbal expression in successful intercultural exchanges. In their study of interactions between Balinese vendors and foreign tourists, they found that openness, gestures, and simplified English facilitated understanding despite linguistic limitations. This resonates with the film's portrayal of Japanese service workers who use formality and ritualized behavior to welcome guests, often in ways misinterpreted by the American protagonist, illustrating the role of social etiquette in communication dynamics.

Ethnocentrism, or the tendency to evaluate other cultures through the lens of one's own, also surfaces prominently in intercultural communication literature. According to Febiyana (2019), such attitudes can reinforce stereotypes and create emotional distance. In Lost in Translation, the protagonists' judgments toward Japanese customs and language—such as their bewilderment at Japanese TV shows or the formality of customer service—illustrate how ethnocentric perceptions

distort cross-cultural understanding. These findings reaffirm the need for empathy and open-mindedness in multicultural environments.

Finally, gender also influences communication patterns, as observed in the works of Holmes (1992) and Tannen (1975). Women's lexical choices, such as the use of nuanced color terms, and their interpretive tendencies during conversations differ from men's more literal approaches. In the film, these differences emerge in dialogues between the main characters and their spouses, often leading to unspoken tensions. Such gender-based communication gaps compound cultural misunderstandings, further highlighting the layered complexity of interpersonal interaction in multicultural contexts.

METHOD

Design and Sample

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design with a focus on intercultural communication as depicted through authentic dialogue in film. The primary data source is the 2003 film Lost in Translation, accessed via www.youtube.com. The film was purposefully selected due to several key considerations. First, it offers a clear illustration of the interplay between language and culture and how both factors influence individual experiences and social interaction. Second, the film's spoken dialogue provides naturalistic language data, directly accessible from the characters' verbal exchanges. Third, the film itself contains a unique narrative device—viewers unfamiliar with the cultural and linguistic context are likely to share the characters' feelings of disorientation, making it an ideal representation of real-life cross-cultural communication challenges. Despite its age, the film remains highly relevant, as the intercultural themes it explores—such as alienation, miscommunication, and the pursuit of meaning across cultures—remain prevalent in an increasingly globalized world characterized by international student exchange, labor migration, and virtual communication.

Instrument and Procedures

The main research instrument used in this study was the researcher herself, applying a note-taking method while watching the film. All spoken dialogues by the main characters were transcribed manually for closer linguistic and cultural analysis. In addition to the primary data obtained from the film, the researcher also conducted a literature review of supporting academic articles relevant to the film's themes and intercultural communication issues. The combination of primary and secondary sources provided a richer foundation for contextual understanding. The note-taking method allowed the researcher to document not only what was said but also how it was said capturing tone, situational context, and possible cultural subtexts that shaped the conversation.

Data Analysis

The data analysis began with categorizing the selected dialogues based on the presence or absence of communication conflict. This was followed by an examination of how linguistic features—such as word choice, tone, turn-taking, silence, or politeness strategies—reflected the speakers' cultural backgrounds. The analysis aimed to identify which cultural elements either contributed to communication breakdown or facilitated successful exchanges. Key excerpts from the film were included as data samples and interpreted in relation to cultural communication theories. The findings were presented by highlighting scenes that demonstrated either intercultural misunderstanding or cultural adaptation, thereby illustrating the vital role of both language and culture in shaping interpersonal communication outcomes.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Lost in Translation is a film produced by American Zoetrope and Elemental Films, written and directed by Sofia Coppola. The film stars two main characters: Bill Murray as Bob Harris, a middle-aged American actor who travels to Tokyo to film a whiskey commercial, and Scarlett Johansson as Charlotte, a young college graduate who feels lonely after being left behind by her husband—a photographer on assignment in Tokyo. Both characters are portrayed as facing personal crises and experiencing emotional and cultural disorientation in the unfamiliar Japanese setting. In the film, language and cultural differences serve as the primary sources of misunderstanding and alienation. Interestingly, communication conflicts do not occur only between two different cultures but also emerge in gender- based interactions within the same cultural context. This makes *Lost in Translation* a relevant subject for analysis from the perspectives of intercultural communication as well as gendered communication.

The film *Lost in Translation* illustrates the complexities of intercultural communication through the experiences of its two main characters, Bob Harris and Charlotte, as they navigate a culturally unfamiliar environment in Tokyo. From the outset, both characters are shown to experience discomfort and alienation, not merely due to linguistic barriers but also due to deeper cultural differences. The scenes depict how unfamiliarity with local customs, social expectations, and communication styles can lead to misunderstandings, frustration, and emotional isolation. These experiences reflect real-world challenges faced in cross-cultural settings, especially when individuals lack prior exposure to the host culture.

A prominent source of miscommunication in the film stems from the distinction between high-context and low-context communication styles. Japanese culture, as a high-context culture, relies heavily on nonverbal cues, indirect expressions, and shared social understanding. In contrast, American culture, represented by the protagonists, is typically low-context, valuing clarity, directness, and explicit

verbalization. This cultural mismatch becomes evident in scenes such as Bob's commercial shoot, where the interpreter simplifies lengthy Japanese instructions into brief translations, leaving Bob confused and uncertain. This reflects Hall's theory of contextual communication, where meaning is embedded differently depending on cultural norms. Another significant communication barrier is phonological difference. The difficulty Japanese speakers often have in distinguishing between the English phonemes /r/ and /l/ creates humorous yet frustrating misunderstandings in the film. For instance, the call girl's repeated use of "lip" instead of "rip" exemplifies a common phonetic interference resulting from the phonemic system of the Japanese language. Such moments highlight that communication challenges often arise not only from vocabulary gaps but also from the speaker's phonetic limitations, which can distort intended messages and hinder effective interaction.

The film also presents the cultural expectation of formality and hospitality in Japanese service settings. Bob, upon arriving at the hotel, is overwhelmed by the elaborate greetings and gift-giving rituals extended by Japanese hosts. While these gestures are deeply rooted in Japanese values of respect and courtesy—embodied in the concept of *okyakusama wa kamisama desu* ("the customer is god")—Bob, coming from a culture where interactions are more casual, finds this overwhelming and confusing. This clash demonstrates how differing hospitality norms can lead to emotional discomfort, even when intentions are positive. Low English proficiency among Japanese speakers is another recurring issue. In several scenes, Bob attempts to communicate in English, only to receive limited or no verbal response. For example, during a hospital visit, the staff speak only in Japanese and resort to pointing rather than explaining. Despite Japan's global status and exposure to Western culture, the film illustrates that English is often avoided in real-life interactions, revealing a gap between formal education and practical communication skills. Historical and cultural factors—such as Japan's former isolationist policies and strong monolingual identity—contribute to this dynamic. Ethnocentrism also emerges as a subtle yet significant theme. Both Bob and Charlotte occasionally express condescension or amusement at Japanese customs, revealing their unconscious bias toward their own cultural norms. Bob's sarcastic remark about the switching of "R" and "L" sounds—"They have to amuse themselves"—exemplifies how frustration can manifest as judgment. These instances underscore the importance of cultural humility in cross-cultural settings. According to Nanda and Warms (in Febiyana, 2019), ethnocentrism can hinder open engagement and deepen the sense of alienation. Gendered communication styles further complicate interactions. One example is seen in the differing interpretations of an invitation between Charlotte and her husband John. Charlotte views John's "you wanna come?" as a genuine offer, while John perceives it as mere politeness. This misalignment in expectations reflects Tannen's (1975) observation that men and women often interpret the same utterances differently due to socialized communication norms. Such disparities in understanding further alienate the characters from each other, not only across cultures but also within intimate relationships.

The contrast in vocabulary usage—especially regarding color terms—illustrates linguistic gender differences. When Bob receives a sample of carpet colors and is asked about "burgundy," he expresses confusion over which sample that is. This reflects Lakoff's theory (in Holmes, 1992) that women tend to use more nuanced color vocabulary, while men categorize colors more generally. These differences, while minor on the surface, demonstrate how even shared language use can vary significantly by gender and influence interpersonal understanding. Ultimately, *Lost in Translation* shows that miscommunication arises from more than just language differences. It is rooted in a complex web of cultural expectations, social behaviors, historical contexts, and individual perceptions. The film effectively portrays how people can feel lost—not just in physical space, but in meaning and connection—when navigating unfamiliar cultures. Yet, it also emphasizes the human desire for understanding, intimacy, and shared experience, even across vast cultural divides. The following dialogue takes place during a scene where Bob Harris is filming a whiskey commercial in Tokyo. In this scene, the Japanese director gives a lengthy instruction—around ten full sentences in Japanese—while the interpreter, Mrs. Kawasaki, conveys only a very brief translation to Bob, consisting of just a few words. This information gap occurs repeatedly, leading Bob to question the accuracy and completeness of the translations. This scene highlights a core issue in intercultural communication: how intended messages can become distorted, oversimplified, or even lose their meaning entirely when crossing linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Scene 1

Director: *Mr. Bob-san.* [speaking Japanese] *Suntory whiskey.* [continues in Japanese] *Casablanca. Bogie.* [continues in Japanese] *Suntory time.*
Kawasaki: *Um, he wants you to turn, look into the camera. Okay?*
Harris: *That's all he said?*
(1)
Kawasaki: *Yes. Turn to the camera.*
Harris: *Right, does he want me to— to... turn from the right, or... turn from the left?*
Kawasaki: [speaking Japanese to Director]
[Kawasaki continues in Japanese]
Director: [speaking Japanese] *Passionate. Camera. Passion.*
[continues in Japanese]
Kawasaki: *Right side, and, uh, with intensity. Okay?*
Harris: *Is that everything? I mean, it seemed like he said quite a bit more than that.*
(2)
Director: [speaking Japanese] *Whiskey.*
[continues in Japanese] *Gently...* [continues in Japanese] *Tension.*
Kawasaki: *Like an old friend, and into the camera.*
Harris: *Okay.*

The conversation reflects how each speaker's cultural background influences their communication style. Referring to Hall's theory of high-context and low-context cultures (as cited in Nurkamto, 2003), Japanese society is categorized as high-context, where messages are often conveyed indirectly, implicitly, and laden with unspoken meaning. In this context, the listener is expected to infer the speaker's true intention. In contrast, American culture tends to represent a low-context communication style, which emphasizes direct, explicit, and straightforward messages. This difference in communication styles often becomes a source of misunderstanding and potential conflict in intercultural interactions, as illustrated in the scene.

The conflict in this case arises when Bob, acting as both actor and model, feels the need to fully understand the director's instructions in order to adjust his pose according to the client's expectations. However, Mrs. Kawasaki, serving as the interpreter, conveys only a brief version of the director's lengthy remarks. The stark contrast between the original utterance and the shortened translation raises doubts in Bob's mind regarding the accuracy of Mrs. Kawasaki's interpretation. This uncertainty is evident in Bob's follow-up questions, such as in utterances (1) and (2), which indicate his concern that the translated message is far too brief compared to what was actually said.

Phonemic Differences

In a later scene, a call girl is sent to Bob's hotel room at the request of Mrs. Kazu. As she attempts to seduce Bob, she asks him to "rip" her stockings. However, she pronounces the word as /lɪp/ instead of /rɪp/, due to difficulty articulating the /r/ sound—a common phonetic challenge for native Japanese speakers. This mispronunciation not only creates an awkward and confusing moment for Bob, but also highlights the phonological differences between languages and the communicative barriers that can arise from cultural and linguistic differences during interpersonal interactions.

Scene 2

Woman: *May I enter? Thank you. Do you like massage?*
Harris: *I don't think I... I like massage anymore.*
Woman: *Mr. Kazu sends premium fantasy. My stockings—*
lip *them.* (giggles) Lip *my stockings. Yes, please.* Lip *them.*
Harris: *What?*
Woman: Lip *them. Hey!* Lip *my stockings!*
Harris: *Hey!* Lip *them? What?*
Woman: Lip *them. Like this.* Lip *them.*
Harris: *Rip them?*
Woman: Lip*, yes.*
Harris: *You want me to rip your stockings?*
Woman: *Yes,* lip *my stockings, please.*

Harris: Rip your stockings. You want me to rip your stockings?
Woman: Yes. Please? Please? Please?
Harris: All right, I'm gonna rip your stockings, and you tell Mr. Kazu—you know—we had a blast.

The phonemic differences between Japanese and English—particularly in the pronunciation of /r/ and /l/—can create significant communication barriers. In Japanese, these two sounds are not distinguished phonemically and tend to occur in free variation. As a result, Japanese speakers often struggle to differentiate or accurately pronounce /r/ and /l/ when speaking English. This situation is illustrated in the conversation above, where the woman says "lip" when she actually means "rip." The mispronunciation leads to a misunderstanding on Bob's part, prompting the woman to demonstrate her intended action physically in order to resolve the confusion.

Such linguistic conflicts are not limited to the shift from /r/ to /l/, but also occur in the reverse. An example of this reverse pattern can be found in a fax sent by Bob's client, which contains a phonemic error involving /l/ being pronounced as /r/. This reinforces the idea that such differences are a source of two-way miscommunication between speakers of the two languages.

"Mr. Bob Harris,
Have a good fright
"flight (/l/) – fright
(/r/)

The confusion regarding the distribution of these phonemes is also evident in another scene, where Charlotte poses a question:

Charlote: Why do they switch the "R"s and the "L "s here?

Differences in Customer Service

At the beginning of the film, Bob is shown sitting in the passenger seat of a sedan, visibly exhausted and nodding off after a long journey. Upon arriving at the hotel, his facial expression reveals a clear desire to rest. However, this hope is quickly dashed when he is immediately greeted by a stream of local businesspeople who take turns offering gifts and welcoming him. The non-stop nature of these interactions leaves Bob overwhelmed, marking the initial trigger of his feeling of being "lost" in the foreign city—not only physically, but also emotionally and culturally.

Scene 3

Kawasaki: Welcome to Tokyo.
Harris: Thank you very much.

Kawasaki*: My name is Kawasaki. Nice to meet you. (gives him her name card)*
Harris*: I've heard of you. Thank you.*
Kawasaki*: And Mr. Mori, from Suntory.*
Harris*: Hi.*
Mr. Mori*: (passes a paper bag and his name card) For you.*
Harris*: Thank you.*
Kawasaki*: And Miss Shibata.*
(Miss Shibata gives him a wooden box and her name card)
Harris*: Hey, I need that.*
Kawasaki*: And Mr. Minami.*
Minami*: Nice to meet you. (gives him his name card)*
Harris*: All right. Thank you.*
Kawasaki*: And Mr. Tanaka.*
Harris*: Thank you. Thank you.*
Kawasaki*: And we will pick you up in the morning?*
Harris*: Okay.*

(Elevator bell sounds)
Staff 1*: Mr. Harris, welcome to Park Hyatt Tokyo.*
Harris*: Yeah. Thank you.*
Staff 1*: This way, please.*
Staff 2*: Mr. Harris, pleased to welcome. Have a nice day.*
Harris*: Thank you.*
Staff 2*: Have a nice stay with us.*
Harris*: Thank you.*
Staff 1*: This way.*
Staff 3*: Mr. Harris, welcome to Park Hyatt Tokyo.*
Harris*: Thank you.*
Staff 3*: Enjoy your stay with us.*
Harris*: Thank you very much.*

In the conversation, conflict arises because only one party feels satisfied with the interaction. This imbalance is triggered by differing expectations and cultural values between Bob and the local community. Bob arrives with the hope of resting and engaging in relaxed interactions. In American culture, for example, customers are typically seen as equal partners, making interactions with hotel staff more informal and friendly. In contrast, the Japanese hosts express intense enthusiasm and hospitality, in line with their cultural values. In Japanese culture, there is a well-known expression: *"Okyakusama wa kamisama desu"*, meaning "the customer is god." This phrase reflects the belief that guests should be treated with the utmost respect, even regarded as holding higher social status than the hotel staff. As a result, Japanese society places great importance on politeness, hospitality, and flawless service in every interaction with guests. The language used tends to be highly formal and carefully chosen. This cultural difference makes Bob feel awkward and uncomfortable, as the treatment he receives is at odds with his expectations. It becomes one of the sources of cultural tension in the

scene.

Gift-giving is an integral part of Japanese culture, rooted in Confucian values, with the purpose of strengthening social relationships—whether within the family, politics, institutions, or the business world (Prabowo, 2014). This tradition is not merely symbolic but has become a systematic and formalized practice in Japanese society. Gifts are seen as a more appropriate means of expressing emotions—such as happiness or regret—than other forms of action (Rowland in Siregar, 2017). In addition to gift-giving, the exchange of business cards is also a key element of Japanese business etiquette, symbolizing respect and a serious commitment to building professional relationships. It is therefore unsurprising that in the opening scenes of the film, Bob is welcomed by hotel staff and business associates who take turns presenting him with gifts. For the Japanese, this gesture is not just a formality but a sincere expression of respect and an effort to establish a positive relationship with a guest they consider important.

Low Proficiency and Limited Use of English

In several scenes, there is a noticeable tendency among Japanese people to rarely use English in daily communication. When they do speak English with foreign visitors, the interaction is generally limited to simple phrases. This phenomenon is also evident in public spaces such as hospitals or restaurants, where Japanese speakers often continue using Japanese even when addressed in English—some even choose not to respond at all. The following conversation takes place when Bob is doing a photo shoot for a whiskey advertisement. The photographer is attempting to direct him into a few poses.

Scene 4

Photographer: Can you put your hand close to your face? Close your face...
[stammers]
Harris: I don't get that close to the glass until I'm on the floor. You know... How's this?
[Shutter clicks]
Photographer: Yes. You want a whiskey?
[Bob takes a gulp of whiskey]
Harris: This is not whiskey. This is iced tea. If you gave me real whiskey—
Photographer: I need mysterious face. Can you show mysterious? Mysterious.
Harris: I think I know what you want. You want this, right?
Photographer: I need more mysterious and, uh—
Harris: More mysterious. Yeah. I'll just try to think, "Where the hell's the whiskey?"
[Shutter clicking]
Photographer: You are a movie star, yes?
Harris: Yes, I should be doing movies, yes, but—
Photographer: And "Lat Pack." "Lat Pack." You know "Lat Pack"?

Harris: Rat P— Rat Pack?
Photographer: Rat Pack. Yes, please.
Harris: Oh, right, right.

Photographer: "Loger" Moore?
Harris: "Loger" Moore?
Photographer: "Loger" Moore. You know "Loger" Moore?
Harris: Roger Moore?
Photographer: Yeah.
Harris: Okay. I—I always think of Sean Connery. Seriously.
Photographer: No, no.
Harris: Didn't you get the Sean Connery one over here?
Photographer: No. "Loger" Moore.

The Most Striking Difference in the Conversation Above Lies in the Level of English Fluency Between the Two Speakers. The photographer frequently uses ungrammatical sentences, as seen in line (1), where he omits a necessary preposition—resulting in the phrase "...close your face?" instead of the correct "...close to your face?". His choice of vocabulary is also imprecise, such as using *face* instead of *expression*, or *show* instead of *look* in line (5), and using tag questions like "..., yes?" which are less appropriate than the standard form "..., aren't you?" as seen in line (9). These elements reflect the photographer's limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. In contrast, Harris speaks with proper sentence structure and even uses idioms, which the photographer appears not to understand. This imbalance is further illustrated when Bob makes a sarcastic remark about the suggested pose, which the photographer fails to grasp. Instead, he interrupts Bob and insists on directing a similar pose, indicating a lack of mutual adjustment in an interaction constrained by language proficiency.

Another piece of data illustrates that even in public places such as hospitals, Japanese people remain reluctant to use English. In the following excerpt, for instance, Bob does not understand a single word spoken by the administrative staff, and the same applies in reverse—the staff does not comprehend what Bob is saying. Rather than attempting to respond or explain in English—an international language—the staff member simply points toward the examination room while continuing to speak in Japanese. This situation highlights the extremely limited use of English in public interactions in Japan and reveals a significant communication barrier between local and foreign speakers.

The film *Lost in Translation* reveals that intercultural miscommunication often stems from fundamental differences in cultural values and communicative styles, rather than mere language proficiency. Hall's (1976) theory of high-context and low-context communication explains how implicit, nonverbal, and socially coded messages in Japanese culture can confuse foreigners like Bob Harris, who expects clarity and directness typical of American discourse. This discrepancy is clearly demonstrated in scenes where Japanese instructions are condensed into overly

simplistic translations, highlighting how messages can lose nuance when mediated through differing cultural lenses.Additionally, phonological challenges such as the inability to distinguish between /r/ and /l/ sounds reflect how native language structures interfere with second-language pronunciation. These mispronunciations, while humorous, underscore serious barriers in cross-linguistic interaction. Similarly, service etiquette differences—rooted in cultural norms of respect and hospitality—become sources of stress when the guests misread excessive politeness as performative or intrusive. Such scenes affirm that effective intercultural communication requires understanding the social intentions behind linguistic forms.

Beyond group-level cultural contrasts, the film also highlights interpersonal and gender-based miscommunication. Charlotte and Bob experience relational strain not only with locals but also with their respective partners due to differing interpretations of speech acts, emotional expression, and conversational expectations. These dynamics echo Tannen's (1975) findings that men and women often assign different meanings to identical utterances, and that such gaps can be intensified in cross-cultural contexts. Moreover, the protagonists' emotional alienation is heightened by their inability to navigate Japan's cultural environment, amplifying their sense of being "lost." Ultimately, *Lost in Translation* presents a nuanced portrayal of how culture, language, perception, and identity converge in shaping communication outcomes. It reinforces the idea that successful intercultural dialogue demands more than shared vocabulary—it requires empathy, cultural sensitivity, and the willingness to engage with unfamiliar norms. By portraying communication breakdowns with subtle realism, the film invites viewers to reflect on their own assumptions in multicultural interactions and consider the deeper human need for connection and understanding.

CONCLUSION

Film serves as an effective medium for exploring cultural dynamics, as it often presents intercultural interactions through dialogue and visual narratives. Lost in Translation is a prime example of a film that deeply portrays the complexities of intercultural communication. It highlights various linguistic conflicts that arise due to cultural differences between speakers, such as contrasts in communication styles between high-context and low-context cultures, phonemic differences, as well as differing expectations in service etiquette and the use of international languages. Beyond intercultural group conflicts, the film also illustrates interpersonal communication issues, particularly those involving gender differences. Variations in sentence interpretation, vocabulary use (such as color terms), and ethnocentric attitudes further reinforce the idea that intercultural communication is not merely about language, but also about perception, values, and worldviews. Thus, Lost in Translation demonstrates how cultural differences profoundly shape individual interactions. The film reminds us that understanding a language alone is not enough; grasping the culture behind the language is essential for creating more meaningful communication in a global context.

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