

# A Linguistic Analysis of Envy Expressions: A Pragmatic Perspective



## التحليل اللغوي لتعبيرات الحسد: منظور تداولي

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#### المخلص:

الحسد هو شعور قوي لكنه غير مريح اجتماعياً، وبسبب ذلك نادراً ما يعبر الناس عنه بشكل صريح. بدلاً من ذلك، يظهر غالباً بطرق غير مباشرة ودقيقة—من خلال السخرية، المديح المتخفف، التعليقات المهذبة، أو التعبيرات المشفرة ثقافياً. تبحث هذه الدراسة في الحسد من منظور براغماتي، مستفسرةً عن كيفية إشارة المتحدثين إليه، وكيفية تعرف المستمعين عليه، وكيف تشكل الأعراف الثقافية استخدامه. تستند الدراسة إلى كل من المحادثات الطبيعية والاستجابات المستحثة لمواقف يومية من المحتمل أن ينشأ فيها الحسد، مثل الترقيات، الإنجازات، أو إظهار الثروة. باستخدام أدوات من النظرية البراغماتية—بما في ذلك نظرية الأفعال الكلامية، مبدأ التعاون لغرييس، ونظرية التأدب (المجاملة)—تظهر الدراسة أن الحسد يكاد يكون دائماً ضمناً وليس صريحاً. في اللغة الإنجليزية، يظهر غالباً من خلال السخرية، التهكم، أو التهوين. أما في اللغة العربية، فيعتمد المتحدثون غالباً على عبارات طقسية مثل "ما شاء الله" للاعتراف بنجاح الآخر مع تخفيف أو تحويل الحسد المحتمل. تكشف هذه الاستراتيجيات كيف يدير الأفراد التوتر بين مشاعرهم الشخصية والوئام الاجتماعي. باختصار،

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تعبيرات الحسد ليست مجرد انفجارات عاطفية، بل هي أداءات براغماتية، مضبوطة بعناية حسب السياق والثقافة.

### Abstract

Envy is a powerful but socially uncomfortable emotion, and because of this, people rarely express it openly. Instead, it often appears in indirect and subtle ways—through irony, disguised compliments, polite remarks, or culturally coded expressions. In this research, the researcher sheds light on the expression envy through a practical lens, delving into how people express it, how others pick up on those cues, and the role cultural expectations play in its expression. This study looks at envy in a practical way, examining how people show it, how others pick up on it, and the influence of cultural norms on its expression. It taps into real conversations and gathered responses to common scenarios that might trigger envy, like getting a promotion, achieving something noteworthy, or showing off wealth. By applying various concepts from pragmatic theory—like Speech Act Theory, Grice's Cooperative Principle, and Politeness Theory—the research indicates that expressions of envy tend to be more subtle than overt. It usually manifests in English as sarcasm, irony, or understatement. In contrast, Arabic speakers frequently use ceremonial expressions like *mā shā' Allāh*, which means "as God has willed," to acknowledge someone else's accomplishments and allay or divert possible jealousy. These tactics show how people deal with the conflict between their own emotions and maintaining social harmony. Envy expressions are, in essence, practical performances that are carefully tailored to the situation and culture, rather than merely being emotional outbursts.

### 1. Introduction

As a complex social emotion, envy is expressed by experiences of resentment toward the advantages, achievements, or belongings of another person, occasionally combined with a desire to acquire them or witness their decline. Envy's linguistic expressions express not only the emotion but also social norms, politeness strategies, and cultural perspectives on rivalry and interpersonal comparison. With a focus on speech acts, implicature, politeness, and sociocultural context, this paper analyzes envy expressions from a pragmatic linguistic standpoint.

### 2. Problem Statement

Envy is a complicated, socially sensitive feeling that often conveys through words in subtle ways. Unlike overtly expressed emotions like happiness or anger, envy is usually expressed through indirect linguistic





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techniques, implicatures, presuppositions, irony, or culturally coded phrases. This makes studying jealousy from a linguistic perspective challenging.

From a pragmatic perspective, the issue is how speakers decide to express jealousy in ways that preserve decorum, preserve social harmony, or preserve face. Depending on the interlocutors' objectives, cultural norms, and shared prior knowledge, jealousy emotions vary greatly depending on the context. For instance, a statement like "You're always so lucky" that on the surface seems to be a complement can instead be interpreted as an expression of envy.

### 3. Research Questions

1. What pragmatic strategies do speakers use to express envy in discourse?

e.g., direct vs. indirect expressions, irony, presupposition, compliment-disguised envy.

2. How does context influence the interpretation of envy expressions?

e.g., role of social status, intimacy, cultural background, and situational factors.

3. What are the politeness mechanisms and face-saving strategies associated with expressing envy?

e.g., mitigation, softeners, humor, or coded language.

4. How do envy expressions differ across cultures or speech communities from a pragmatic perspective?

e.g., differences in collectivist vs. individualist societies.

5. To what extent do prosody, intonation, and non-verbal cues contribute to the pragmatic meaning of envy expressions?

6. How can pragmatic theories (e.g., speech act theory, Grice's implicature, politeness theory, relevance theory) explain the indirectness and ambiguity of envy expressions?

These questions link the linguistic problem (indirectness, ambiguity, cultural variation) to a pragmatic framework, ensuring your study has clear analytical directions.

### 4. Research Objectives

1. To identify and categorize the pragmatic strategies speakers employ in expressing envy (e.g., indirectness, irony, presupposition, disguised compliments).

2. To examine how contextual factors influence the interpretation of envy expressions, including social roles, relationships, and cultural norms.

3. To analyze the politeness strategies and face-management techniques used in envy-related discourse in order to mitigate social tension or avoid conflict.



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4. To compare cross-cultural variations in envy expressions and determine how pragmatic norms shape the linguistic realization of envy in different communities.
5. To investigate the role of prosody, intonation, and non-verbal cues in reinforcing or altering the pragmatic meaning of envy expressions.
6. To apply and evaluate pragmatic theories (such as speech act theory, Gricean maxims, politeness theory, and relevance theory) in explaining the indirectness and interpretive challenges of envy expressions.

### 5. Literature Review

#### 1. Envy as a Linguistic Emotion

As a social-comparative emotion that develops when someone perceives another's benefit, envy has been extensively studied in psychology and philosophy (Parrott & Smith, 1993; Smith & Kim, 2007). Envy is dyadic and based on hatred toward another's accomplishment or ownership, as opposed to jealousy, which is characterized by the fear of losing something to a rival. Researchers also distinguish between malignant envy, which aims to hurt the envied individual, and benign envy, which encourages self-improvement (Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, & Pieters, 2009; Lange & Crusius, 2015). This distinction is crucial for pragmatics because, although malignant envy is frequently concealed in sarcasm or covert criticism, benign envy can manifest as praising language.

#### 2. Emotional Talk and Pragmatics

In pragmatics, speech acts are used to both describe and perform emotions (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). In interactions, envy is rarely identified directly; instead, it is conveyed through implicature and indirectness. Envy can be expressed by disobeying maxims, according to Grice's (1975) theory of conversational maxims. For instance, a speaker who says, "You're always so lucky," may be expressing appreciation on the surface but subtly conveying envy. Another helpful lens is Relevance Theory, which demonstrates how hearers deduce jealous intent from common information and context (Sperber & Wilson, 1986).

#### 3. Politeness and Face Management

Speakers often utilize politeness techniques to minimize the expression of jealousy since it threatens both the hearer's positive face (by suggesting malice) and the speaker's negative face (by acknowledging inferiority) (Brown & Levinson, 1987). These tactics, which enable speakers to conceal jealousy while preserving social harmony, can include humor, hedges, or self-deprecating statements. In addition, Goffman (1967) emphasized the negotiation of face-threatening behaviors in social interactions—a notion that is especially pertinent to envy discourse. Speakers often utilize politeness techniques to minimize the expression of





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jealousy since it threatens both the hearer's positive face (by suggesting malice) and the speaker's negative face (by acknowledging inferiority) (Brown & Levinson, 1987). These tactics, which enable speakers to conceal jealousy while preserving social harmony, can include humor, hedges, or self-deprecating statements. In addition, Goffman (1967) emphasized the negotiation of face-threatening behaviors in social interactions—a notion that is especially pertinent to envy discourse.

### 4. Irony, Sarcasm, and Indirectness

As per Clark and Gerrig (1984) and Attardo (2000), irony is said to work through contextual inappropriateness and echoic mention. Ironic praise or caustic remarks are frequently used by speakers since jealousy is socially undesirable. Prosodic elements like stress and intonation also lead listeners to reframe seemingly favorable statements as being jealous or resentful. Irony, then, is a useful tool that allows speakers to subtly convey jealousy while preserving credibility. (Bryant, 2010)

Kreuz, & Glucksberg (1989) clarified that Sarcasm, which is frequently employed to ridicule, criticize, or convey irony, is a communication technique in pragmatics where a speaker conveys a meaning that is opposite or incongruent with the literal expression. The speaker and listener's shared knowledge, tone, and context all play a significant role in the interpretation. Although sarcasm is a type of verbal irony, it frequently has a negative or critical intent, whereas irony can be neutral or humorous. Grice's Maxim of Quality, which states that one should only say what one believes to be true, is violated pragmatically by sarcasm; the hearer understands that the speaker does not mean the words literally and deduces the intended (often opposite) meaning. As in the example below:

Speaker: "What a terrific opportunity for another meeting! Just what I required.

(The intended meaning, which is to express annoyance, is negative, but the literal meaning is positive.)

The term "indirectness" describes the use of statements whose literal form does not match their intended meaning, forcing the listener to deduce the speaker's true intention through context and common sense.

A fundamental idea in pragmatics, particularly in Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1975), is indirectness. For example, a speaker may say, "It's cold in here," rather than, "Close the window." This is interpreted by the listener as a request rather than just a statement.

### 5. Praise, Pride, and Ambiguity of Envy

Complements can be ambiguous speech acts that occasionally conceal envy, according to studies on the subject (Holmes, 1988; Manes &

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Wolfson, 1981). A comment like "You always get the best opportunities," for example, might serve as both a complement and a covert sign of jealousy. Since the recipient may minimize their accomplishment to prevent inciting more jealousy, compliments also lead to sensitive reaction techniques.

### 6. Envy: Cross-Cultural Pragmatics

Studies conducted across cultures show that cultural norms have a significant influence on jealousy. Wierzbicka (1999) and Kövecses (2000) demonstrate that metaphors and terminology related to emotions differ among languages. To avoid envy, many Middle Eastern cultures emphasize the evil eye and utilize protective expressions such *mā shā' Allāh*, which means "God has willed it." In contrast, English uses the metaphor "green with envy" (Abu-Lughod, 1986). These practical customs show that jealousy is a socially controlled situation as well as a personal emotion.

### 6. Research methodology

This research is qualitative in nature, drawing on the principles of pragmatics and discourse analysis. Since envy is a subtle, context-dependent emotion, it cannot be captured effectively by purely quantitative measures. Instead, the study takes a descriptive–analytical approach, examining how envy is expressed, implied, and interpreted in everyday communication.

#### 6.1. Data Collection

Two types of data will be used. First, naturally occurring discourse will be gathered from conversations, social media posts, and TV talk shows, as these contexts often reveal authentic envy expressions. Second, elicited data will be collected through short role-play activities and discourse completion tasks (DCTs). For example, participants may be asked to respond to situations such as a friend buying a luxury car or a colleague receiving a promotion. These tasks provide controlled yet realistic scenarios where envy is likely to appear.

#### 6.2. Participants

The study will involve around 30–40 participants of different ages and genders. To capture cultural variation, the sample will include both English-speaking and Arabic-speaking participants. This diversity will allow for a meaningful comparison of pragmatic strategies across languages and communities. As this is shown in Table (1):

**Table (1): Participants' linguistic and demographic background**

Category	Description	Purpose of the study
Total Number	30-40 participants	To ensure a manageable yet diverse sample size for





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		qualitative analysis
Age Range	20-65 years	To capture age-related variation in pragmatic use of envy expressions
Gender	Balanced representation of males & females	To explore whether gender influences pragmatic strategies
Language Groups	English & Arabic speakers	To enable cross-linguistic comparison between English and Arabic Use
Cultural Background	Participants from English (UK,USA) & Arabic regions	To identify cultural norms affected by envy expressions and interpretation
Selection Criteria	fluent speakers of their native language; able to engage in spontaneous speech	To get authentic and natural Data
Recruitment Method	Samples are from Universities & social media	To access diverse yet accessible participant pools
Ethical Considerations	Informed agreement & full anonymity ensured	To accomplish ethical integrity of the study

### 6.3. Analytical Framework

The analysis is grounded in several well-established pragmatic theories: Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) will help classify envy expressions as acts such as compliments, sarcastic remarks, or complaints.

#### 1-Speech act theory

Austin's theory was extended by John Searle (1969, 1975), who categorized speech acts into five primary categories according to their illocutionary force:

1-Representatives/Assertives: The speaker expresses belief in the veracity of a proposition and makes an assertion or describes a current situation. "It's

Pouring " "انها تمطر السماء " "

2. Directives: The speaker uses commands, requests, and advice to try to persuade the hearer to do something. "Please take a seat." "من فضلك اجلس " "

3. Commissives: Through threats, offers, and promises, the speaker commits to a future action. "I'll give you a call tomorrow." "سأتصل بك غداً " "

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4. Expressives: The speaker conveys a psychological or emotional state. "I apologize for your loss." "انا آسف على خسارتك".

5. Declaratives: When someone in a position of authority says something, it alters reality. "I now declare you to be husband and wife." "أعلن أنك ناجح في الامتحان".

### -Direct vs. Indirect Speech Acts:

Searle (1975) also made a distinction between Direct vs. Indirect Speech Acts:

-**Direct speech acts** are those in which the function and form are compatible. "Close the door." is an example of a direct command.

- **Indirect speech acts** are those in which the intended purpose is not met by the literal form.

"Can you close the door?" is an example of a request rather than a question. Contrasting Searle's theory to Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, indirect speech acts are essential to social interaction and politeness. Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) will help classify envy expressions as acts such as compliments, sarcastic remarks, or complaints.

## 2- Grice's Cooperative Principle and Conversational Maxims:

### - Grice's Cooperative Principle

Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975) introduced the Cooperative Principle in his seminal work "Logic and Conversation". With implicature—the extra, implied meaning that listeners deduce from context. Grice sought to explain how people are able to convey meaning beyond the literal words, i.e., this will guide the identification of implicatures, especially when envy is implied rather than stated.

### - The Four Grice's Conversational Maxims:

Grice (1975) sets four maxims that characterize the typical ways in which people collaborate during conversations:

#### A. Quantity Maxim (Information)

Definition: Provide just enough information, neither too little nor too much.

Rule 1: Provide as much information as is necessary.

Rule 2: Don't add more information than is necessary to your contribution.

For instance:

A: "Where is the meeting?"

B: "In Room 210." (Relevant)

B: "At 9:05 AM, in Room 210, next to the coffee maker, close to the library." (Too much information)

Example of Flouting (for hint or irony):





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A: "Did you find the film enjoyable?"

B: "Well, the popcorn was tasty."

→ Implication: The film was not entertaining.

### B. Quality Maxim ( Accuracy )

Definition: Don't say anything you don't have proof for or that you think is untrue.

Rule 1: Don't say anything you think is untrue.

Rule 2: Never make a claim for which you don't have sufficient proof.

For instance:

A: "Who broke the window?"

B: "The wind was to blame." (if B thinks it was)

Example of Flouting (sarcasm):

A: "John is consistently on time."

B: "He's always on time!" (ironically stated) → In actuality, John is consistently late.

### C. Relation Maxim (Relevance)

Definition: Provide information that is pertinent to the subject or circumstance.

For instance: A: "Are you a coffee lover?"

B: "After drinking it, I can't sleep."

→ Implication: Coffee keeps B awake, which is why they dislike it.

The Flouting For instance, A: "How was your date?"

B: "Well, the food was delicious."

Implication: It wasn't a good date.

### D. Manner Maxim (Clarity)

Definition: Be precise, organized, and steer clear of vagueness or obscurity.

Rule 1: Steer clear of obscurity.

Rule 2: Steer clear of confusion.

Rule 3: Don't be overly wordy.

Rule 4: Maintain order.

For instance, "How do I get to the library?"

B: "It's on your right if you turn right and then left." (Unambiguous)

B: "Go that way... kind of past the place with the thing." (Vague)

The Flouting Example: A speaker may be hinting at something hidden if they purposefully use ambiguous or indirect language.

For example, "Let's just say not everyone was pleased with your presentation." → suggests criticism.

### 3- Politeness Theory

Goffman's (1967) concept of "face" and Grice's (1987) Cooperative Principle are the foundations of Brown and Levinson's theory.



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It seeks to clarify how and why people use civil language in order to preserve social harmony and steer clear of heated arguments during conversations.

### -The conception of "face"

A person's "face" is their public self-image, which is the emotional and social identity that everyone tries to preserve when interacting with others.

Each person has two different kinds of face needs, according to Brown and Levinson:

#### A. The Positive Face

the desire for acceptance, admiration, approval, or understanding.

The desire for social acceptance and belonging is reflected in it. □ For instance, telling someone, "Your presentation was excellent!"

#### B. The Negative face

the necessity of both freedom of action and freedom from compulsion.

The desire for independence and autonomy is reflected in it. For instance, using hedges "I apologize for disturbing you, but could you please assist me for a moment?"

### -Face-Threatening Acts ( FTAs )

Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) are any forms of communication that put the "face" of the speaker or listener in danger.

As examples:

- Because it imposes, making a request puts the listener's face in danger.
- Disagreeing or criticizing: endangers the listener's good reputation.
- Saying sorry puts the speaker's good reputation at risk (admitting fault).

Speakers frequently employ politeness techniques to lessen or soften the impact of FTAs because they can harm relationships.

### - Strategies of Politeness:

Depending on how much "face" they guard, Brown and Levinson distinguished four primary politeness techniques, which were ranked from most direct to most indirect.

#### A- Bald On-Record Strategy

One definition of the bald on-record strategy is straightforward, unambiguous speech that makes no effort to downplay the danger to the listener's face. Used when promptness or efficiency take precedence over civility. As in the example, "Close the door." , "Give me your notes." used in situations where directness is justified by power imbalances, between close friends, or in emergency situations.

#### B- The Positive Politeness Strategy

Definition: Exhibits warmth and places an emphasis on unity, kinship, or common objectives.





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By showing interest, approval, or a shared interest, it lessens the threat to the hearer's positive face.

Common strategies:

- Using language specific to the group (nicknames, jokes)
- Exhibiting optimism ("Won't you help me with this?")
- Presenting interest or compliments ("I really liked your idea — could we expand it?")

For instance: "Hey, friend, would you mind lending me your notes? You're so organized all the time!

→ Preserves good face by showing solidarity and flattery.

### C-The Negative Politeness Strategy

Definition: Respects the hearer's right to freedom and non-imposition.

To lessen the imposition, it employs hedging, indirectness, and apology.

Typical strategies:

- Using oblique language
- Apologizing or showing respect
- Making use of modal verbs (could, might, would)

Reducing the scope of the request

For instance, "I'm so sorry to bother you, but could you please forward the report to me?"

→ Uses deference and apology to shield bad face.

### D- Off-Record (Indirect) Strategy:

The speaker leaves room for the hearer to interpret what they mean by hinting at it rather than stating it outright.

This gives the hearer "plausible deniability," protecting both faces.

Typical strategies:

- Using irony, metaphors, or clues
- Making an oblique reference to the request

For instance, "It's really hot in here." → Infers that the window should be opened.

"My sandwich appears to be being enjoyed by someone." → Indirect charges.

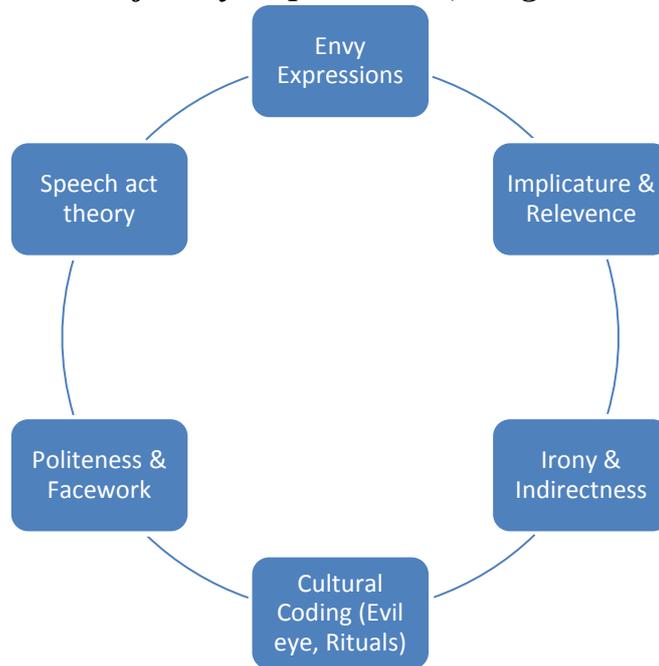
Brown & Levinson's (1987 ) Politeness Theory will be used to examine how envy is managed as a face-threatening act. Irony and Indirectness Studies (Clark & Gerrig, 1984; Attardo, 2000) will inform the analysis of sarcastic or ironic envy expressions. Cross-Cultural Pragmatics (Wierzbicka, 1999) will provide a framework for comparing English and Arabic strategies.



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## Conceptual Models of Envy Expressions ( Pragmatic Perspective)



### 6.3. Procedure of Analysis

The analysis will follow a clear sequence:

1. Transcription – all collected data will be carefully transcribed.
2. Identification – instances of envy will be identified using both semantic clues (envy words, metaphors) and pragmatic cues (tone, irony, context).
3. Coding – expressions will be coded into categories such as “direct envy,” “disguised compliment,” “irony/sarcasm,” and “politeness strategies.”
4. Interpretation – each expression will be analyzed in context, focusing on speaker intention and hearer inference.
5. Comparison – findings will be compared across English and Arabic data to reveal similarities and cultural differences.

### 6.4. Ethical Considerations

The data will be anonymized to preserve privacy, and participants will provide their informed consent. Particular attention will be paid to phrases associated with religious or traditional customs, such as the Arabic phrase *mā shā’ Allāh* (“God has willed it”), which is frequently used to avoid envy, because envy is culturally sensitive.

### 6.5. Expected Outcomes

The goal of the study is to understand how envy is pragmatically encoded and negotiated in communication through this methodology. It is anticipated that the results will draw attention to common tactics like indirectness, politeness, and irony while also demonstrating how cultural context affects the way envy is expressed and understood.





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### 7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that envy is a practical behavior influenced by interaction, culture, and context rather than merely a suppressed feeling. Although people rarely declare out loud, "I am envious," their tone, language, and word choice frequently subtly convey the emotion. According to the analysis, pragmatic cues like irony, prosody, and politeness strategies—which enable speakers to express themselves without endangering relationships—are crucial for eliciting jealousy expressions.

The study also highlighted significant cross-cultural differences. In Arabic-speaking settings, envy is often framed through religious and ritual language, reflecting cultural concerns with the “evil eye” and the importance of blessing others. In English-speaking contexts, envy is more likely to be expressed through sarcasm or playful understatement, which serve as socially acceptable ways to acknowledge feelings without confrontation.

Overall, the findings imply that envy is a socially negotiated behavior in addition to being a psychological state. It reminds us that emotions are not just felt, but are also expressed, understood, and controlled. It is found at the heart of language, culture, and interaction. This study advances pragmatics by highlighting the significance of cultural perspective in comprehending human communication and by demonstrating how subtle emotions like envy are encoded in discourse.

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