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EXPLORING SOCIOPRAGMATIC FAILURE IN JAPANESE-INDONESIAN SAFETY DISCOURSE: A MEANING GAP ANALYSIS IN MULTINATIONAL MANUFACTURING ORGANIZATION

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ABSTRACT
Safety discourse is a crucial element in building a safety culture in manufacturing organizations. However, the effectiveness of safety discourse in multinational companies is not solely influenced by language clarity but also by the successful transformation of safety meanings across cultures. This study aims to explore how meaning gaps arise in Japanese–Indonesian workplace safety discourse, identify forms of sociopragmatic failure, describe the underlying factors, and analyze their implications for the effectiveness of safety discourse. The approach used in this study is exploratory qualitative with an interpretivist paradigm. Data collection was conducted through participant observation of chorei activities, toolbox meetings, safety briefings, safety patrols, in-depth interviews with Japanese management, national management, leaders, and Indonesian workers, and analysis of organizational safety documents. The analysis was conducted through identifying workplace safety discourse, meaning gaps, forms of sociopragmatic failure, causal factors, and their implications. The results show that the main problem in safety discourse is not linguistic barriers, but rather differences in the construction of institutional meaning. This study identifies six initial forms of sociopragmatic failure: priority gap, perspective gap, risk anticipation gap, knowledge gap, fatalistic belief gap, and symbolic understanding gap. These six categories conclude that safety discourse failures are more often triggered by differences in safety philosophies, cultural norms, hierarchical relationships, work experiences, and beliefs about risk than by limited language skills. This study proposes a meaning gap as a conceptual mechanism linking workplace safety discourse to sociopragmatic failure and offers an initial typology that extends the application of Thomas' (1983) sociopragmatic failure theory to the context of cross-cultural safety discourse.

Keywords: *workplace safety discourse; sociopragmatic failure; meaning gap; cross-cultural communication; japanese manufacturing*

INTRODUCTION

Occupational safety and health (K3), hereinafter referred to as safety, is the primary foundation for organizational sustainability, particularly in the manufacturing sector. Over the decades, various safety approaches have evolved through the implementation of safety management systems, risk control, standard operating procedures (SOPs), audits, training, and the use of technology to prevent workplace accidents (Dekker, 2014; ISO, 2018; Reason,

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1997). This approach has been successful in improving an organization's ability to identify hazards and control risks, yet serious accidents continue to occur even in organizations with mature safety systems (Dekker, 2019; Hollnagel, 2014). This situation demonstrates that the success of a safety system is determined not only by the adequacy of procedures, but also by how safety messages are understood, interpreted, and implemented in daily actions by all members of the organization.

In a modern perspective, safety is no longer viewed solely as a technical issue, but as the result of complex interactions between people, organizations, and communication (Hollnagel et al., 2006; Weick et al., 2005).. Various studies have shown that safety communication is crucial in building a safety culture, encouraging worker participation, increasing risk awareness, and supporting safe work behaviors (Cooper, 2000; Cunningham & Jacobson, 2018; Guldenmund, 2000). However, the effectiveness of safety communication is determined not only by the clarity of the information conveyed, but also by how the message is interpreted according to the recipient's experience, knowledge, cultural values, and social context. Therefore, in this study, the term safety discourse will be used to refer to the definition of safety communication from a workplace discourse perspective.

The development of workplace discourse studies has contributed to broadening perspectives on workplace communication. Language is no longer understood simply as a medium for conveying information, but as a social practice that shapes professional identities, work relationships, power relations, and institutional goals (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Fairclough, 1992; Koester, 2010; Vine, 2014). In the context of safety, safety discourse encompasses discourse within various organizational activities such as morning briefings (chorei), toolbox meetings, safety briefings, safety patrols, safety coaching, and spontaneous interactions during the production process. Therefore, workplace safety discourse can be understood as the entirety of linguistic practices used by organizations to construct, negotiate, and reproduce the meaning of safety in everyday work life.

This perspective is becoming increasingly important in Japanese manufacturing organizations in Indonesia. These organizations are multilingual and multicultural work environments that blend Japanese, Indonesian, and various organizational communication practices within a single work system. The safety philosophy that emerged and developed in Japan is translated into Indonesian in a hierarchical manner, starting with Japanese management, national management, supervisors, and finally production workers. Thus, the safety discourse process involves not only language transfer but also the transfer of organizational philosophy, cultural values, social norms, and perspectives on safety (Hazel & Svennevig, 2018; Lønsmann & Kraft, 2018).

Cultural differences between Japan and Indonesia have the potential to add to this complexity. Japanese organizational communication is characterized by high-context communication, namely a tendency to convey meaning implicitly, consider group harmony (wa), maintain hierarchical dignity, and use mitigation strategies and indirectness in delivering instructions and warnings (Hall, 1976; Ide, 1989; Maynard, 1997). Conversely, in many work contexts in Indonesia, workers more easily grasp explicit, direct, and operational instructions that are quickly understood and immediately implemented. This difference in

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orientation causes a single safety message to create a gap in meaning. The same message can be interpreted differently by different recipient groups.

In a cross-cultural context, these differences in interpretation can be understood through the concept of a meaning gap, namely the gap in meaning between what the speaker intends and what the listener understands. The meaning gap is not only caused by limited language skills, but also by differences in cultural assumptions, social norms, power relations, work experiences, and pragmatic expectations that underlie an utterance (Holmes & Wilson, 2022; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). In other words, a message may be linguistically understandable, but it fails to achieve its communicative purpose because the speaker and listener construct meaning based on different cultural frameworks.

This phenomenon appears in various Japanese safety terms such as Anzen Daiichi, Kiken Yochi (KY), Hiyarihatto, Horenso, and expressions like Ganbatte kudasai and Chotto abunai kamo shiremasen ne. Lexically, these terms are relatively easy to translate, but the institutional meanings inherent in them do not always transfer intact during the translation process. For example, the slogan Anzen Daiichi is often translated as "Safety First." While linguistically acceptable, the intended meaning by Japanese management is that safety is an absolute priority that cannot be overridden by other targets such as quality, cost, or delivery. "Prioritize" versus "number one" will have different implications when there is a clash between two or more options: safety or other targets. The phrase "prioritize" allows for room for negotiation, perhaps even a slight override. Unlike "number one," which is absolute. This shift in meaning demonstrates that the primary issue in safety communication lies not only in translation accuracy, but also in successfully transforming the organization's safety philosophy to all members.

In cross-cultural pragmatic studies, this phenomenon is relevant to the concept of sociopragmatic failure. Thomas (1983) describes sociopragmatic failure as occurring in situations where speakers and listeners have different social assumptions about how an utterance should be understood in a given context. Unlike the concept of pragmalinguistic failure, which is more relevant to language forms, sociopragmatic failure arises from differences in cultural norms, social values, rights and obligations, and expectations regarding expected actions (Kecskes, 2014; Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009; Thomas, 1983). In the context of safety discourse, this type of failure does not always appear as a linguistic error, but can appear in the form of differences in interpretation of safety priorities, collective responsibility, risk urgency, or the organizational philosophy underlying a safety discourse.

Although studies on safety communication, safety culture, and cross-cultural communication have grown rapidly, most still focus on safety behavior, safety leadership, safety climate, or the effectiveness of safety management systems (Cooper, 2000; Cunningham & Jacobson, 2018). On the other hand, cross-cultural pragmatics research focuses more on examining speech acts, politeness, intercultural communication, and pragmatic failures in the context of language learning or general communication (Spencer-Oatey, 2008; Taguchi, 2015; Thomas, 1983). To date, there are few studies integrating the

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perspectives of workplace safety discourse, meaning gap, and sociopragmatic failure to explain the safety discourse of multinational manufacturing organizations, particularly Japanese companies operating in Indonesia. This gap provides a valuable contribution for this research.

Based on this background, the present study aims to explore how meaning gaps emerge in Japanese–Indonesian workplace safety discourse, identify the forms of sociopragmatic failure that develop from these gaps, examine the underlying factors contributing to their occurrence, and analyze their implications for the effectiveness of safety discourse in Japanese manufacturing workplaces in Indonesia. Unlike previous studies, this research proposes the concept of the meaning gap as a conceptual mechanism linking workplace safety discourse to sociopragmatic failure. Furthermore, it offers a preliminary typology of sociopragmatic failure that is specific to cross-cultural safety discourse. These contributions are expected to advance research in applied linguistics, cross-cultural pragmatics, and workplace safety discourse, while also providing a conceptual foundation for developing cultural translation strategies aimed at fostering shared safety meaning within multinational organizations in future research.

METHOD

This study employed an exploratory qualitative approach within an interpretivist paradigm to investigate how meaning gaps emerge in Japanese–Indonesian workplace safety discourse and how they may develop into sociopragmatic failure. This approach was selected because the study was not intended to test causal relationships between communication failure and workplace accidents. Rather, it sought to identify preliminary patterns in the construction and interpretation of safety meanings within cross-linguistic and cross-cultural workplace interactions.

The study was conducted in a Japanese manufacturing company operating in Indonesia that implements the safety philosophy and management system of its Japanese parent company while employing a predominantly Indonesian workforce. To protect confidentiality, the company name and participants' identities are anonymized. The research context encompassed both formal and informal safety communication activities, including *chorei* (morning meetings), toolbox meetings, safety briefings, safety talks, safety patrols, *Kiken Yochi* (hazard prediction) sessions, and safety-related communication during production activities.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their involvement in the development, mediation, delivery, and interpretation of safety messages. The participant groups included Japanese managers, Indonesian national managers, production-line leaders, and Indonesian workers. These four groups were selected to capture perspectives across organizational levels and to compare the meanings intended by message senders with those interpreted by message recipients. In the final version of the article, the number of participants, years of work experience, general job positions, and participant distribution should be reported explicitly.

Data were collected through workplace observations**,** semi-structured interviews**, and** organizational document analysis. Observations focused on communicative practices,

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including speech forms, the use of safety-related terminology, communication strategies, hierarchical interactions, recipients' responses, and processes of clarification and meaning negotiation. Semi-structured interviews explored participants' understandings of concepts such as *Anzen Daiichi*, *Kiken Yochi*, *Horenso*, personal protective equipment (PPE), safety priorities, and the ways in which safety instructions and warnings are communicated. Organizational documents included safety policies, briefing materials, work procedures, safety forms, posters, slogans, and internal communication media. The integration of these data sources enabled comparisons between institutional safety messages, actual communicative practices, and participants' interpretations.

Data analysis was conducted iteratively through five stages. First, data related to workplace safety discourse were identified and categorized according to communicative context, participants, communicative purposes, and expected actions. Second, meaning gaps were identified by comparing the meanings intended by speakers or the organization with the interpretations constructed by message recipients. Third, instances reflecting differences in perceptions of priorities, urgency, hierarchy, responsibility, risk, or expected actions were analyzed using Thomas's (1983) concept of sociopragmatic failure. Fourth, recurring patterns were compared across multiple data sources and participant groups to develop preliminary analytical categories. Finally, the communicative implications of these patterns were interpreted in relation to the potential emergence of unsafe interpretations, without claiming a direct causal relationship with unsafe actions or workplace accidents.

The trustworthiness of the study was ensured through data source and methodological triangulation**,** member checking**,** an audit trail documenting the analytical process**, and** peer debriefing with supervisors and academic colleagues. Researcher reflexivity was also maintained because the researcher possesses extensive professional experience within the Japanese manufacturing context. While this insider position provided valuable contextual access and nuanced understanding, it also introduced the potential for interpretive bias. Accordingly, the researcher's interpretations were systematically compared with participants' accounts, observational evidence, and organizational documents throughout the analytical process.

As an exploratory study, the categories and typologies developed in this research are presented as preliminary findings rather than definitive classifications or broadly validated theoretical models. The findings are intended to identify initial indications of meaning gaps and sociopragmatic failure in Japanese–Indonesian workplace safety communication while providing an empirical foundation for subsequent research on *cultural translation*. Such future research is needed to explain how Japanese safety philosophies, values, and practices are translated, negotiated, adapted, and reconstructed within the sociocultural context of Indonesian workers.

Accordingly, the claims advanced in this study are limited to the organizational context under investigation and are *not intended to be generalized* to all Japanese companies operating in Indonesia. The emerging typologies should therefore be understood as

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preliminary analytical categories that require further examination through broader datasets, more diverse industrial settings, and deeper analyses of cultural translation processes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

Incomplete Shared Safety Meaning

The results of the organizational safety culture survey indicate that employees across all respondent groups perceive the company as demonstrating a very strong commitment to workplace safety. At every organizational level—including vocational employees, contract employees, permanent employees, production leaders, and managers—the *Commitment* dimension consistently received the highest ratings, ranging from *4.74 to 4.95*. In contrast, the dimensions of *Hearing, Appreciation, Reporting*, and particularly *Kiken Yochi (KY)/Risk Assessment* among managerial respondents received comparatively lower scores. These findings suggest that the organization has successfully established strong institutional legitimacy regarding the importance of safety. Across all respondent groups, there was broad agreement that top management regards safety as the organization's highest priority.

Nevertheless, the findings also reveal notable differences associated with organizational position and length of service. As employees gain greater work experience and assume higher organizational responsibilities, increasing attention is directed toward the quality of implementation, employee participation, two-way communication, and the effectiveness of risk assessment practices. Among permanent employees with more than three years of service, a gap begins to emerge between workers' participation in safety activities and subsequent managerial follow-up. At the managerial level, concerns shift away from the organization's commitment to safety itself and focus instead on the quality and effectiveness of *Kiken Yochi (KY)* implementation.

The convergence of survey findings and randomly selected follow-up interviews suggests that safety has been widely accepted as a core organizational value. However, this acceptance has not yet been accompanied by a fully shared understanding of *how safety should be interpreted and translated into everyday communication practices and workplace behavior*. In other words, while organizational commitment to safety appears to have been institutionalized successfully, *shared safety meaning remains incomplete*, as employees across different organizational levels continue to construct and interpret safety messages in different ways. This finding provides initial evidence that institutional commitment alone does not necessarily ensure the development of a common understanding of safety throughout the organization.

Perspective Gaps in Workplace Safety Communication

One of the most consistent findings emerged from the in-depth interview with the Chairman. As the company's senior national executive, he argued that the primary challenge in workplace safety communication does not lie in the safety procedures themselves, but

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rather in the way individuals construct perspectives when delivering and interpreting safety messages. He explained:

> *"When we talk about Japanese culture and Indonesian culture, I think... Indonesians are relatively weak in terms of point of view. When communicating something—including safety—they tend to start from their own perspective while overlooking the perspectives of others."*

This statement suggests that workplace safety constitutes a context in which differences in communicative orientation between Japanese and Indonesian employees become particularly evident. According to the participant, effective safety communication requires more than simply delivering instructions; it also requires the ability to anticipate how those instructions will be interpreted by the intended audience. The Chairman further contrasted this communicative orientation with the practices he had observed among Japanese colleagues:

> *"...Japanese people... when they want to encourage others to do something, including matters related to safety, they tend to use a persuasive approach, so that people do not perceive it as a burden... and the results can be much greater."*

A particularly noteworthy aspect of the interview was the Chairman's self-reflection on his own communication practices. He acknowledged that many of the safety messages he had delivered over the years had not always been understood as he had intended. He stated:

> *"...it turned out that what I had been trying to communicate all these years simply didn't get through... it just didn't get through."*

The repeated use of the expression *"didn't get through"* (*nggak nyampe*) throughout the interview provides a strong indication of a discrepancy between the meaning intended by the message sender and the meaning constructed by the message recipient. This observation is consistent with the organizational safety culture survey. Although the *Commitment* dimension received consistently high scores across all employee groups, the *Hearing* dimension was rated noticeably lower, particularly among permanent employees with longer organizational tenure (more than 15 years). These findings suggest that while employees recognize the organization's strong commitment to safety, they perceive two-way communication and mutual understanding as areas that remain insufficiently developed.

Taken together, these findings indicate that the central challenge in Japanese–Indonesian workplace safety communication lies not in the organization's commitment to safety itself, but in the existence of *perspective gaps* that shape how safety messages are interpreted. Such differences in communicative orientation may hinder the development of *shared safety meaning*, even within an organizational environment characterized by a strong institutional commitment to safety.

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Beyond Shared Language

The findings further indicate that reducing linguistic barriers does not automatically eliminate meaning gaps in workplace safety communication. During the interview, the Chairman described an experience involving several Indonesian national managers who were scheduled to participate in training at the company's headquarters in Japan. According to him, communication during the program became less effective because the Indonesian participants had limited Japanese language proficiency, while many of the Japanese trainers were not sufficiently fluent in English. He explained:

> *"...the national managers could not speak Japanese... several trainers from headquarters were not proficient in English... so the proposed solution was simply to add an interpreter."*

However, the Chairman repeatedly emphasized that the problem extended beyond language proficiency alone. In his view, learning Japanese is important not merely because it facilitates verbal communication, but because it provides access to the organization's ways of thinking, corporate culture, work philosophy, and underlying safety values. As he explained, Japanese language proficiency enables employees to understand:

> *"...the way of thinking, corporate culture, work philosophy, and safety values."*

This perspective was reinforced by an interview with a Japanese expatriate manager. When asked about communication challenges, he acknowledged that language had been a significant obstacle during the early stages of his assignment in Indonesia. After several years of working in the country, however, he reported that linguistic barriers had largely disappeared as his Indonesian language proficiency improved. He stated:

> *"At first there were language barriers... but now language is almost no longer a problem."*

Despite this improvement, he continued to perceive substantial differences in how the concept of *Safety First* was understood and enacted. According to him, in Japan, *Safety First* is genuinely treated as the organization's highest priority, to the extent that production lines may be stopped immediately whenever a potential hazard is identified. He explained:

> *"In Japan, Safety First is truly the highest priority... a production line can be stopped immediately for safety reasons."*

In contrast, when describing the Indonesian context, he observed that considerable attention is often directed toward production targets and customer satisfaction. As he noted:

> *"We cannot allow customers to suffer losses... therefore supervisors must continuously remind operators about the importance of safety."*

Taken together, these findings suggest that the reduction of linguistic barriers does not necessarily result in shared meaning. Although participants generally understood the safety terminology being used, they continued to interpret key concepts differently, particularly regarding organizational priorities, the relationship between safety and productivity, and the underlying meaning of *Safety First*. These findings indicate that the principal challenge lies not in lexical comprehension but in the interpretation of

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organizational values embedded within safety discourse. In other words, *sharing a common language does not necessarily lead to sharing a common meaning*, particularly when communication involves culturally embedded organizational philosophies and institutional assumptions.

Emerging Safety Meaning Gaps

When the findings are examined holistically, it becomes evident that the observed phenomena are not isolated but are closely interconnected. The safety culture survey indicates that the organization has successfully established a strong institutional commitment to workplace safety. However, the interview data, workplace observations, and responses to open-ended survey questions reveal that employees continue to attach different meanings to many of the safety concepts embedded in organizational practice. These differences are reflected in how participants understand safety priorities, communication processes, hazard identification, and the implementation of safety procedures.

Accordingly, the central issue identified in this study is *not a lack of concern for workplace safety*, but rather *the incomplete development of shared safety meaning* regarding how safety should be understood and enacted in everyday work practices. This pattern is consistently evident across all data sources. On the one hand, participants overwhelmingly acknowledged that safety is regarded as the organization's highest priority. On the other hand, they demonstrated considerable variation in their interpretations of key concepts such as *Safety First, Kiken Yochi (KY), Hiyari Hatto, Horenso,* and other safety-related practices.

These differences were also reflected in communication practices. Throughout the interviews, the Chairman repeatedly emphasized the importance of considering the recipient's point of view when communicating safety messages. In his view, effective safety communication involves more than transmitting instructions; it requires ensuring that messages are received and interpreted in the manner intended by the sender. His repeated reflection that his messages *"didn't get through"* suggests that communicative success cannot be evaluated solely by the transmission of information but must also be assessed in terms of whether *shared understanding* is successfully achieved between communicators.

Similarly, interviews with Japanese expatriate managers indicated that communication challenges are no longer dominated by linguistic barriers. Most expatriates reported that proficiency in both Indonesian and Japanese has improved substantially compared with previous years. Nevertheless, they continued to observe differences in how Indonesian workers interpret safety priorities, make operational decisions, and balance safety considerations with production targets. These findings reinforce the argument that communication difficulties persist even after linguistic barriers have largely diminished.

The findings further suggest that safety behaviour is shaped by *social learning processes* within the workplace. Newly recruited workers tend to observe and emulate the practices of more experienced colleagues. Consequently, behaviours that do not fully conform to formal safety procedures may gradually become normalized when they are repeatedly modelled by senior workers. Conversely, contractor employees were generally perceived as demonstrating greater procedural compliance, not necessarily because they

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possessed a deeper understanding of safety principles, but because they were subject to more intensive supervision and monitoring.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that workplace safety implementation is a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of organizational policies, communicative practices, work experience, social learning, and individuals' interpretations of safety concepts. Rather than being transmitted directly from the organization to employees, safety meaning is continuously *constructed, negotiated, reinforced, and occasionally reconstructed* through everyday workplace interactions. As a result, variations in communicative practices and workplace experiences may evolve into *meaning gaps*, limiting the development of shared safety meaning across organizational members. This finding provides empirical support for the proposition that safety communication should be understood as an ongoing process of *meaning negotiation*, rather than as the simple transmission of organizational safety messages.

Manifestations of Sociopragmatic Failure in Japanese Workplace Safety Discourse

Building upon the preceding findings, this study identified five recurring manifestations of sociopragmatic failure in Japanese–Indonesian workplace safety discourse. These manifestations did not primarily arise from inadequate linguistic competence, as most participants were familiar with the Japanese safety terminology used within the organization. Instead, they reflected differences in how workers interpreted the institutional values, communicative intentions, and social functions embedded in these safety concepts. Consequently, the same terminology often generated different practical understandings and safety behaviors.

a. Anzen Daiichi (安全第一): Safety First as Philosophy or Operational Priority

Anzen Daiichi **(安全第一)** literally means *Safety First*. Within Japanese manufacturing organizations, however, it represents a fundamental management philosophy stating that safety constitutes the foundation of all organizational decisions. Production, quality, cost, and delivery should never be achieved by compromising safety. In the Indonesian workplace context, *Anzen Daiichi* is commonly translated as *"Utamakan Keselamatan"* (Prioritize Safety). Although linguistically accurate, this translation tends to be interpreted as a general safety slogan rather than as an organizational philosophy guiding decision-making. Interview data indicate that many workers recognized Safety First as an important company value, yet in practice safety priorities were frequently negotiated alongside production targets, delivery schedules, and operational efficiency.

This divergence illustrates sociopragmatic failure because both management and workers use the same expression while assigning different institutional meanings to it. For Japanese managers, Safety First functions as a non-negotiable organizational principle, whereas some workers perceive it as a situational priority that may be balanced against production demands. Such differences influence how safety-related decisions are made during routine operations.

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b. Horenso (報・連・相), BNF, and SCW: Ambiguity of Abnormality and Power Relations

Horenso **(報・連・相)** consists of *Hokoku* **(報告,** reporting**),** *Renraku* **(連絡,** informing**),** and *Sodan* **(相談,** consulting**)**. Within Japanese organizations, Horenso is not merely a reporting procedure but a collective mechanism for maintaining organizational awareness and preventing risks through early communication. This philosophy is reinforced through Bad News First (BNF) and Safety Call Work (SCW), both of which require workers to communicate abnormal conditions immediately after they are detected rather than after problems have escalated.

However, the findings reveal that the primary challenge does not lie in workers' knowledge of these procedures but in the absence of a shared understanding of what constitutes normal **(正常,** *seijō)* and abnormal **(異常,** ijō**)** conditions. Many workers interpreted BNF as applicable only after equipment failure, production disruption, or accidents had already occurred, whereas organizational policy expects BNF to begin as soon as early signs of abnormality emerge. This ambiguity is further reinforced by workplace power relations. Several participants described experiences in which reporting relatively minor abnormalities elicited negative responses from supervisors, such as comments implying that workers should have been able to resolve the problem independently. Although organizational rules explicitly prohibit unauthorized repairs and require workers to stop work, perform SCW, and immediately conduct BNF, inconsistent supervisory responses create uncertainty regarding the appropriate timing of reporting.

Consequently, workers often postpone reporting while attempting to solve problems themselves to avoid appearing incompetent, overly dependent, or incapable. In this case, sociopragmatic failure emerges because the institutional intention of early reporting as responsible safety behavior conflicts with workers' perception that early reporting may threaten their professional image within hierarchical relationships.

c. Kiken Yochi (危険予知): Predicting Hazards or Identifying Existing Risks

Kiken Yochi **(危険予知)** literally means *hazard prediction*. Within Japanese safety management, KY emphasizes anticipating what might happen before work begins through collective imagination and proactive risk assessment. In everyday Indonesian workplace practice, however, KY is often translated simply as *identifikasi bahaya* (hazard identification). While this translation captures part of its meaning, it shifts attention from anticipating future scenarios toward identifying hazards that are already visible.

Observations and interviews indicate that many KY activities focused on listing existing hazards rather than discussing potential accident scenarios or imagining how routine work could unexpectedly develop into dangerous situations. As a result, KY was frequently implemented as a procedural checklist rather than as a process of anticipatory thinking.

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This difference demonstrates sociopragmatic failure because the same safety activity serves different communicative purposes. For Japanese managers, KY develops predictive thinking; for many workers, it primarily fulfills procedural requirements.

d. Yarinikui Sagyō (やりにくい作業): Difficult Work as Risk or Normal Work

Yarinikui Sagyō **(やりにくい作業)** literally refers to work that is difficult or inconvenient to perform. Within Japanese manufacturing philosophy, such work signals opportunities for *kaizen* because difficulty often indicates hidden ergonomic problems, inefficient processes, or latent safety risks. Among many workers, however, difficult work was frequently interpreted as a normal characteristic of manufacturing jobs requiring greater effort, experience, or endurance. Consequently, physically demanding or awkward tasks were often accepted as unavoidable rather than recognized as indicators requiring process improvement.

This reinterpretation illustrates sociopragmatic failure because organizational signals intended to trigger systematic improvement become normalized as routine operational conditions. Consequently, opportunities for preventive intervention and ergonomic improvement may be overlooked.

e. **Member Voice and Nayami Sōdan (悩み相談): Feedback for Improvement or Complaining?**

The final manifestation concerns Member Voice, closely related to the Japanese concept of *Nayami Sōdan* **(悩み相談)**, literally meaning "consultation regarding concerns or difficulties." Within Japanese organizational culture, expressing concerns is considered constructive feedback that supports collective learning, continuous improvement, and organizational safety rather than personal criticism. Interview findings suggest that workers in the Indonesian context often interpreted raising concerns differently. Expressing discomfort, reporting work difficulties, or questioning existing practices could be perceived as complaining, lacking resilience, or being insufficiently grateful for having employment. Consequently, workers frequently hesitated to communicate concerns, particularly when interacting with senior employees or supervisors.

This hesitation does not necessarily indicate unwillingness to contribute but reflects different social expectations regarding appropriate workplace communication. While Japanese organizational culture frames voice behavior as collective responsibility, some workers anticipate negative interpersonal consequences when speaking openly about workplace problems. As a result, potentially valuable safety information may remain unspoken until problems become more serious. Sociopragmatic failure therefore arises because feedback intended as organizational learning is reinterpreted as personal complaint, reducing opportunities for early risk detection and continuous improvement.

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Table Manifestations of Sociopragmatic Failure in Japanese Workplace Safety Discourse

Japanese Safety Concept	*Institutional Meaning in Japanese Safety Culture*	*Worker Interpretation in Indonesian Workplace*	*Source of Sociopragmatic Failure*	*Potential Safety Consequences*
Anzen Daiichi (安全第一)	Safety is the fundamental organizational philosophy guiding all managerial and operational decisions. Production, quality, cost, and delivery must never override safety.	Safety is understood as an important priority or company slogan that may be balanced with production targets and operational demands.	Different interpretations of the organizational status of safety: absolute organizational philosophy versus situational operational priority.	Safety decisions become negotiable under production pressure, increasing the possibility of unsafe trade-offs.
Horenso (報・連・相), BNF, and SCW	Workers must immediately report, inform, and consult whenever abnormality is detected. BNF and SCW are preventive communication mechanisms activated at the earliest sign of abnormality.	Reporting is often delayed until equipment failure, production disruption, or accidents become evident. Workers may hesitate to report because of *sungkan*, fear of appearing incompetent, or previous negative responses from supervisors.	Ambiguous organizational boundaries between **normal** and **abnormal** conditions combined with hierarchical power relations create uncertainty regarding when reporting becomes socially appropriate.	Delayed reporting, unauthorized self-repair, ineffective early intervention, and missed opportunities to prevent accidents or near-fatal events.
Kiken Yochi (危険予知)	Hazard prediction through anticipatory thinking before work begins by	Commonly interpreted as identifying existing hazards or completing procedural	Shift from predictive risk anticipation to reactive hazard identification.	Weak signal detection decreases, reducing proactive risk management

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	imagining possible accident scenarios and preventive actions.	hazard checklists.		and increasing vulnerability to unexpected incidents.
Yarinikui Sagyō (やりにくい作業)	Difficult work indicates latent system weaknesses requiring process redesign and *kaizen*. Difficulty is viewed as organizational evidence for improvement.	Difficult work is accepted as a normal characteristic of manufacturing jobs requiring greater endurance, experience, or personal adaptation.	Organizational improvement logic is replaced by individual adaptation and normalization of difficult work.	Ergonomic hazards, inefficient work methods, and latent risks remain unresolved because difficult work is normalized.
Member Voice / Nayami Sōdan (悩み相談)	Expressing concerns, discomfort, or operational difficulties is constructive feedback supporting organizational learning, continuous improvement, and collective safety.	Raising concerns may be interpreted as complaining, lacking resilience, or being insufficiently grateful. Workers therefore hesitate to speak openly, especially to supervisors.	Different social meanings of workplace voice: organizational feedback versus personal complaint. Hierarchical relationships further discourage speaking up.	Reduced reporting of weak signals, hidden operational problems, limited organizational learning, and delayed identification of emerging safety risks.

aSynthesis of the Five Manifestations

Across all five manifestations, the findings reveal a consistent sociopragmatic pattern:

Common Pattern	***Explanation***
Shared terminology	Workers and managers generally understand the same Japanese safety vocabulary.
Different institutional meanings	The same concepts are interpreted differently regarding responsibility, authority, urgency, and acceptable workplace behavior.

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Sociopragmatic failure	Communication appears successful linguistically but fails pragmatically because organizational intentions are interpreted differently.
Underlying mechanisms	Cultural translation, organizational ambiguity (particularly normal vs. abnormal conditions), hierarchical power relations, face management, and previous interactional experiences with leaders.
Organizational consequence	Formal safety systems remain in place, but preventive communication, early reporting, anticipatory thinking, and continuous improvement become less effective.
Central implication	Building a safety culture requires **shared safety meaning**, not merely shared safety terminology.

Summary of the Findings

Across these five manifestations, sociopragmatic failure consistently emerged not from misunderstanding Japanese vocabulary but from differences in interpreting the institutional meanings attached to workplace safety concepts. Organizational safety communication was therefore shaped by cultural assumptions, hierarchical relationships, previous interactional experiences, and differing interpretations of normality, responsibility, and appropriate communication.

These findings suggest that implementing Japanese safety philosophy in Indonesian manufacturing extends beyond linguistic translation. It requires continuous cultural translation and negotiation of meaning so that workers and managers can construct genuinely shared understandings of safety rather than merely sharing the same terminology.

DISCUSSION

This study explored how Japanese safety concepts were interpreted and enacted within an Indonesian manufacturing workplace. The findings demonstrate that the main challenge in cross-cultural safety communication was not the absence of organizational commitment or workers' unfamiliarity with safety terminology. Rather, the central issue concerned differences in the social and institutional meanings assigned to the same concepts. Japanese managers and Indonesian workers often used identical expressions—including *Anzen Daiichi*, *Horenso*, *Kiken Yochi*, *Yarinikui Sagyō*, BNF, and SCW—while associating them with different expectations, responsibilities, and appropriate forms of action.

This distinction is important because it shifts the analysis from linguistic equivalence to sociopragmatic interpretation. According to Thomas (1983), sociopragmatic failure arises when interlocutors differ in their judgments regarding the social conditions governing language use, including authority, obligation, responsibility, interpersonal distance, and the appropriateness of particular communicative actions. In the present study, workers generally understood the literal meanings of the relevant safety expressions. However, they did not

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always interpret their institutional force in the same way as Japanese management. The resulting gap was therefore not primarily a vocabulary problem, but a difference in understanding what the concepts required people to do within specific organizational relationships.

Shared Terminology Does Not Ensure Shared Safety Meaning

One of the central findings is that shared terminology cannot be treated as evidence of shared understanding. The repeated use of Japanese safety expressions created an appearance of communicative alignment, yet closer analysis revealed substantial differences in how these concepts were operationalized. For example, *Anzen Daiichi* was widely recognized as "Safety First," but its practical meaning varied. For Japanese management, it functioned as a foundational principle that should govern decisions across production, quality, cost, and delivery. For some workers, however, it was understood more as a general priority or organizational slogan whose application could be adjusted according to operational circumstances.

This finding supports the view that organizational meaning is not simply transmitted from management to workers. It is reconstructed through experience, interaction, local norms, and prior workplace practices. From a sensemaking perspective, organizational members interpret institutional messages by connecting them with situations they have previously encountered, the reactions they receive from authority figures, and the consequences attached to particular actions. Safety concepts therefore gain meaning not only through formal training or translation, but through everyday organizational experience.

The finding also explains why repeated communication does not necessarily eliminate meaning gaps. Repetition may strengthen familiarity with terminology without clarifying its institutional implications. Workers may be able to repeat the phrase *Safety First* while still being uncertain about whether stopping production is acceptable, whether a minor abnormality should be reported, or whether raising a concern will be interpreted positively. The problem is therefore not insufficient exposure to safety language, but incomplete alignment between organizational discourse and interactional practice.

Sociopragmatic Failure as a Gap Between Formal Rules and Social Consequences

The findings on *Horenso*, BNF, and SCW reveal that sociopragmatic failure is shaped by the relationship between formal rules and the social consequences of following them. Formally, workers are required to work according to standard operating procedures, avoid unauthorized repair, stop when an abnormality occurs, and communicate the condition through BNF and SCW. However, workers' actual decisions are also influenced by how leaders respond to early reporting.

The reported response, "How can you not repair something this small?", illustrates this contradiction. Although the formal rule prohibits workers from conducting unauthorized repair, the interactional response implies that competent workers should be able to solve minor problems independently. Workers therefore receive two competing messages. The explicit institutional message requires immediate reporting, while the implicit social message rewards self-resolution and may treat early consultation as evidence of incompetence.

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This contradiction helps explain why workers may delay BNF until a problem, breakdown, or accident has already occurred. The meaning of BNF is gradually shifted from "report at the first sign of abnormality" to "report when the situation has become sufficiently serious." Similarly, SCW may be activated only when a danger is already visible rather than when work first deviates from normal conditions.

Such behavior should not be interpreted solely as individual non-compliance. It emerges from a pragmatic dilemma created by the organization itself. Reporting early may satisfy the formal safety rule, but it may also threaten the worker's professional image, invite criticism, or demonstrate dependency in a hierarchical relationship. Attempting a repair may violate the written rule, but it can simultaneously protect the worker from being regarded as incapable.

The sociopragmatic failure therefore lies in the different social meanings assigned to reporting. Institutionally, early reporting represents competence, prevention, and collective responsibility. Interactionally, it may be experienced as weakness, inability, or unnecessary escalation. This mismatch weakens the practical force of the safety rule even when the rule itself is well known.

Power Relations and the Production of Silence

The findings indicate that hierarchy plays a central role in shaping safety communication. Workers do not decide whether to report, consult, or speak up in a socially neutral environment. Their decisions are made within unequal power relations in which leaders possess the authority to judge whether a report is appropriate, excessive, timely, or evidence of poor performance.

This is particularly evident in the practice of *sōdan*. Within the institutional meaning of *Horenso*, consultation is intended to prevent individuals from making uncertain decisions alone. However, among some workers, consulting a leader may imply that the worker cannot complete the task independently. Feelings of *sungkan*, embarrassment, and fear of being judged incapable therefore affect whether consultation occurs.

The same pattern appears in Member Voice and *nayami sōdan*. In the Japanese organizational meaning described by participants, the expression of difficulty or concern is treated as useful information for improvement. A worker who communicates discomfort, confusion, or operational difficulty provides the organization with evidence that a process may require redesign, support, or *kaizen*. In the Indonesian context, however, speaking about such difficulties may be associated with complaining, lacking endurance, or being insufficiently grateful for employment.

This difference creates a form of socially produced silence. Workers may recognize a hazard, difficult task, or uncomfortable condition but choose not to verbalize it because the interpersonal risks of speaking appear greater than the immediate technical risks of remaining silent. Their silence should therefore not automatically be interpreted as indifference or lack of safety awareness. It may represent an adaptive response to a workplace environment in which voice is formally encouraged but not always interactionally protected.

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This interpretation has important implications for the concept of safety culture. A speaking-up culture cannot be established merely by instructing workers to report or by providing formal reporting channels. Workers evaluate the likely response to voice based on previous interactions. When leaders respond defensively, dismissively, or punitively, the organization teaches workers that silence is socially safer than communication. Conversely, when leaders acknowledge early reports and treat uncertainty as legitimate, they reinforce the intended pragmatic meaning of BNF, SCW, and Member Voice.

Ambiguity Between Normal and Abnormal Conditions

Another important finding concerns the unclear distinction between normal and abnormal conditions. Organizational rules require workers to report abnormalities, but the category of abnormality is not always defined in sufficiently concrete and shared terms. Workers may therefore be uncertain whether a small equipment irregularity, unusual sound, minor process deviation, physical discomfort, or difficult work method should be classified as abnormal.

This ambiguity is not merely technical. It is sociopragmatic because the classification of a condition determines whether speaking, stopping, or consulting is considered appropriate. If a condition is interpreted as normal variation, reporting may appear excessive. If it is interpreted as abnormal, failure to report becomes a safety violation. Without shared criteria, workers must make this judgment within a hierarchical context and under the possibility of negative evaluation.

The problem is further intensified by accumulated work experience. When minor deviations repeatedly occur without immediate harmful consequences, they may become normalized. Workers learn that such conditions are part of routine production rather than signals requiring intervention. This normalization can weaken the anticipatory function of *Kiken Yochi* and the improvement-oriented meaning of *Yarinikui Sagyō*.

The distinction between hazard identification and hazard prediction is especially relevant here. When *Kiken Yochi* is reduced to identifying visible hazards, workers may overlook subtle changes, weak signals, or possible future scenarios. The Japanese term *yochi* emphasizes anticipation—imagining what may happen before it occurs. However, when translated and practiced primarily as hazard identification, its temporal orientation shifts from future possibility to present visibility.

A similar reinterpretation occurs with *Yarinikui Sagyō*. In the intended institutional meaning, difficult work is evidence that the process may contain hidden risk and should therefore trigger improvement. In workers' everyday experience, however, difficulty may be understood as a normal requirement of industrial labor. The worker is expected to become accustomed to the task rather than question its design. The result is a shift from system improvement to individual adaptation.

Both cases illustrate how safety concepts can be linguistically transferred while their underlying risk logic is altered. The words remain recognizable, but the practical threshold for intervention changes.

Cultural Translation Rather Than Direct Language Transfer

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The findings suggest that the movement of Japanese safety concepts into Indonesian workplaces should be understood as a process of cultural translation rather than direct language transfer. Cultural translation involves the reinterpretation of values, assumptions, responsibilities, and social relationships as concepts move between organizational and cultural contexts.

The terms examined in this study carry more than dictionary meanings. *Anzen Daiichi* contains assumptions about organizational priorities; *Horenso* contains expectations regarding interdependence and timely consultation; BNF contains a temporal expectation that abnormal information must be communicated at the earliest stage; SCW contains an obligation to interrupt unsafe action; *Kiken Yochi* contains an anticipatory orientation toward uncertain risk; *Yarinikui Sagyō* treats difficulty as organizational evidence for improvement; and *nayami sōdan* constructs personal concern as potentially valuable feedback.

When these concepts enter the Indonesian workplace, they encounter other social meanings. Consultation may be linked to incompetence, reporting may be constrained by respect for hierarchy, difficult work may be associated with endurance, and expressing concern may be judged as complaining or lacking gratitude. These local interpretations are not simply incorrect translations. They represent situated attempts to make sense of organizational concepts through existing cultural and workplace norms.

However, when such reinterpretations remain unrecognized, they can produce sociopragmatic failure. Management may assume that workers share the intended meaning because they use the same vocabulary, while workers may believe that their behavior is socially appropriate because it reflects local expectations of competence, respect, and resilience. Both sides may therefore consider their own interpretation reasonable while remaining unaware of the gap.

Cultural translation in this context requires more than providing Indonesian equivalents for Japanese terminology. It requires explicit discussion of the social meaning of action. Workers need concrete examples of what counts as abnormal, when BNF must begin, when SCW is mandatory, why unauthorized repair is prohibited, and how leaders are expected to respond. At the same time, leaders must recognize that their everyday reactions function as powerful translations of organizational policy. A dismissive response can redefine early reporting as incompetence, even when formal training defines it as responsibility.

From Individual Compliance to Shared Safety Meaning

Taken together, the findings indicate that safety cannot be strengthened only through stricter individual compliance. Workers' behavior is shaped by a broader interpretive environment in which rules, leadership responses, peer expectations, and cultural assumptions interact.

The organization may formally require early reporting, proactive voice, hazard prediction, and continuous improvement. However, these expectations will not become embedded if workers experience contradictory signals in practice. Shared safety meaning is

created when formal rules, leader behavior, and organizational consequences consistently communicate the same message.

For example, if workers are prohibited from conducting repair, leaders must not criticize them for stopping and reporting minor abnormalities. If *nayami sōdan* is intended as improvement feedback, workers who express difficulty should not be labelled as complainers. If *Yarinikui Sagyō* is a signal for *kaizen*, difficult work should be investigated rather than normalized. If *Kiken Yochi* is intended to develop anticipatory thinking, evaluation should focus on the quality of predicted scenarios rather than the completion of a checklist.

This shift requires organizations to move from asking whether workers know the rule to examining how the rule is socially interpreted. Safety competence should include the ability to recognize uncertainty, communicate weak signals, consult appropriately, and stop work without fear of interpersonal punishment. Leadership competence should include receiving early reports constructively, clarifying ambiguous thresholds, and protecting workers who speak up.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study extends the concept of sociopragmatic failure into workplace safety discourse. Previous discussions of sociopragmatic failure have often focused on politeness, requests, refusals, and culturally appropriate interaction. The present findings show that sociopragmatic differences can also affect high-risk organizational communication, particularly when participants interpret responsibility, authority, urgency, and appropriateness differently.

The study also demonstrates that sociopragmatic failure may arise even when no overt misunderstanding is visible. Workers and managers may use the same terminology, participate in the same safety activities, and appear to agree with the same principles. The failure becomes visible only when their actions reveal different interpretations of when to report, when to stop, what counts as a hazard, and whether speaking up is socially acceptable.

Practically, the findings indicate that safety training should address meaning rather than terminology alone. Training should include contrasting scenarios showing normal and abnormal conditions, acceptable and unacceptable forms of self-repair, early and late BNF, effective and ineffective SCW, and constructive leader responses. More importantly, organizational evaluation should examine whether actual leadership behavior supports or contradicts the intended safety philosophy.

The existence of previous internal and external near-fatal incidents associated with violations of BNF and SCW further emphasizes that these meaning gaps are not merely communicative imperfections. They may affect whether weak signals are escalated before they develop into serious events. Clarifying the pragmatic meaning of early reporting is therefore not only a cultural or linguistic concern but a central component of accident prevention.

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Concluding Interpretation

Overall, the findings reveal that sociopragmatic failure in Japanese–Indonesian safety discourse emerges from the interaction of cultural interpretation, organizational ambiguity, power relations, and inconsistent leadership responses. The central problem is not that workers do not understand safety vocabulary, but that they may attach different social meanings to reporting, consulting, predicting, enduring, and speaking up.

Japanese safety concepts become effective only when their institutional intentions are translated into interactional practices that workers can interpret consistently. Without this alignment, the organization may achieve shared terminology without achieving shared safety meaning. Cross-cultural safety management therefore requires continuous negotiation of meaning, explicit clarification of communicative expectations, and leadership practices that make early reporting and worker voice socially safe as well as formally mandatory.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how Japanese safety concepts are interpreted within the workplace discourse of a Japanese manufacturing company operating in Indonesia. The findings demonstrate that the principal challenge in cross-cultural safety communication does not primarily stem from linguistic limitations or the absence of organizational commitment to safety. Rather, it arises from differences in the sociocultural interpretation of institutional safety concepts as they are translated and enacted across organizational levels.

Five recurrent manifestations of sociopragmatic failure were identified: *Anzen Daiichi* **(安全第一)**, ***Horenso*** **(報・連・相)** *together with Bad News First (BNF) and Safety Call Work (SCW)*, *Kiken Yochi* **(危険予知)**, *Yarinikui Sagyō* **(やりにくい作業)**, and *Member Voice/Nayami Sōdan* **(悩み相談)**. Across these concepts, workers generally understood the literal meanings of Japanese safety terminology. However, they frequently attached different institutional meanings concerning responsibility, authority, urgency, risk anticipation, and appropriate workplace communication. Consequently, identical safety vocabulary did not necessarily produce shared safety understanding or consistent safety behavior.

Among these findings, the study highlights the interaction between *organizational ambiguity* and *power relations* as a critical mechanism underlying sociopragmatic failure. Formal organizational rules require workers to recognize abnormal conditions, stop unsafe work, refrain from unauthorized repair, and immediately communicate abnormalities through BNF and SCW. In practice, however, uncertainty regarding the boundary between normal and abnormal conditions, together with workers' concerns about appearing incompetent, overly dependent, or complaining, may discourage early reporting and consultation. As a result, communication intended to prevent accidents may be delayed until abnormalities have already developed into equipment failures, production disturbances, or safety incidents. These findings indicate that sociopragmatic failure should be understood not merely as a communication problem but as a phenomenon emerging from the interaction between

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organizational discourse, leadership responses, workplace hierarchy, and local cultural expectations.

The study therefore argues that transferring Japanese safety philosophy into Indonesian workplaces involves a process of *cultural translation* rather than simple linguistic translation. Japanese concepts such as *Anzen Daiichi*, *Horenso*, *Kiken Yochi*, and *Nayami Sōdan* carry embedded assumptions regarding collective responsibility, proactive communication, anticipatory thinking, and continuous improvement. When these concepts are interpreted through different cultural norms and workplace experiences, their institutional intentions may be partially reconstructed, resulting in meaning gaps that influence everyday safety practices. Developing a shared safety culture consequently requires organizations to negotiate shared meanings, clarify the practical boundaries between normal and abnormal conditions, and ensure that leadership behavior consistently reinforces rather than contradicts formal safety policies.

Theoretically, this study extends Thomas's concept of sociopragmatic failure beyond interpersonal communication into the domain of workplace safety discourse. It demonstrates that sociopragmatic differences may influence high-risk organizational communication even when all participants appear to share the same language and terminology. The study also contributes to the growing literature on cultural translation by showing that organizational philosophies are translated not only through language but also through institutional practices, leadership interactions, and locally negotiated meanings.

Practically, the findings suggest that multinational organizations should move beyond terminology-based safety training toward meaning-oriented communication. Organizations need to define operationally what constitutes normal and abnormal conditions, clarify when BNF and SCW must be activated, protect workers who report early abnormalities, and develop leadership practices that encourage consultation, early reporting, and constructive Member Voice. Aligning organizational rules with everyday supervisory responses is essential for transforming formal safety procedures into shared organizational practice.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted within a single Japanese manufacturing company in Indonesia and focused on qualitative interpretations of workplace safety discourse. Therefore, the findings should not be generalized statistically to all Japanese multinational companies. Future research may compare different industries, organizational cultures, and national contexts to examine whether similar sociopragmatic patterns emerge. Longitudinal studies could also investigate how shared safety meaning develops over time through leadership practices, organizational learning, and continuous cultural translation.

Ultimately, this study concludes that effective cross-cultural safety communication depends not on whether organizational members use the same safety terminology, but on whether they construct the same institutional meaning from that terminology. Shared vocabulary alone does not guarantee shared safety understanding. Instead, sustainable safety culture is built through continuous negotiation of meaning, cultural translation, and leadership practices that transform organizational philosophy into everyday communicative action.

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