

# A Comparative Study of Refusal Speech Acts in Chinese and American English

## ETUDE COMPARATIVE DES ACTES DE DISCOURS DE REFUS DANS LE CHINOIS ET L'ANGLAIS AMERICAIN

Li Honglin<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Refusals are frequently performed in our daily lives, and the speech act of refusals is one significant research topic in Pragmatics. Based on the speech act theory of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969), with the theoretical frame of the politeness theory put forward by Brown and Levinson, This paper presents a comparative study of speech acts of refusal in Chinese and American English (AE). The results show that refusals vary in directness with situations and cultures, just like other speech acts, yet there are some similarities between Chinese and AE. On the one hand, both languages employ the three directness types, namely the direct refusal speech act, ability of negation and indirect refusal speech act, and prefer indirect refusals. The situational variability of directness in both languages follows a similar trend. On the other hand, Americans are more direct than Chinese and Chinese sincere refusals are considered as face-threatening acts, which call for politeness strategies to minimize the negative effects on the addressee(s). Furthermore, Chinese shows the lower degree of situational variation in the use of the three directness types. From all these evidence, we maintain that the cross-linguistic differences are due to basic differences in cultural values, i.e., Americans value individualism and equality, while Chinese value collectivism and social hierarchy.

**Key words:** Refusal Speech Act, Chinese-American, Comparison, Cultural Values

**Résumé:** Dans la vie quotidienne, il nous arrive souvent de refuser les autres. Les actes de discours de refus est aussi une problématique importante dans les recherches de la pragmatique. Selon la théorie des actes de discours d'Austin et de Searle ainsi que le principe de politesse de Brown et de Levinson, l'article présente une étude comparative des actes de discours de refus des Chinois et des Américains. Il existe des points communs entre eux, par exemple, les mêmes caractéristiques des actes de refus : l'utilisation des trois ordres directs dans les actes de discours, à savoir, actes de discours de refus direct, capacité de refus et actes de discours de refus indirect ; la préférence pour les actes de refus indirect ; la tendance d'aliénation semblable du contexte. Mais il se trouve aussi des différences sous l'influence de la culture. Les Américains sont plus directs que les Chinois dans les actes de refus. Les Chinois s'efforcent de minimiser l'impact négatif des actes de refus sur l'interlocuteur en utilisant des stratégies de politesse, parce que, d'après eux, le refus direct blesse la face de l'autre partie. D'ailleurs, le niveau d'aliénation du contexte du chinois est inférieur à celui de l'anglais américain. Ces écarts sont dus aux différentes conceptions de la valeur culturelle des deux pays, les Américains préconisent la personnalité et l'égalité alors que les Chinois insistent sur la collectivité et la hiérarchie sociale.

**Mots-Clés:** actes de discours de refus, Chine et Etats-Unis, comparaison, conception de la valeur culturelle

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Oxford philosopher John L. Austin presented Speech Acts Theory. The American philosopher John R. Searle, who had studied under Austin in the fifties, subsequently became the main proponent and defender

<sup>1</sup> Foreign Language Department of Central China Normal University, China.

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of the former's ideas. Searle further developed the speech act theory; especially he put forward the famous indirect speech act theory. Indirect speech act is a universal phenomenon in human language. As Searle puts it "The unit of linguistic communication is not, as has generally been supposed, the symbol, word or sentence, ... but rather the production of the symbol or word or sentence in the performance of the speech act"(1969). Refusal speech act is to perform the action of refusal. It has similarities in Chinese and American English, but it also has differences in the two languages due to the specific communication situation and varied cultures. This paper presents the similarity and difference of refusal speech acts in Chinese and American English.

## 2. SIMILARITY OF REFUSAL SPEECH ACTS IN CHINESE AND AMERICAN ENGLISH

Refusal speech acts vary in directness with situation and culture, but there are some similarities between Chinese and American English. Both the two speech acts try to abide by the Cooperative Principle and the Politeness Principle, Politeness is the norm that people of different cultural backgrounds must obey and uphold, because to satisfy others' faces is to save your own face. What is different is that in two languages there are some constraints on politeness strategies employed by people in communication.

Chinese and Americans both employ the three directness types, namely the direct refusal speech act, ability of negation speech act, and indirect refusal speech act(王愛華, 吳貴涼 2005). Direct refusals such as "no way", "no, thanks" in American English and "不行", "不可以", "不用" in Chinese. Ability of negation speech act means the speaker doesn't have the ability to accept the request or invitation. These speech acts may be "I can't...", "I don't have..." in American English and "我不能...", "我也沒有...呀", etc. in Chinese. Indirect refusal speech acts means the refusal is performed through the other speech. For example, Americans will use "I have a really busy schedule this week", "I'm not interested in such kind of activity", etc. to refuse an invitation, and Chinese people will use "我寫論文需要參考這本書呀", "這本書很常用的, 你最好也自己去買一本吧", etc. to refuse the borrowing request from others.

Furthermore the situational variability of directness in both languages follows a similar trend. According to the statistics presented by 王愛華, 吳貴涼(2005), the three directness types used in Chinese respectively is 5.7%, 8.9%, 85%, whereas in American English is 15.1%, 15.9% 69%. Both Chinese and American prefer to choose indirect refusal speech acts rather than the direct refusal speech acts. However Americans are more

direct than Chinese. The number of direct refusal speech acts in American English is 2.6 times than that in Chinese, and American English indirect refusal speech acts are 16% less than that of Chinese. People's speech acts are embedded in the cultural background. The doctrine of the Golden Mean and collectivism influenced Chinese, so people try to be harmonious and self-restrained in the social communication. Americans advocate individualism and freedom, so their association is more simple and direct.

## 3. DIFFERENT REFUSAL SPEECH ACTS IN CHINESE AND AMERICAN ENGLISH

Although speech acts in both languages try to abide by the Cooperative Principle and the Politeness Principle, they differ in practical strategies of word use and syntactic structure. The findings drawn from interpersonal communications indicate that the Chinese tend to use the politeness refusal strategy of "marginally touching the point" because they are more economical in their choices of the number of the tokens of the refusal strategies so that they could restore relationship with people. One polite mode of refusing is "address term + apology + reasons". The Americans tend to use a "question attentiveness" strategy. They try to employ different refusal strategies in order that the problems in question could be solved. One polite mode of refusing is "I would like to + reasons + apology.

The variety of speech acts is influenced by the social distance, social power and difficulty of required behavior. However these factors do not enjoy the same status in Chinese and American English refusal speech acts even in the same site. Social power plays a more important role in Chinese, so does social distance in American English. The cross-linguistic differences are due to basic differences in cultural values. Americans value individualism and equality, while Chinese value collectivism and social hierarchy. Social hierarchy is typically illustrated in the aspects of superior and inferior social ranks, parents and children, teachers and students. Social distance is typically displayed in the relation of close relatives or friends and ordinary friends or strangers.

### 3.1 Social Power Influence

#### 3.1.1 Superior and Inferior Social Ranks

Chinese society is ranked by the hierarchy essentially. Therefore social communication is influenced heavily by the social status. People in the inferior social rank should be respectful to the one who is relatively in the superior social rank. The refusal speech acts are more indirect when the refused person's social status is higher than the speaker. On the contrary, the American's value

of equality permeates in Americans' mind. The noted claim of "All men are created equal" in the Declaration of Independence is known throughout the world. So an American would probably refuse the request of his up leader more direct than Chinese. For example, when the manager asked the employee to work overtime, but the employee's child happened to get a high fever and need to see the doctor that day. Chinese employee may refuse as this "我孩子發高燒，得馬上去醫院呀". While the American may say "Sorry, I can't. I have to go home to look after my child now". Chinese used the objective excuse to refuse the extra shift to show that he had no alternative. American used the negative word "can not" to illustrate his opinion clearly. In this example the American is more direct than the Chinese in the same situation.

### 3.1.2 Parents and Children

In Chinese culture, the old member of a family is respected by the younger one. Parents have the indispensable authority in the family. Children should be filial to their parents. Therefore it is acceptable for parents to refuse children directly but children can not do the same to their parents. While in American culture, individualism is appreciated. To some extent, children are equal to their parents. They should respect each other's privacy and ideas. Sometimes children call their parents names, which is not accepted in Chinese culture. In this circumstance, American children can refuse their parents directly if they thought they were right. For instance, the father asked his son to practice piano after supper. But there was an interesting TV program at that moment. The Chinese child might answer "好吧，我看完電視就開始練習". He used the future promise to refuse the present requirement, but do not use the direct negative words. The American child might response "I don't like playing the piano after supper, because I don't want to miss the interesting program". The American children can express their own opinions directly without scruple the authority of their parents.

### 3.1.3 Teacher and Student

In Chinese society, people consider whether there is any precedent or experience can be used for reference before they perform by themselves. So Chinese generally worship their forbears and respect their teachers. Chinese emphasize "honor the teacher and revere his teachings". It is teacher's responsibility to criticize student's misbehavior. In this atmosphere, teachers naturally use direct refusal speech acts to refuse students' requirement of delaying their homework. Teachers may say "不可以晚交作業，今日事今日畢", "好學生是能按時完成作業的，按時交過來吧", or "不能以任何理由晚交作業，趕早不趕晚". Teachers tend to use relatively more direct refusal speech acts to decline students in such situation. While the students probably dare not choose the direct refusal speech acts to refuse teachers. For example, when the

teacher asked his student to translate something that is not related to the course work, the student may refuse like this "我想我可能翻譯不了這篇文章，您最好還是找個對這個領域稍微熟悉的同學來翻譯吧", "如果是上周就好了，可是我這周有考試呀，得用很多時間復習功課啊". Americans respect the forbears. However they seldom obey the rules mechanically. They worship forbears devoutly but do not thoroughly respect teachers as Chinese do. Therefore the directness of refusal speech acts used by American students is higher than Chinese students. When the teacher invite a American student to have a dinner together, the student can choose these refusal speech acts to decline the invitation such as "I don't believe that would be a good idea", "Sorry, sir, I don't prefer to have dinner at your house this time", "I can't have dinner with you, because I must eat dinner with my roommates".

### 3.2 Social Distance Influence

Because of the value of equality, Americans are not sensitive to social rank. Influence of social distance on refusal speech acts plays a more important role than that of social power in American English. Americans may use the same type of refusal speech acts to refuse anyone, regardless of his social status. However the selection of refusal speech acts based on social distance is quite different. The more distant the social distance, the more indirect the refusal speech acts.

Americans possibly would use more assistant speech acts and rhetorical utterances to weaken the frankness of refusal. For instance, the speaker is invited to eat something. If the inviter is his workmate, the American may refuse like this "No, thank you. I just ate before coming", "Thank you, but I'm not hungry". If the inviter is his workmate's mother, the refusal speech acts may be "It's very nice of you, but I'm full", "Thank you. It smells delicious. But I have just had meal", "Oh, thanks. I've eaten already. And I'm full now. I can't eat any more". The later refusal speech acts have the associative and rhetorical utterances such as "It's very nice of you", "It smells delicious". Those utterances alleviate the refusal impact.

Chinese is just on the opposite. Chinese belongs to the collectivism culture. They distinguish in-group and out-group members clearly. Chinese are less likely to refuse a family member, but they are cold in manner to the out-group members. So the refusal speech acts are not as polite as they refuse the in-group members. When the Chinese refuse a member outside the family, they tend to express that there is a compelling extrinsic force directing them towards the action, and they refuse by claiming exterior factors. For instance, if the requirement of asking for help is presented by his friend, he may refuse like this "不好意思，我這會兒正忙呢", "是得快點弄好，可是我幫不上忙呀", "呦，我剛好答應小李了". If the requirement is presented by a stranger, he may refuse like this "你找別人吧，我不行".

“你的忙我幫不上”，“這不好吧，你得自己做”。These utterances include the directive word “you”，which clearly show the remote relationship between each other, and they are not as indirectness as those among friends.

Moreover, the responses of the Americans and the Chinese indicate that, compared with the Chinese, significantly more Americans are fond of teaching a peer a lesson when they are right. The American methods of teaching a peer a lesson can be exemplified as follows: “Sorry, but you snooze, you loose”, “If you skip class, then you pay the price” or “You should come to class more often. You might learn more if you take your own notes.” The Chinese, in contrast, tones will be softer by saying: “你不應該這樣做的” or “好吧，但下次你還是最好別曠課了”。

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Refusal speech act is the utterance, which is spoken out to perform the action of refuse. Contrastive studies of the speech act of refusing in interpersonal communications have been made enormously by the scholars both at home and abroad. The findings indicate that the Chinese and the Americans use different formulaic expressions in refusing and apply different

refusal strategies. The Chinese are more economical in their choices of the number of the tokens of the refusal strategies, which suggests a politeness refusal hypothesis of “marginally touching the point”, while the Americans tend to employ different refusal strategies in refusing and even do not hesitate to give a peer a lesson if they are right, which suggests a hypothesis of “question attentiveness”. This distinction seems to result from differences in social cultures between the Chinese and the Americans: The Chinese tend to emphasize restoring relationship between people, while the Americans emphasize solving the problems in question.

However, politeness is what people in both cultures are concerned about. Chinese and American English refusal speech acts have three types of directness, and the trend of using them is similar, but Chinese is more direct than American English. Social power is the most important factor influencing Chinese people’s selection of refusal speech acts. While social distance plays the most powerful role in Americans’ selection of refusal speech acts. The cross-linguistic differences are mainly caused by the basic different cultural values. Americans value individualism and equality, while Chinese value collectivism and social hierarchy.

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#### THE AUTHOR

**Li Honglin**, Foreign Language Department of Central China Normal University, Wuhan, Hubei, 430079, P.R. China.  
E-mail: lihonglin0518@163.com