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PRAGMATIC ASPECT OF REFUSAL BEHAVIOR IN CHINESE (BASED ON AN ONLINE SURVEY)

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To overcome linguistic and cultural barriers and to make cross-cultural interactions effective and comprehensible, scholars conduct thorough analyses of communicative behavior in various speech situations, such as requests, gratitude, demands, or refusals. The latter, in our view, is one of the most interesting and ambiguous subjects of study. Refusal behavior increases the risk of deteriorating interpersonal relationships, has a negative impact on both parties in communication, and possesses a high degree of "conflict potential." The goal of any communicative interaction is to achieve the communicative objective with minimal emotional and status losses. This article presents an analysis of refusal strategies in the Chinese language. The study is based on the scientific method of discourse analysis of a language corpus obtained through an online survey of Chinese respondents. The results showed that survey participants prefer to use indirect speech acts as the primary strategy to maintain face, with social distance and hierarchy being significant factors influencing the choice of strategies. The findings may be useful in practical Chinese language classes and related subjects, such as translation, as well as in studies of Chinese language discourse.

Keywords: Chinese language, refusal, indirect speech acts, strategies, communicative mitigation

Introduction

Communicative linguistics is a comprehensive field of modern linguistics. Today, one of its priority areas is intercultural communication. This is not a coincidence, as in the age of globalization and the Internet, communication between representatives of different countries, nationalities, and faiths becomes increasingly convenient, frequent, and diverse.

To avoid adverse consequences from objections or disagreements, the recipient to whom a request is directed typically formulates their response in a polite manner and uses evasive or indirect speech acts of refusal. An "indirect refusal" refers to a non-confrontational, "non-cooperative" response behavior exhibited by the listener in reaction to proposals, requests, invitations, and offers made by the speaker, achieved through the execution of another speech act. The analysis and identification of effective speech techniques for refusal behavior in Chinese culture underscore the relevance of this study. Through these techniques, one communicator in a culture can maintain face, while another can indicate and preserve their personal boundaries.

Thus, on one hand, we find it important to investigate refusal behavior within the framework of a specific culture, carefully studying the reasons and patterns that shape a particular national model of communicative behavior. On the other hand, we focus on the role and characteristics of indirect speech acts (hereinafter abbreviated as ISA) in refusal situations. This constitutes the aim of this research. Moreover, the ambiguity and evasiveness associated with ISAs, along with the harmonization of communication and its maintenance in a positive light, can simultaneously introduce complexities, often generating ambiguity in statements. This is especially true when it comes to high-context cultures, such as Chinese culture.

For instance, the phrase "我想想" ("I need to think") in the context of disagreement or refusal is not equivalent to a promise to plan a solution to a problem or to consider the best way to fulfill a request; rather, the speaker is postponing the moment, subtly demonstrating an inability or unwillingness to engage in others' affairs. Consider another case: "не знаю" in Russian is equivalent to "не могу" and is used to indirectly convey to the interlocutor the impossibility of fulfilling their request. However, it can simultaneously express hesitation, agreement, surprise, or indignation, and distinguishing these linguistic-cultural nuances can be challenging, especially for foreigners. This is precisely why it is essential to study the communicative strategies of tactical refusal in the Chinese language in detail, as well as the ethnocultural characteristics that influence the communication techniques of native speakers.

Thus, in the practical part, we will attempt to analyze the semantic and functional-stylistic features of expressing refusal in the Chinese language, focusing on the theory of ISAs, politeness, and a number of concepts within Chinese culture.

Scientific novelty of the study lies in the quantitative and qualitative analysis of indirect refusals to requests, with responses obtained from Chinese respondents. Additionally, the study identifies and describes the explicit and implicit reasons for which the recipient indirectly declines to respond, a topic that has not been previously addressed in the works of Russian linguists.

Previous studies on Chinese refusal: In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in publications and works where linguists study the lexicogrammatical, syntactic, and ethnocultural features of refusal behavior (speech act failure). Most often, research is conducted based on a specific language within the frameworks of theories such as speech act theory developed by J.L. Austin (1970), speech acts (J.S. Searle [Searle 2010]), politeness principles (Brown and Levinson, Grice, Leech [Brown.R., Levinson S. 1978]), social norms and roles, and the pragmatic and semantic aspects of speech communication [Y.E. Prokhorov, I.A. Sternin 2011], among others.

It is important to note the trend of comparing and analyzing refusal behavior among speakers of two cultures (for example, Chinese and

Americans). The empirical component of the overwhelming majority of studies is conducted through surveys or is based on linguistic material from serial or television discourse. For instance, Chinese authors Wang Aihua and Wu Guilan conducted a comparative analysis of refusal speech acts in American and Chinese cultures. Their analysis is grounded in Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, particularly the principle of face maintenance and the associated determinants of social power and distance. However, the researchers challenge the thesis of Western linguists that the greater the value of "interpersonal distance" between communicators and social regulation, the more indirect the politeness strategy is. Ultimately, the conclusions of Wang Aihua and Wu Guilan do not refute but rather reaffirm and expand Brown and Levinson's theory. They argue that the aforementioned components of polite communication, along with the emotional factor specifically examined in their study, do influence verbal behavior in refusal situations in both Chinese and American contexts, but in not entirely the same way [Wang Aihua, Wu Guilan 2004]. For example, the concept of face in Chinese culture has its specific characteristics that differ from those in other cultures. The main motivation is the understanding of whether personal behavior aligns with societal concepts and evaluations. The Chinese are motivated by the social principle of 来礼还礼 (li lai huan li) or "returning a favor," which creates significant pressure when they find themselves in a situation where they cannot fulfill a request, reflecting this pressure at the verbal level.

Dai Xingwen, in her article "Tactics of Refusing Speech Behavior and Their Functions in the Chinese Language" [Dai Xingwen 2021], conducts a comparative study of the indirect refusal behavior of Chinese individuals and foreign students studying Chinese as a foreign language. The survey results showed that both groups of respondents prefer indirect refusal strategies to avoid conflict. Factors influencing their behavior include social status and contextual settings of refusal speech behavior. Chinese students utilize a more diverse range of means for indirect expressions compared to foreign students. Dai Xingwen emphasizes the importance of using clichés in teaching the Chinese language, as well as the correct use of indirect expressions in communication. In this context, the article by another Chinese linguist, Mi Ruonan, is significant. He thoroughly analyzes the lexical-grammatical components of fixed expressions and speech patterns in refusal situations. In the first part of his work, the author provides a detailed breakdown and analysis of the discursive formulas of direct and indirect speech acts of disagreement/refusal, while in the second part, he discusses three main tasks that refusal behavior addresses during communication: concluding a conversation, avoiding conflict, maintaining amicable relationships, and preserving face [Mi Ruonan 2023].

Another notable contribution is made by Tang Lin [Tang Lin 2004], who examined the topic of indirect speech acts of refusal and their representation in

Chinese discourse. Based on the results of a survey conducted among Chinese individuals with higher education, the researcher found that polite (委婉拒绝) and indirect refusals (间接拒绝) predominated in quantitative terms, further confirming the notion that this model of refusal behavior is most common in the Chinese language. Tang Lin noted that despite the mitigating, euphemistic nature of indirect speech acts, this approach is not always diplomatic in some cases. Additionally, the article offers a thorough analysis of the lexical and syntactic means of expressing refusal, which contribute to the formation of a "unique Chinese culture" [Tang Lin 2004:117].

Regarding Russian and Russian-speaking studies on speech behavior in refusal situations in the Chinese language, it should be noted that scholars mostly address this topic indirectly within the framework of the speech genre "request," not to mention indirect refusal behavior. Moreover, a significant portion of articles and monographs focuses on the study of refusal speech acts within European languages, for example, by Takhtarova S.S. [Takhtarova 2013], Korzova E.N. [Korzova 2022], and others. In our view, it is indisputable that a comprehensive analysis of both speech genres is necessary for a clearer and more complete understanding of the entire picture, examining request and refusal situations in conjunction, rather than in isolation. The nature of the request, how, by whom, and under what circumstances it is formulated will influence the content of the refusal. In this regard, the scholarly works of Belarusian linguist Babkina P.S., which focus on the linguistic and cultural features of indirect requests and refusals in Chinese and Russian languages, deserve special attention. The author emphasizes that communicators in both cultures more often use indirect rather than direct speech acts, and it is noteworthy that they are driven by different intentions, based on culturally specific patterns of communicative behavior [Babkina 2019]. In her work "Indirect Request and Indirect Refusal in the Chinese and Russian Ethnolinguistic Space," Anastasia Sergeevna concludes that for Chinese individuals, indirect communication serves as a tool for demonstrating politeness and maintaining a positive face through the expression of respect and goodwill towards the interlocutor. To achieve this, means of communicative mitigation are typically employed.

Regarding Western studies, it is important to note the following trend: most English-language articles are published by Chinese authors (to some extent, this is also observed in our domestic scientific circles). This suggests that these works continue to explore the issue of speech refusal through the lens of an "Eastern perspective," rooted in their national culture, while making their research findings more accessible to an English-speaking audience. They provide a detailed examination of communicative tactics in refusal speech situations and various types of refusing behavior [Wang Rongbin, Zhao Mengyao, Jia Yang 2023]. Interestingly, the research reveals that preschool

children in China more frequently use explicit rather than implicit refusals, as well as non-verbal communication methods [Guo Yuling 2012].

The results of the review of foreign and domestic sources indicate that existing studies on the speech act of refusal focus on the peculiarities of communicative behavior among representatives of different cultures and compare refusal tactics in Chinese with those in other languages. A detailed lexical-grammatical and semantic-pragmatic analysis of speech patterns is provided, along with methodological recommendations for using this knowledge in teaching Chinese as a foreign language, for preparing lessons, and for developing educational materials. The overwhelming majority of studies are based on survey results and have significant potential for further identifying the influence of extralinguistic factors such as the age and gender of communicators on refusal behavior. Alongside this, we believe that an important condition that plays a significant role in the interpersonal interactions of speakers of any language is the cultural worldview. Considering this, a detailed examination of the cultural, semantic, and functional-stylistic features of refusal behavior in the Chinese language is a key objective of our research.

Methodology

Research process and model

This study was conducted to investigate the lexical-grammatical and linguocultural features of refusal tactics in the Chinese language. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed in the research.

Sixty-five native speakers aged 20 to 35 participated in the study. An online survey was distributed on Google and WeChat platforms. The author initially selected all request speech acts from the corpus, totaling 390, and then analyzed and classified the selected request speech. The central theme of this research is the use of communicative mitigation as one of the most commonly used and effective indirect strategies employed in this speech situation. Additionally, the article analyzes the level of complexity and the reasons for refusal speech behavior in specific situations among the respondents. The analysis of the obtained factual material relies on the results of the survey, during which informants were asked to present and formulate refusals in various communication situations. The relationship between the degree of politeness and the indirectness of statements is also examined.

A modified version of the Discourse Completion Test (DCT), created based on the work of other researchers, was used, incorporating social variables such as social distance and social hierarchy between participants, which we believe is relevant for analyzing paradigms and scenarios of interpersonal communication among Chinese individuals. Additionally, semantic analysis was applied in examining refusal speech formulas in Chinese, which allowed us to unpack the implicit meanings of certain statements and fixed expressions.

Research Hypothesis

Considering the fact that Chinese culture is high-context, we can assume that the external circumstances and conditions in which communication participants are situated have a direct impact on their communicative behavior, particularly in the context of refusal speech situations.

Results and Discussion

In 1996, Liao Chaoqing and M. Bresnahan [Liao, C.C., Bresnahan, M.I. 1996] presented a classification of refusal tactics called "features of strategies" and provided a detailed description of 24 techniques of refusing behavior. Additionally, typologies by other researchers, such as L.M. Beebe, T. Takahashi, and R. Ulysses-Wailtz [Beebe, L. T., Takahashi, & R. Ulysses-Wailtz 1990], were examined. These typologies not only categorized verbal refusals but also identified and analyzed non-verbal methods. The models examined have much in common, and thus, in our analysis of the linguistic material, we relied on them and separately highlighted the most common tactics.

To identify refusal strategies, we broke down the obtained statements into minimal, yet complete semantic units of information that can be understood independently. These semantic units were then classified using the typology created by other researchers, as described above. For example, when a colleague asks for help in preparing a presentation, the response given by the respondent can be broken down into separate lexical-semantic fields.

Respondents most often use speech clichés as a mitigative refusal strategy. Wan Aihua, in her research, describes the following lexical-syntactic structure of a sentence in a refusal situation: 修饰语+辅助言语行为+中心言语行为 (modifier + auxiliary speech act + main speech act). In a simplified form, it can be represented as: 道歉语+解释+拒绝 (words of apology + explanation + refusal). It is important to note that, based on our data, the scheme proposed by Wan Aihua is not always presented in full form, which is clearly evident within the same situation:

妈妈，真是不巧。 - 我今天跟朋友已经约好了，下次陪您去逛。
(Mom, I'm really sorry. I already have plans with a friend today; let's go together next time.)

不好意思，这周我也有事，借不了。 - (Sorry, I also have plans on this weekend and can't lend it.)

对不起。我很忙。 - (Sorry, I'm busy.)

不好意思，周末我要出门。 - (Sorry, I need to go out this weekend.)

The last example clearly shows that in Chinese Refusal Acts (CRA), it is often sufficient to describe only the reason for the refusal, which is enough for

the recipient to interpret it correctly. In our view, studying clichés at the level of words, phrases, and sentences holds significant importance in the paradigm of research on refusing communicative behavior.

Examples of indirect communication clichés used in refusal situations include expressions like 暂时没有时间 (it's not the right time now) and 再商量一下 (let's discuss it later/let's come back to this issue later). Since the person does not directly reject the offer but politely indicates that the postponement of the request is temporary and that the circumstances are not favorable, and the refusal is not related to the personal desire of the addressee, this speech tactic is not perceived as rude or painful by the requester. Thus, it also demonstrates respect for the addressee and a desire not to cause harm.

Special attention was paid to the analysis of the situation of refusal of behavior from the position of such parameters as social distance and the level of hierarchical relations. The survey participants had to imagine how they would respond to a particular request with a refusal, if they were in front of a loved one (mother, younger brothers/sisters), colleague, friend or boss. Analyzing the table below, it can be noted that the indicators differ depending on the social consequences and the consequences being tested. If this is a co-worker or a neighbor, the social distance between them and the respondent is equally neutral, and they are at the same level of hierarchy. The social distance between relatives will be close, at this level social power depends on family ties, seniority in the family. The indicators regarding friends are the same, the communicants are close and equal:

Figure 1

speech situation	social distance	social power *
S1 (refusal to mom's request to go shopping): Close, low	nearer	lower
S2 (refusal to a colleague's request for help with a work project): Neutral, equal	neutral	equal
S3 (refusal to a friend's request to borrow transportation): Close, equal	near	equal
S4 (refusal to a brother/sister's request for help with homework): Close, high	nearer	higher
S5 (refusal to a manager's request to do overtime work): Neutral, low	neutral	lower
S6 (refusal to a neighbor's request to borrow tools): Neutral, equal	neutral	equal

*The given indicator reflects the position of the refuser in relation to the requester.

By comparing the results of the provided table and analyzing the level of tactic usage in refusals by the respondents, it becomes evident that when the refuser occupies a higher position in the social hierarchy, it is reflected in the respondent's speech and manner of responding: polite formulations are used rarely, giving way to brief, abrupt phrases that logically justify the reason for

refusal and even openly criticize the requester's behavior. If the social distance is low, the speaker, on the contrary, employs various mitigating strategies as a tactic of indirect refusal behavior and even expresses agreement. There is also a certain correlation between speech behavior and social distance: the closer it is, the less formal expressions are used by the survey participants, who instead use slang or humor in their speech, while the more neutral the interaction, the drier and more formal the tone of the conversation.

Another important communicative dominant that significantly influences speech etiquette in Chinese discourse is 面子 ("face"). According to Ting-Toomey S., the concept of "face" represents society's assessment of a person in terms of how well their behavior conforms to social norms [Ting-Toomey S. 1985]. Avoiding direct refusals is related to the concept of "face" in Chinese society, akin to our notions of "reputation" or "social status." In China, direct refusals are considered an extremely impolite way of expressing disagreement. Therefore, in most cases, Chinese people use polite forms of address, such as indirect speech acts, including communicative mitigation, to avoid losing face and damaging the reputation of the interlocutor.

After examining the quantitative ratio of indirect and direct refusals in specific communicative situations described earlier, we found that the latter significantly predominates in the options provided by the respondents.

Figure 2

Situation	Direct Refusal	Indirect Refusal	Mitigated Indirect Refusal
S1	4%	60%	36%
S2	15%	30%	55%
S3	5%	45%	50%
S4	7%	76%	17%
S5	5%	75%	20%
S6	5%	67%	48%

Moreover, the category of mitigated indirect refusal is highlighted separately in the table, as in some cases implicit indirect refusals may conceal overt rudeness and verbal aggression. For example, let's compare the responses to a request for help with a brother or sister's school homework:

做梦 - "Dreaming is not harmful!"

没空，走开 - "I'm busy, leave me alone!"

不写 - "No."

In the first two cases, we have a indirect refusal, while the last expression is a direct refusal. Even though the speaker does not openly express unwillingness to fulfill the request or state it directly, their speech is rude and dismissive, and the emotional harm caused by these words is clearly greater than a short and direct refusal. Let's analyze more cases:

你的工作你自己整，我自己的都整不完呢还给你整。 - "Deal with your own matters yourself. I can barely handle my work, let alone help you!"

有没有可能我忙的很，没空。 - "Even if I could help, I'm swamped with work. I have no time!"

每个人都有自己的工作。不好意思我忙得很。 - "Everyone has their own responsibilities. Sorry, I'm really busy."

不做。 - "No, I can't help."

Despite the use of direct refusals, respondents describe the objective reasons for their inability to assist a colleague, while also reproaching the requester for irresponsibly shifting their duties onto others, which contradicts corporate policy. This once again confirms the idea that the situation is not so straightforward, and while indirect refusals may help preserve face, they do not always aim to mitigate the negative consequences of refusing behavior. Instead, they could be interpreted as an attempt to assert personal boundaries and demonstrate social power while maintaining one's reputation, without supporting the interlocutor's face.

The next step involved a thorough quantitative and qualitative analysis of refusal tactics, allowing us to confirm our hypothesis that one of the important factors influencing the refusing behavior of communicators in Chinese discourse is context. The conditions in which the requester and the person making the refusal find themselves also significantly affect which tactic the refuser considers effective and appropriate based on the specific situation. Based on the classification proposed by Liao Chaoqing, L.M. Beebe, and T. Takahashi, we selected tactics such as praise, explanation of reasons, demonstration of regret, topic change, attempts to confuse the interlocutor, deferred promises, and offering alternatives, as well as some others, which were used as a response (manipulating pity, humor, external agreement, etc.) on rare occasions:

Figure 3

Tactic/ Situation	Praise	Reason and Regret	Topic Change	Deferred Promise	Offering Alternatives	Other*
S1	2%	20%	9%	48%	2%	0%
S2	2%	37%	0%	43%	5%	4%
S3	0%	60%	2%	10%	20%	8%
S4	4%	38%	7%	9%	2%	40%
S5	0%	30%	0%	10%	24%	36%
S6	0%	9%	0%	62%	18%	10%

*(manipulation of feelings of pity, distraction or topic change, external agreement, internal disagreement, compromise agreement, intimidation, challenging the fairness of the request)

According to the results of the experiment, it was found that the majority of respondents used mitigating tactics when refusing, such as delaying the request, referencing external circumstances, seeking compromise, and humor. Most often, the refusal appeared as an evasion of the request or the use of various tricks to avoid taking responsibility for the refusal, rather than directly stating that they could not help. This trend was clearly observed when respondents had to refuse a neighbor or friend's request to lend a personal item. They referred to family circumstances, unfortunate timing, and so on.

However, some people preferred to be open and honest, directly stating the reason for their refusal. For them, truthfulness and straightforwardness were more important than remaining complimentary towards others and maintaining positive relationships. While this might disappoint and negatively affect future communication with the requester, it allowed them to avoid disagreements and mistrust in the future:

车用不用都不想借人，出事故都会很麻烦。

"I never want to lend my car to anyone under any circumstances. If something happens to it, it will be a hassle."

An alternative to this could be an indirect mitigating refusal in the form of a joke:

车河老婆概不外接。

"Never lend your car or your wife to anyone!"

Some of them also offered alternative ways to resolve the issue or get out of the situation, demonstrating a willingness to compromise, preferring to avoid conflict and maintain good relationships with the requester. This was especially evident when respondents had to formulate a refusal to their boss:

好的，但是回晚点交给你，因为我提前有安排了。

"Okay, but I will send it to you later in the evening because I have plans before that."

我带回家今晚8点自谦写完一定发给你。

"I will take the work home and definitely send it to you before 8 PM."

我到点下班了，加班费给的话我旧干，不给的话我走了。

"My working day is over; if you pay for overtime, I will prepare the report; otherwise, I will go home."

The respondents understood that a scheduled meeting was not a valid reason to refuse a superior, and it was more of a directive than a request. Therefore, some even did not voice their true reasons, as we see in the second example, immediately proposing a solution that was convenient for both parties. The last statement, while proposing a middle-ground option, sounds more ultimatum-like, as the speaker does not adapt to the existing working conditions but dictates their own. This leads us to suggest that the Confucian principle of

respect for hierarchy and authority influences communicative behavior, often not allowing the speaker to express disagreement, even indirectly, leading them to respond positively or express external agreement while having internal disagreement.

A common feature of the refusal behaviors that were examined and studied in this article is that they were directly related to the context and conditions in which the respondents found themselves. Based on the cultural worldview and values of the individual, each chose the most suitable and effective way to refuse.

Conclusion

In summary of the results of the analysis conducted above, we concluded that in situations involving refusal, Chinese individuals typically employ indirect speech acts, which can broadly be defined as a refusal strategy. We identified the most common strategies as offering alternatives, deferred promises, and providing reasons for refusal (usually circumstances beyond the speaker's control). Each respondent chose their method of refusal based on accepted beliefs and values, as well as their way of interacting with others. Key components of Chinese culture, such as social distance, power dynamics, and the concept of face or business reputation, played a significant role in these choices. Additionally, we identified context as another crucial factor; the quality of respondents' answers often depended on how well the parameters of the communicative situation were defined.

Particular importance in the Chinese language is given not only to mitigating tactics but also to linguistic means of expressing refusal. Considering that Chinese has a fixed word order, a more in-depth study of these speech patterns could provide valuable material for practical Chinese language and translation classes, helping students better understand linguistic nuances and develop the skill of producing authentic speech.

It should be acknowledged that the potential for this research is vast, and for more accurate, qualitative results, a broader survey and detailed analysis of respondents' speech profiles could enhance our understanding in the fields of intercultural communication and Chinese language discourse. For example, employing a multimodal discourse analysis method and focusing on serial discourse could help supplement and verify the findings by integrating the analysis of both verbal and non-verbal means of interaction among communicators in China.

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