

A Cross-Cultural Study of Refusal Speech Acts in China, Korea, and America

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Abstract: This study compared refusal strategies used by speakers from three cultural groups whose native languages are Chinese, Korean, and American English respectively, from the perspective of cross-cultural communication based on Discourse Completion Task (DCT). Results show that generally speaking, all groups employed indirect refusal strategy more frequently than direct refusal strategy and adjuncts to refusal strategy, but the American subjects used direct refusals and adjuncts to refusals significantly more frequently than Chinese and Korean subjects. Besides, it was also found that the Korean subjects tended to be more direct than the Chinese subjects and showed a tendency towards the American subjects. Finally, with regard to the refuser's social status, it was observed that all the three groups employed adjuncts to refusal strategy more frequently to lower status interlocutors than to higher status interlocutors.

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, intercultural communication becomes increasingly important because of the integration of economic, political, and personal relationships throughout the world. However, without an understanding of different sociolinguistic rules observed by the speakers of different languages, intercultural communication breakdown or pragmatic failure often occurs. As indicated by Wolfson (1989), each society has its own sociolinguistic rule and social norms, and they must be understood in its own system which reflects the structure and value of the society. No two societies are the same in sociolinguistic behaviour.

Cultural specificity of language use is particularly obvious in speech act of refusal. Compared to other types of speech acts, refusal has received far more attention in intercultural communication because of its pragmatic complexities. Previous studies on refusal have shown that refusals can be expressed implicitly or explicitly, and they involve various face-saving strategies (Atkinson and Drew, 1979; Beebe and Cummings, 1996; Gass and Houck, 1999; Nelson et al., 2002a; Panphotong, 1999; Sairhun, 1999; Turnbull, 2001; Turnbull and Saxton, 1997).

As is known, China and Korea share many similarities in language and culture, since they are geographical neighbours and they all belong to collectivistic and high-context culture. However, in recent decades, Korea has been influenced greatly by western culture. Compared to Korean culture, there are great differences between Chinese and American culture, because American culture belongs

to individualistic and low-context culture.

To enhance the understanding of intercultural communication, this study compared refusal strategies preferentially used by speakers from three cultural groups whose native languages are Chinese, Korean, and American English, respectively. It aims to shed light on cross-cultural communication and may help alleviate uneasiness and barriers in interactions between people from these different cultures.

2. Literature review

Comparisons of speech acts across different cultures (e.g., Lyuh, 1992; Nelson et al, 2002; Wolfson, 1989) have shown that the same speech act may be realized differently in different cultures.

Liao and Bresnahan (1996) found that Chinese subjects employed “positive opinion” significantly less frequently than American subjects. Chang (2008) found that the native speakers of English used significantly more direct refusals and adjuncts than native speakers of Chinese, and that the Chinese preferred more specific reasons than Americans. Chang (2008) points out that it may be due to the difference between high-context and collectivistic culture (Chinese) and low-context and individualistic culture (American). Similarly, Guo’s (2012) research suggests that both Chinese and American subjects used more indirect refusals than direct refusals, but American subjects tended to be more direct than Chinese subjects, which can be attributed to cultural differences.

In comparing the speech act of refusal of Koreans and Americans, Lyuh (1992) noted that Koreans tended to use fewer direct refusals and used more vague excuses. In this study, Lyuh (1992) also found that Korean were more oriented toward face-saving, which reflected Korea’s collectivistic and high-context culture. Americans, on the other hand, were more task-oriented, which reflected America’s individualistic and low-context culture. In Kwon’s (2004) study which investigated refusals between Korean speakers in Korea and American English speakers in the USA, he found that Korean speakers used direct refusal formulas much less frequently than English speakers, and that Koreans used less specific and more tentative refusals than did Americans.

However, previous studies restricted their investigation on the comparison between two cultures (i.e., Korea vs. American, China vs. America), but to the researcher’s best knowledge, there are few studies concerning the comparison of refusal speech acts among Chinese, Korean, and American culture. This study aims to fill up this gap by comparing the refusal strategies produced by speakers from these three cultural groups whose native languages are Chinese, Korean, and American English, respectively.

Because China and Korea share the same collectivistic and high-context culture, it is hypothesized that the Chinese speakers and Korean speakers would perform similarly without significant difference with regard to the use of refusal strategies. However, since Korea has been influenced greatly by American culture and language, it is also expected to find that the Korean speakers would show a tendency toward American English speakers.

3. Methodology

3.1 The questionnaire

To compare the present findings with those of previous studies, this study used the Discourse Completion Task (DCT) developed by Beebe et al (1990), which has been a much-used elicitation method in intercultural speech act studies. It is a written role-play questionnaire including 12 situations classified into four stimulus types eliciting a refusal: requests, offers, invitations, and suggestions. In each type, three items featured scenarios that represent three levels of the refuser’s social status relative to the interlocutor: high, equal, and low (See Table 1).

In this study, three versions of DCT were used: a Chinese version administered to native speakers of Chinese (NC), a Korean version administered to native speakers of Korean (NK), and an English version administered to native speakers of English (NE).

Table 1: Classification of items in the Discourse Completion Task (DCT)

Stimulus Type	Refuser Status (relative to interlocutor)	DCT Item	Situation
Request	Lower	12	Stay late at night
	Equal	2	Borrow class notes
	Higher	1	Request raise of pay
Offer	Lower	11	Promotion to another city
	Equal	9	Eat another piece of cake
	Higher	7	Pay for broken vase
Invitation	Lower	4	Invitation to boss's party
	Equal	10	Dinner at friend's house
	Higher	3	Luxurious restaurant (bribe)
Suggestion	Lower	6	Write reminders
	Equal	5	Try a new diet
	Higher	8	More conversation practice in foreign language class

3.2 Participants

Altogether 107 participants participated in this study, and they were divided into three groups: native speakers of Chinese (NC), native speakers of Korean (NK), native speakers of English (NE).

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of the participants

Group	County	Sample size	Mean Age	Sex	
				Male	Female
NC	China	36	35.4	19 (52.8%)	17(47.2%)
NK	Korea	36	35.6	18 (50%)	18 (50%)
NE	America	35	38.2	18 (51%)	17(49%)

Besides, all the participants were office workers with working experience. Nine of the twelve situations in the questionnaire were related to workplace scenarios. Therefore, they were expected to respond differently compared with student participants in previous studies who would not have the type of social and working experience as expected of office workers.

3.3 Data analysis

The refusal responses were coded based on a taxonomy of refusal strategies provided in Table 3. This taxonomy was constructed based on Beebe et al. (1990) and Chang (2008)'s. It consists of three major categories of refusal strategy: Direct refusals, indirect refusals, and Adjuncts to refusals. They were analyzed as consisting of a sequence of semantic formulas. For example, if a respondent refused a request from his employee to increase pay, saying "I totally understand. You do great work and I wish I could pay you more but the store has been struggling and I can't afford it right now". Based on the classification semantic formulas in Table 3, this response was coded as: [statement of empathy] [gratitude/appreciation] [wish] [excuse, reason, explanation] [negative willingness/ability]. In this response, five different semantic formulas are identified and counted toward the total number of different semantic formulas used by this participant. Then it was further coded as C2C4B2B3A2, where A, B, and C refer to the three major categories of refusal strategies (i.e., Direct refusals, Indirect refusals, and Adjuncts to refusals), in order to count the frequency of the major categories of refusal strategies.

Table 3: Classification of refusal strategies

A. Direct refusal

1. No
2. Negative willingness/ability (e.g., "I can't/I won't/I don't think so.")

B. Indirect refusal

1. Statement of regret (e.g., "I'm sorry.../I feel terrible...")
2. Wish (e.g., "I wish I could help you...")
3. Excuse, reason, explanation (e.g., "My children will be home that night/I have a headache.")
4. Statement of alternative (e.g., "I'd rather.../I'd prefer.../why don't you ask someone else?")
5. Set condition for future or past acceptance (e.g., "If you had asked me earlier, I would have...")
6. Promise of future acceptance (e.g., "I'll do it next time/I promise I'll.../Next time I'll...---using "will" of promise or "promise")
7. Criticism: criticize the request/ requester, etc. (statement of negative feeling or opinion) insult/attack (e.g., "who do you think you are? / That's a terrible idea!")
8. Let interlocuter off the hook (e.g., "Don't worry about it/That's okay/You don't have to.")
9. Self-defense (e.g., "I'm trying my best. /I'm doing all I can do/I no do nothing wrong")
10. Postponement ("I'll think about it")
11. Topic switch (avoidance) (e.g., "Don't you think my notes are beautiful?"-in Situation 6)
12. Repetition of part of request (e.g., "Monday?")
13. Acceptance that functions as a refusal--unspecific or indefinite reply/lack of enthusiasm
14. Statement of principle (e.g., "It is against our company's compliance/I never do business with friends.")

C. Adjuncts to refusals

1. Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement (e.g., "That's a good idea.../I'd love to...")
2. Statement of empathy (e.g., "I realize you are in a difficult situation")
3. Pause fillier (e.g., "uhh/well/oh/uhm")
4. Gratitude/appreciation (e.g., "Thanks for your invitation", "I appreciate the offer")
5. Statement of comfort (e.g., "we've been looking for an excuse to toss it for years!"-in Situation 7)

4. Results

4.1 The overall pattern of refusal strategy by the native speaker groups

Table 4 presents the mean number of different categories of refusal strategies used by the subjects in the three native speaker groups. The number of strategies used by each participant was counted over all the 12 items, reflecting the overall pattern of strategy use across different stimulus types (i.e.,

request, invitation, suggestion, and offer) and speakers' relative social status (i.e., higher, lower, and equal).

Table 4: Overall mean frequency of refusal strategies by strategy category and subject group

Refusal strategy	Statistic	Group			F Value
		NC (N=36)	NK (N=36)	NE (N=35)	
Direct	Mean	1.86	3.86	5	22.435*
	SD	1.35	2.2	2.31	
Indirect	Mean	17.27	17.41	16.6	0.51
	SD	2.86	3.95	3.91	
Adjunct	Mean	3.83	3.97	7.62	16.144*
	SD	2.63	2.7	4.03	

* $p < 0.05$

Table 4 shows that the subjects in the NE group employed more direct refusals and adjuncts than the NC and NK groups. The differences were statistically significant based on one-way ANOVAs (direct refusal: $F(2,104) = 22.435, p < 0.05$; adjuncts: $F(2,104) = 16.144, p < 0.05$).

Post-hoc multiple comparisons with the Bonferroni correction indicated that the NE group used significantly more direct refusals than the NK group, who in turn used significantly more direct refusals than the NC group. As for adjuncts to refusals, the NE group utilized the strategy significantly more frequently than NC and NK groups, while there was no significant difference between the NC and NK groups.

4.2. Pattern of refusal strategy by stimulus types

As a reminder, the DCT administered in this study contained four types of stimuli (i.e., request, invitation, suggestion, and offer), each consisting of three items. In this section, the refusal strategy used for each stimulus type was compared among the three native-speaker groups, in the order of request, invitation, suggestion, and offer.

4.2.1. Refusal of request

Table 5 indicates that when refusing a request, the subjects in the NE group used more direct refusals and adjuncts than did the subjects in the NC and NK groups. The differences were statistically significant based on one-way ANOVAs (direct refusal: $F(2,104) = 21.339, p < 0.05$; adjuncts: $F(2,104) = 3.469, p < 0.05$).

Table 5: Mean frequency of refusal strategies used in response to requests by strategy category and subject group

Refusal strategy	Statistic	Group			F Value
		NC (N=36)	NK (N=36)	NE (N=35)	
Direct	Mean	0.41	1.02	1.71	21.339*
	SD	0.55	0.94	0.95	
Indirect	Mean	5.13	4.8	4.97	0.458
	SD	1.43	1.3	1.67	
Adjunct	Mean	0.47	0.69	0.94	3.496*
	SD	0.65	0.7	0.87	

* $p < 0.05$

Post-hoc multiple comparisons with the Bonferroni correction indicated that the NE group used significantly more direct refusals than the NK group, who in turn used significantly more direct refusals than the NC group. Regarding adjuncts to refusals, the NE group employed the strategy significantly more frequently than the NC group, while there was no significant difference either between the NC and the NK group or between the NE and the NK group.

4.2.2. Refusal of invitation

Table 6 shows that when refusing an invitation, the subjects in the NE group employed more direct refusals and adjuncts than the NC and NK group, and the NK group used more indirect refusals than the NC and NE group. The differences were statistically significant based on one-way ANOVAs (direct refusal: $F(2,104) = 10.831, p < 0.05$; indirect refusals: $F(2,104) = 4.31, p < 0.05$; adjuncts: $F(2,104) = 3.469, p < 0.05$).

Post-hoc multiple comparisons with the Bonferroni correction indicated that in terms of the direct refusals and adjuncts to refusals, the NE group used these two strategies significantly more frequently than the NC and NK group, while there was no significant difference between the NC and the NK group. As for indirect refusals, significant difference was only observed between the NK and the NE group.

Table 6: Mean frequency of refusal strategies used in response to invitations by strategy category and subject group

Refusal strategy	Statistic	Group			F Value
		NC (N=36)	NK (N=36)	NE (N=35)	
Direct	Mean	0.58	0.97	1.57	10.831*
	SD	0.84	0.84	1	
Indirect	Mean	4.66	5.44	4.48	4.31*
	SD	1.21	1.66	1.56	
Adjunct	Mean	0.94	0.8	1.8	5.696*
	SD	1.14	0.98	1.77	

* $p < 0.05$

4.2.3. Refusal of suggestion

Table 7: Mean frequency of refusal strategies used in response to suggestions by strategy category and subject group

Refusal strategy	Statistic	Group			F Value
		NC (N=36)	NK (N=36)	NE (N=35)	
Direct	Mean	0.02	0.16	0.34	4.207*
	SD	0.16	0.37	0.68	
Indirect	Mean	3.94	3.75	3.6	1.091
	SD	0.79	0.96	1.16	
Adjunct	Mean	0.55	0.88	1.88	15.19*
	SD	0.87	1.11	1.15	

* $p < 0.05$

Table 7 shows that when refusing a suggestion, the subjects in the NE group employed more direct refusals and adjuncts than the NC and NK groups. The differences were statistically significant based on one-way ANOVAs (direct refusal: $F(2,104) = 4.207, p < 0.05$; adjuncts: $F(2,104) = 15.19, p < 0.05$).

Post-hoc multiple comparisons with the Bonferroni correction indicated that the NE group employed direct refusals significantly more often than the NC group, while there was no significant difference either between the NK and the NC group or between the NK and NE group. As far as adjuncts to refusals were concerned, the NE group employed this strategy significantly more frequently than the NC and the NK group, while there was no significant difference between the NC and the NK group.

4.2.4. Refusal of offer

Table 8 shows that when refusing an offer, the subjects in the NK group employed more direct refusals than the NC and NE group, while the NE group used more adjuncts to refusals than the NC and the NK groups. The differences were statistically significant based on one-way ANOVAs (direct refusal: $F(2,104) = 8.764, p < 0.05$; adjuncts: $F(2,104) = 13.244, p < 0.05$).

Post-hoc multiple comparisons with the Bonferroni correction indicated that in terms of direct refusals, the NK and the NE group employed this strategy significantly more frequently than the NC group, while there was no significant difference either between the NK or the NE group. As for adjuncts to refusals, the NE group used this strategy significantly more frequently than the NC and the NK group, while there was no significant difference between the NC and the NK group.

Table 8: Mean frequency of refusal strategies used in response to offers by strategy category and subject group

Refusal strategy	Statistic	Group			F Value
		NC (N=36)	NK (N=36)	NE (N=35)	
Direct	Mean	0.83	1.69	1.37	8.764*
	SD	0.69	1	0.91	
Indirect	Mean	3.52	3.36	3.51	0.313
	SD	0.81	1.07	1.06	
Adjunct	Mean	1.88	1.58	3	13.244*
	SD	1.18	1.22	1.23	

* $p < 0.05$

4.3 Pattern of refusal strategy by relative social status of the speaker

The following section investigates the influence of social status on the use of refusal strategies among NC, NK, and NE groups. Table 9 to Table 11 present and compare the frequency of the use of direct, indirect, and adjuncts to refusals of each group regarding refusers' social status (relative to interlocutors): lower social status, equal social status, and higher social status, respectively.

4.3.1. Lower social status

Table 9 shows that in the situation where the refuser's social status was lower than the interlocutor, the subjects in the NE group employed more direct refusals and adjuncts to refusals than the NC and the NK group. The differences were statistically significant based on one-way ANOVAs (direct refusal: $F(2,104) = 6.728, p < 0.05$; adjuncts: $F(2,104) = 4.446, p < 0.05$).

Post-hoc multiple comparisons with the Bonferroni correction indicated that in terms of direct refusals, the NK and the NE group employed this strategy significantly more frequently than the NC group, while there was no significant difference between the NK and the NE group. As for adjuncts to refusals, the NE group used this strategy significantly more frequently than the NC and the NK group, while there was no significant difference between the NC and the NK group.

Table 9: Mean frequency of refusal strategies used in response to lower status interactions by strategy category and subject group

Refusal strategy	Statistic	Group			F Value
		NC (N=36)	NK (N=36)	NE (N=35)	
Direct	Mean	0.55	1.13	1.37	6.728*
	SD	0.69	1.07	1.08	
Indirect	Mean	6.19	6.63	6.02	1.405
	SD	1.39	1.75	1.59	
Adjunct	Mean	1.19	1.13	2	4.446*
	SD	1.19	1.12	1.69	

* $p < 0.05$

4.3.2. Equal social status

Table 10 shows that in the situation where the refuser's social status was equal to the interlocutor, the subjects in the NE group used more direct refusals and adjuncts to refusals than the NC and the NK group. The differences were statistically significant based on one-way ANOVAs (direct refusal: $F(2,104) = 9.135, p < 0.05$; adjuncts: $F(2,104) = 18.803, p < 0.05$).

Post-hoc multiple comparisons with the Bonferroni correction indicated that when it comes to direct refusals, the NK and the NE group employed this strategy significantly more frequently than the NC group, while there was no significant difference between the NK and the NE group. As for adjuncts to refusals, the NE group used this strategy significantly more frequently than the NC and the NK group, while there was no difference between the NC and the NK group.

Table 10: Mean frequency of refusal strategies used in response to equal status interactions by strategy category and subject group

Refusal strategy	Statistic	Group			F Value
		NC (N=36)	NK (N=36)	NE (N=35)	
Direct	Mean	0.88	1.66	1.91	9.135*
	SD	0.74	1.24	1.12	
Indirect	Mean	5.5	5.33	5.14	0.528
	SD	1.1	1.67	1.55	
Adjunct	Mean	0.91	0.91	2.51	18.803*
	SD	0.99	1.1	1.61	

* $p < 0.05$

4.3.3. Higher social status

Table 11 shows that in the situation where the refuser's social status was higher than the interlocutor, the subjects in the NE group used more direct refusals and adjuncts to refusals than did the NC and the NK group. The differences were statistically significant based on one-way ANOVAs (direct refusal: $F(2,104) = 20.371, p < 0.05$; adjuncts: $F(2,104) = 9.378, p < 0.05$).

Post-hoc multiple comparisons with the Bonferroni correction indicated that in terms of direct refusals, the NE group and the NK group employed this strategy significantly more frequently than the NC group, while the NE group used this strategy significantly more frequently than the NK group. As for adjuncts to refusals, the NE group used this strategy significantly more frequently than the NC and the NK group, while there was no significant difference between the NC and the NK group.

Table 11: Mean frequency of refusal strategies used in response to higher status interactions by strategy category and subject group

Refusal strategy	Statistic	Group			<i>F</i> Value
		NC (N=36)	NK (N=36)	NE (N=35)	
Direct	Mean	0.38	1.05	1.71	20.371*
	SD	0.54	0.92	1.07	
Indirect	Mean	5.58	5.44	5.42	0.119
	SD	1.15	1.52	1.7	
Adjunct	Mean	1.75	1.91	3.11	9.378*
	SD	1.07	1.31	1.84	

* $p < 0.05$

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This section examines the differences in the use of three refusal strategies among the native speakers of Chinese, Korean, and English.

The overall comparison shows that all the groups employed indirect refusal strategy most frequently than the other two strategies. Besides, the NE group used direct refusals and adjuncts to refusals significantly more frequently than the NK and the NC groups.

As for the breakdown of four stimulus types (i.e., request, invitation, suggestion, and offer), results also show that all the groups used indirect refusal strategy most frequently than the other two strategies. Besides, it was discovered that the NE group used direct refusals and adjuncts to refusals more frequently compared with the other two groups. However, as for the use of indirect refusals, significant difference was only discovered in refusals of invitation: it was the NK group that used more indirect refusals than did the NE group. Another finding was that in the use of adjuncts to refusals, there was no significant difference between the NC and NK groups in all the 4 stimulus types.

In terms of the observation concerning the classification of refusers' social status, generally speaking, in all the three social status types, all the three groups employed indirect refusal strategy the most frequently, and there was no significant difference among them. Besides, the NE and NK groups used direct refusal strategy significantly more frequently than the NC group in response to all the three social status. As for adjuncts to refusals, the NE group used this strategy significantly more frequently than the NC and NK groups in all the three social status types, while there was no significant difference between the NC and the NK group. In addition to these differences, it was also observed that when using direct refusal strategy, the NK group showed a tendency toward the NE group.

Another difference regarding the refuser's social status is that all the NC, NK, and NE groups did not seem to perform differently to lower versus higher status interlocutors when making direct refusals. It seemed they were not sensitive to a particular status. However, all the three group's sensitivity to status was found in the use of adjuncts to refusals. They employed adjuncts to refusal strategy more frequently to lower status interlocutors than to higher status interlocutors.

The differences among groups could be explained by cultural differences. As aforementioned, China and Korea belong to high-context and collectivistic culture, while the US belongs to low-context and individualistic culture. "High-context and collectivistic culture values group orientation and group harmony, which is related with other-face maintenance" (Chang, 2008). Therefore, people in this culture tend to be indirect when expressing thoughts. On the contrary, "low-context and individualistic culture values individual orientation and overt communication codes" (Chang, 2008).

Thus, people in this culture tend to be direct when delivering messages. That the NE group employed significantly more direct refusals than the NC and the NK groups could be explained by this difference. Furthermore, this cultural difference could also explain the different use of adjuncts to refusals. The NE group utilized this strategy significantly more frequently than the NC and the NK group. That is because in high-context and collectivistic culture, generally speaking, “people dare not express positive opinion first before they refuse. They are afraid if they express positive opinion, which belongs to adjuncts, then they are forced to comply with it” (Liao and Bresnahan, 1996:704). Besides, it could also be applied to explain that there was no significant difference between the NC group and the NK group since they share the same high-context and collectivistic culture.

It was also observed that the NK group tended to be more direct than the NC group and showed a tendency towards the NE group (including the observation regarding the influence of three types of social status), though Korea and China share the same high-context and collectivistic culture. It may be due to the social reform and policy changes of Korea in recent decades. After Korea gained its independence, it adopted the western economic development system. In the 1990s, it successfully transformed from a traditional industry to a high-and new technology industry and became a developed economy in East Asia. During this process, Korea has been greatly influenced by western culture, especially American culture, which affected Korean people’s values and influenced their way of speaking accordingly. However, compared with Korea, Chinese society has been influenced less by western culture. Therefore, relatively speaking, its social value is stable and is almost the same as before.

Finally, it was expected to find that the NC and NK groups would be more sensitive to interlocutors’ social status than the NE group when making direct refusals. The reason is that based on Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory, societies like China and Korea belong to negative politeness group in which the values for social distance and relative power are high, while societies like America belong to positive politeness group in which the values for social distance and relative power are low. However, results showed they were not sensitive to the lower or higher social status of the interlocutors, the same as the NE group. The reason may be that in the modern era, especially in business communication, speakers focus more on the content of communication rather than the social status of the interlocutor. Maybe they were afraid that if they took the interlocutor’s social status into consideration, it would influence the effectiveness of communication. Another finding concerning the social status of the interlocutor is that all the three groups expressed adjuncts to refusals more frequently to the interlocutor with lower social status than to the interlocutor with higher social status. It seems it is a common phenomenon shared by the two different cultures. Maybe in the workplace, the use of adjuncts with different frequencies could be viewed as a way to mitigate the social status inequality.

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