

A Pilot Study on Refusal to Suggestions in English by Japanese and Chinese EFL Learners

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Abstract. This pilot study aims to find out the preferred semantic formulas and their sequences in refusal to suggestions in academic contexts corresponding to power variations by Japanese and Chinese EFL learners. Twenty-six Japanese, thirty-one Chinese and five native speakers of English responded to a written discourse completion test. It was found that in comparison with the native speakers of English, the Japanese utilized some semantic formulas which conveyed positive reactions to build up preparations for the coming refusal, showing an indirect way for refusal. The Chinese group was the second indirect in terms of this preparation. A feature shared by the Japanese and Chinese EFL learners was that they preferred the way that a statement of refusal followed a statement of justification, which was the reversed way that was preferred by the native speakers of English. The factor of power affected all the three groups to some extent; however it affected the Japanese most.

Key words: refusal to suggestions, Japanese and Chinese EFL learners, a pilot study

1. Introduction

Speakers from the same community share strategies for resolving the constant communicative problems that arise in interaction (Richard & Arndt, 1992). However, some strategies are not universally shared. In fact, many studies have revealed the problems of effective performance of speech acts with different outcomes by native speakers of English and non-native speakers of English due to cultural variation on strategies of interacting, and linguistic and social norms (Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Edmondson & House, 1991; Gass & Houck, 1999; Kasper, 1997; Sasaki, 1998; Song Mei Lee-Wong, 2000).

Refusal is characterized as response to one of the other four speech acts, request, invitation, offer and suggestion, rather than as an initiating act. It is a speech act by which a speaker denies to engage in an action proposed by the interlocutor (Chen, Ye, & Zhang, 1995). For example, for refusing a suggestion of driving to downtown, one might say, "Train is better. Driving takes time." Some refusal studies focus on refusal to requests; few aim at all of the four types (Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Chen, Ye & Zhang, 1995). Refusal to suggestions is the least studied, particularly in academic contexts (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1996).

The purpose of this research is to find out the preferred semantic formulas¹ and their sequences in refusal to suggestions in academic contexts by Japanese and Chinese EFL learners

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corresponding to variations of power and cause for refusal.

2. Literature review

2.1. Power, Distance, and Ranking of Imposition

Brown and Levinson (1987) classify variables to most speech act situations into Power (P), Distance (D) and Ranking of Imposition (R). Power refers to the three types of relationship between the two interlocutors in terms of social status. They include that the hearer's status is higher than, equal to and lower than the speaker's. Distance refers to the familiarity between the two interlocutors. Language and behavior would be different when the two speakers are very close or are strangers. Ranking of Imposition refers to the importance or degree of difficulty in the situation. For example, in request, if you ask for a big favor, a large rank of imposition would occur; if a small request, a small rank.

2.2. Cause variation

Studies have found that in most communities, reason or excuse is always utilized for refusal, though those studies did not specifically classify what kind of reasons were given by participants. Actually, causal attributions are often the topic of conversation, for instance, when we give or request an explanation to or from another person (Forsterling, 2001). It implies that causal explanations speakers make reflect cognitive processes that are perceived necessary to achieve the goal of communication (Hilton, 1990); for example, to strategically manipulate how interlocutor causally explains their behavior, particularly undesirable behavior (Forsterling, 2001). Moreover, whether a cause is due to the action taker, that is internal cause, or due to other person(s) or circumstances, that is external cause, affects reaction in behavior and language (Weiner, 1995). For instance, oversleep or a late bus can be the reason for being late for class, but each of these reasons might lead to different behavior and language of the speaker and the hearer.

2.3. Empirical studies

Studies on refusal are mainly two groups in terms of concern on refusal type or the way of dealing with excuse for refusal. Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz (1990) and Chen, Ye and Zhang (1995) touch all refusal types include refusal to request, invitation, offer, and suggestion. However, Yamashita (1996) and Gass and Houck (1999) focus on refusal to request. By discourse completion tests (DCT) or role plays (RP), they either instruct their refusers with or without a prepared excuse for refusal. The provided excuses are all *external* factors, rather than *internal* ones, which make refusers unable to accept what has been said by the previous speaker. For the instruction without a prepared excuse, refusers are allowed to write down or say anything they like. They, except for Gass and Houck (1999), compare the semantic formulas appeared corresponding to the three power relationships in a mixture of contexts, such as family, company and campus. Only Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993, 1996) concentrate on academic setting in which a foreign student refuses an American supervisor's suggestion regarding class selection.

This pilot study concerns two types of power in academic contexts. First, a student refuses a suggestion from a teacher (refuser < hearer, that is, the refuser's status is lower than the hearer's). Second, a student refuses a suggestion from another student (refuser=hearer). Refusals in the case of a teacher that refuses a suggestion of a student (refuser > hearer) will be reported after large data collection is done. As for Distance and Ranking of Imposition, this study sticks to refusing suggestions of academic issues from a familiar person. No studies on the influence of cause variation on speech act have been found yet. This pilot study focuses on external cause for refusal.

Comparison between the influence of external and internal causes will also be included after the large data collection is done.

3. Research purpose and research questions of this pilot study

This pilot study covers refusal to suggestions both from a supervisor (higher status) and a classmate (equal status) particularly of academic issues on campus. It attempts to find out:

1. What are the preferred semantic formulas and sequences for refusal by Japanese and Chinese EFL learners and native speakers of English?
2. How do the semantic formulas and their sequences vary corresponding to power type?

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants

Participants consist of 26 Japanese (9 male, 17 female) third-year students as EFL learners at a university in Chugoku area, Japan, and 31 Chinese (10 male, 21 female) third-year students as EFL learners at a university in Northeast, China, and 5 native speakers of English (2 female and 3 male) in Chicago. The Japanese (hereafter J) and Chinese (hereafter C) were from 20 to 23 years old. The native speakers of English (hereafter N) were office staff whose age range was from 24 to 33. They all have obtained either a bachelor degree or a master degree.

4.2. Materials

This study utilized DCT. The researcher is aware that written response in a single dialogue turn may provide only a partial dimension of what might take place in actual interaction (Wolfson, Marmor and Jones, 1989). However, DCT enables a collection of large amounts of data and analysis of a consistent situation, which facilitate comparison of factors such as gender, social status, and ethnicity. In addition, it enables researchers to find out potential common features of a particular group of people rather than an individual. Therefore, it enables this study to survey on the similar and different features in refusal of the three groups which might represent the cultural and pragmatic norms of each group. The following are two sample tests for the study.

Situation 1 (Hereafter S1. A student refuses a teacher's suggestion.): You are a foreign student at a university in the UK. For a report, you want to investigate how students think about campus life. You think freshmen have not yet known campus life well. Prof. Brown is your teacher who you are quite familiar with. In teacher's office, Prof. Brown is telling you an idea for the report. But you do NOT want to accept the idea. What would you say in English?

Prof. Brown: A very interesting topic, I think. How are you going to do it?

You: I'll interview some students.

Prof. Brown: Good. And better ask several students from each grade.

You: _____

Situation 2 (Hereafter S2. A student refuses another student's suggestion.): You are a foreign student at a university in the UK. You want to improve your English speaking. You think practicing with a conversation partner individually can provide you more chances to speak than taking a Speaking class. Wilson is your classmate and good friend. In a cafe, Wilson is telling you an idea for improving speaking. But you do NOT want to accept the idea. What would you say in English?

You: I need to improve my speaking ability.

Wilson: You'd better take a Speaking class in the coming semester.

You: _____

4.3. Classification of refusal

This study uses Beebe *et al.* (1990)'s classification on refusal responses, however slightly modifies the system developed by them since it seems that some responses that appeared in this study didn't show up in their study. The following are a classification of the main refusal responses and examples in this study.

Disagreement (e.g., "I don't think..." or "I think I should not...")

Apology (e.g., "I'm sorry..." or "I hate to say...")

Cause (e.g., "freshmen do not have much campus life yet" or "freshmen have just enrolled")

Explanation (e.g., "so, that's why I didn't..." or "so, I didn't...")

Gratitude (e.g., "thank you for the suggestion")

Mind (ask if the hearer minds his/her decision. e.g., "do you mind if I ...")

Positive evaluation or agreement (e.g., "a nice idea" or "I thought the same at first")

Request (e.g., "what do you think about my idea?")

Topic reminding (e.g., "as you know the purpose of my report is...")

Understanding (e.g. "I understand what you mean")

4.4. Data collection procedure

At first, a Chinese teacher who is teaching English at a Chinese university and a Chinese office staff who is working in Chicago were contacted. After they accepted the request of questionnaire distribution, the DCT was sent to them by email. After that, they asked their students or colleagues to do the DCT and send the finished DCT directly to the researcher.

5. Results

5.1. The preferred semantic formulas

Table 1 shows the descriptive number for some main semantic formulas appeared in S1 and S2. The most distinguished feature is that all the three groups utilized the provided external reason in their refusal. 46% of the Japanese in S1 and 42% of the Japanese in S2 conveyed disagreement in

Table 1. Numbers of the main semantic formulas in S1 and S2 by the Japanese, Chinese and native speakers.

Semantic formula	Japanese (N=26)		Chinese (N=31)		Native speaker (N=5)	
	S1 (%)	S2 (%)	S1 (%)	S2 (%)	S1 (%)	S2 (%)
Apology	3 (11.5)	1 (3.7)	0 (0)	1 (3.2)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Cause	26 (100)	26 (100)	31(100)	30 (96.8)	5 (100)	5 (100)
Disagreement	16 (61.5)	15 (57.7)	23 (74.2)	24 (77.4)	5 (100)	3 (60.0)
Explanation	12 (46.2)	11 (42.3)	7 (22.6)	6 (19.4)	0 (0)	2 (40.0)
Gratitude	16 (61.5)	9 (34.6)	3 (9.7)	3 (9.7)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Mind	7 (26.9)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Positive	15 (57.7)	22 (84.6)	9 (29.0)	4 (12.9)	1(20.0)	0 (0)
Request	8 (30.8)	4 (15.4)	0 (0)	2 (6.5)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Topic	6 (23.1)	9 (34.6)	0 (0)	4 (12.9)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Understanding	8 (30.8)	4 (15.4)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)

a way that sounds like explanation, for example, “that’s why I didn’t...” after giving cause(s) Two Japanese used both explanation and disagreement in S1. Another prominent feature of the Japanese is that they used more semantic formulas than the other two groups. The following was a typical answer from the Japanese data. “Thank you for your suggestion. I had also thought that way. But I think the freshmen have just enrolled. They don’t know much about campus life. That’s why I didn’t want to include freshmen in my interview.”

Figures 1 and 2 display the frequency of each semantic formula by the three groups in the two situations. J stands for Japanese, N for the native speaker of English, C for Chinese, S1 for situation 1, and S2 for situation 2. Except for cause and disagreement, gratitude, positive evaluation and explanation were frequently used by the Japanese in S1. However, in S2, they frequently used positive evaluation. That is, for conveying an opposite thinking, the Japanese also evaluated positively the idea of the interlocutor, said gratitude and explained why they hold their idea. Moreover, they were more sensitive when they refused teacher’s suggestion. In comparison with S2, they more frequently used semantic formulas of mind and request in S1. That is, the Japanese students asked if the teacher minds that they were thinking that way, or required for the teacher’s further opinion. The Chinese were somehow like the Japanese in terms of disagreement in both of the situations; somehow were like the American in terms of gratitude, mind, positive evaluation, and understanding. The Japanese and the Americans shared a frequency of explanation in S2.

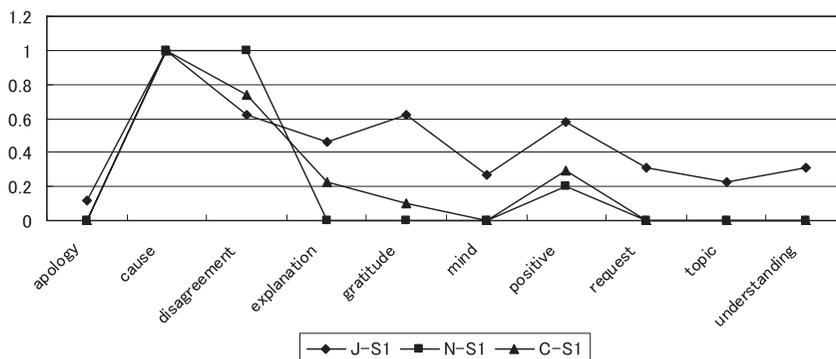


Figure 1. Percentage of semantic formulas in situation 1.

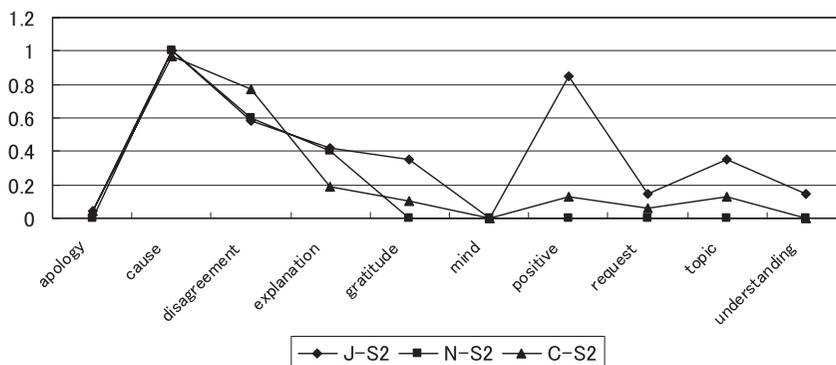


Figure 2. Percentage of semantic formulas in situation 2.

5.2. The preferred sequence of the semantic formulas

Table 2. The preferred refusal sequences of the three groups

		Refusal sequence			
		Situation 1			
Japanese	Gratitude	→	Causes	→	Disagreement
	Positive	→	Causes	→	Disagreement
Chinese	Causes	→	Disagreement		
	Positive	→	Causes	→	Disagreement
Native speaker	Disagreement	→	Causes		
	Positive	→	Disagreement	→	Causes
		Situation 2			
Japanese	Positive	→	Causes	→	Disagreement
	Gratitude	→	Causes	→	Disagreement
Chinese	Causes	→	Disagreement		
	Positive	→	Causes	→	Disagreement
Native speaker	Disagreement	→	Causes		
	Explanation	→	Causes		

5.2.1. The general sequences preferred by the three groups

Table 2 shows the most and the secondly preferred sequences by the three groups. In each group cell, the first and the secondly listed sequences are respectively the most and the secondly preferred sequences by that group.

5.2.2. Yes-but sequence by the Japanese

One outstanding feature in sequence by the Japanese is the “Yes-but” sequence. This term is borrowed from Gass and Houck (1999), which means their Japanese subject provided an empathetic nod with an apology (*sorry*) followed by a head shake with *but*, which introduces an excuse expressing a refusal. However, by this term this study means that most of the Japanese utilized positive evaluation or agreement, such as “I understand what you mean” or “I once had thought the same”, at the beginning as a preparation for the coming justifications marked by *but* or *however*, which introduced reasons for the disagreement following up.

5.2.3. (because)-so sequence by the Japanese and Chinese vs. the Americans

A common feature in sequence shared by the Japanese and Chinese is termed as (because)-so sequence in which the brackets mean that most of the Japanese and Chinese justified their opinions with cause(s) without an initial marker *because*. That is, they underused *because* when they were telling the reason. However, after the justification they came to a relatively clearer disagreement or explanation initiated with a marker *so*. This (because)-so sequence is the reversed pattern preferred by most of the Americans. The Americans disagreed clearly first, then stated the reason(s). The marker *so* did not appear in any discourse by the Americans.

6. Discussion

Among the three groups, the Americans tended to disagree at the beginning part of their speech, the Chinese the second, the Japanese the ending part. It is difficult for Japanese to refuse directly and the social acceptability of a linguistic action in Japanese culture might influence the way they carry out the same action in a target language context (Robinson, 1992). This indirect style corresponds to one of the four dimensions, direct-indirect dimension, of cultural variations in conversation style by Gudykunst (1988). From a positive evaluation to gratitude to causes, the Japanese carefully build up preparations for the coming refusal. The pre-built structure for a final true need or want could be totally disregarded because it has no meaning or could mean something different from other culture perspective, such as the US (Lustig & Koester, 1993).

In addition, among the Japanese in S1, 61.5% say gratitude, 30.8% require the teacher's further opinion, and 26.9% ask if the teacher minds his/her decision, indicating that the Japanese are the most influenced by power among the three groups. The awareness of power by the Japanese results in the use of expressions involving face or politeness issue. By these expressions, on the other hand, the Japanese leave the space for further discussion or negotiation, attempting to establish a harmonious relationship or environment for communication. This result is in contrast with what Beebe *et al.* (1990) get from their study on refusal to suggestions from a company boss, a family friend, and a student. They notify that no significant difference is found in their data, which was probably due to the fact that their Japanese participants have been living in the US long and have got used to American pragmatic norm on this aspect.

The sequence of the Americans in this study proves Schiffrin (1987) that most native speakers of English justify statements after they made them, including request and account, compliance and justification, and claim and grounds. Moreover, the reversed sequence by the Japanese and Chinese echoes the discussion that Westerners are more deductive, Asians are more inductive (Scollon and Scollon, 1991, 2001) and Chinese give definite claim after a series of justification both in formal and informal circumstances (Kirkpatrick, 1993, 2002).

7. Conclusion and future tasks

This pilot study finds out that first, the provided external causes were utilized by all the participants, indicating a need for cause giving and cause requesting in refusal by the three cultural groups. Secondly, some more semantic formulas were perceived additionally necessary by the Japanese, though the extent to which those semantic formulas were used varies due to the factor of power. Thirdly, the sequence of cause and disagreement was reversely preferred by the two Asian groups and the Americans.

Further research is needed to prove that if features revealed here are L1 syntax-orientated or L1 pragmatics-orientated or both. It is plausible that the product of the L2 learners is a mixture of the syntax of L2 and cognition of L1 pragmatic norms, reflecting a stage in L2 acquisition process.

Notes

Semantic formulas are "the means by which a particular speech act is accomplished in terms of the primary content of an utterance...a superset of specific content" (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 1991). In the present study they mean the expressions used by a refuser to complete a refusal.

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