The refusal speech act in a cross-cultural perspective: A study of Iranian English-language learners and Anglo-Australian speakers

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A B S T R A C T

This study aimed to investigate the refusal strategies of Iranian English-language learners and Anglo-Australian students to shed light on possible areas of cross-cultural miscommunication. Data were collected through a discourse completion test. Sociocultural norms underlying refusals of Iranian students were also investigated through focus group interviews (FGIs).

In interaction with addressees of higher social power, both groups of participants used more indirect strategies. However, while making refusals to status equals, the performance of the Iranian and Australian participants differed from each other to a degree that could lead to intercultural miscommunication. The FGIs revealed that first language cultural schemas of *tă'ărof* (ritual politeness) and *ru-dar-băyesti* (state/feeling of distance-out-of-respect) greatly affected the refusals of the Iranian students.

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1. Introduction

Due to the globally ever-increasing number of English speakers from various cultural backgrounds, English is frequently used as a means of intercultural communication (Dogancay-Aktuna and Hardman, 2012; Sharifian, 2014; Sifakis, 2004). It is currently an international language (Crystal, 2003; House, 2010; Jenkins, 2000; Sharifian, 2009), estimated to be spoken by a quarter of the world's population, at least to some extent (Hurn and Tomalin, 2013). To enable effective intercultural communication, it is necessary to give language learners insights into their own culture as well as into the values of other cultural groups (McKay, 2002). In such a context, cross-cultural pragmatic studies can play a pivotal role in illuminating the cultural differences between English speakers from a wide range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This study therefore aims to explore the refusal strategies used by Iranian English-language learners and a cohort of Anglo-Australian students to shed light on possible areas where cross-cultural miscommunication could occur.

Numerous cross-cultural and intercultural studies have shown that members of different cultural groups draw on differing pragmatic norms while performing speech acts (Beebe and Takahashi, 1989; Beebe et al., 1990; Clyne, 1994; Cordella, 1991; Félix-Brasdefer, 2008b; Gass and Neu, 1996; Neumann, 1995; Wierzbicka, 1985, 2003). In other words, the cultural underpinnings of speech acts as well as the cultural conceptualisations attached to them vary from one language and culture to another (Kasper and Schmidt, 1996; Sharifian, 2007, 2011; Sharifian and Jamarani, 2011). These differences can lead to

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intercultural miscommunication and misunderstanding when people from different cultural backgrounds interact by means of a common language like English.

Refusals are generally issued in response to an elicitation act (e.g. a suggestion, an offer, a request, or an invitation) to decline engaging in the activity proposed by the interlocutor (Chen et al., 1995). Two types of refusal can be traced in the literature: genuine (also termed substantive), and ritual or ostensible (Babai Shishavan, 2016). While genuine refusals exist in almost every language and culture, ritual refusals are present only in some languages. Genuine refusals express the speaker's real intention to reject the action proposed in the initiation act. However, ritual refusals only pretend to be genuine and their main purpose is to show consideration towards the interlocutor (Chen et al., 1995, p. 4152). When a ritual refusal is offered, a subsequent acceptance is likely if the interlocutor repeats the initiating turn. Unlike genuine refusals, which are face-threatening acts, ritual refusals are considered to be polite, face-enhancing speech acts. Because of the different purposes of genuine and ritual refusals, they need to be studied separately. This study focuses only on genuine refusals (hereafter refusals).

Refusals are considered to be face-threatening acts (Brown and Levinson, 1987). They impose a threat to the face of the hearer because in performing a refusal the speaker declines to give the response his/her interlocutor expects to receive. Therefore, refusals can be interpreted as a form of disapproval or disrespect. The recipient of a refusal might take this act as a sign of impoliteness or ultimately of dislike. Furthermore, refusals are complex speech acts, with their production usually involving extended negotiations and verbal cooperation as well as face-saving actions to mitigate their uncooperative nature (Gass and Houck, 1999). The initiation acts in response to which refusals are issued, as well as social and situational variables (e.g. social power differentials between the interlocutors) also affect how people refuse in different situations (Beebe et al., 1990; Brown and Levinson, 1987). For this reason, many language learners find refusals demanding speech acts to perform (Beebe et al., 1990). Refusals can therefore be problematic speech acts to perform in intercultural encounters.

Many previous cross-cultural studies on refusals have investigated the degree of congruence between the speech act productions of non-native English speakers with those of native speakers (Al-Eryani, 2008; Al-Issa, 2003; Allami and Naeimi, 2011; Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 1991; Beebe et al., 1990; Chang, 2009, 2011; Gass and Houck, 1999; Keshavarz et al., 2006; Lauper, 1997; Nguyen, 2006; Tanck, 2004; Wannaruk, 2008). The main focus of these studies is on the failure of non-native speakers to communicate effectively due to pragmatic transfer and the adverse effect of first language interference on second language production. In studies of this kind, the target norm is considered a prescribed form of the target language, and the investigation focuses on non-native speakers' awareness of this norm and the degree to which they comply with it. As such, non-native speakers are expected to "say 'No' in a way that is appropriate and accepted in the target language culture" (Lauper, 1997, p. 4). However, English language pedagogy needs to re-examine this assumption in the light of the English as an International Language (EIL) paradigm (Sharifian, 2009). The adequacy of attaining native-like competence to be an effective communicator in today's globalised world has been challenged (Byram, 2009; Canagarajah, 2006; House, 2007; Sharifian, 2009). Moreover, it is argued that using English for intercultural purposes is not just for non-native English speakers; native speakers of English also are frequently required to use English in intercultural settings (Byram, 2009). Therefore, the present study adopts an EIL perspective to investigate possible areas of intercultural misunderstanding, rather than investigating deviation of non-native speakers from the native speaker norms. It is concerned with refusal strategies used by Iranian English-language learners and by a group of Anglo-Australian students, and aims to identify and analyse possible areas of cultural difference that might lead to intercultural miscommunication and misunderstanding.

2. Background

The realisation of refusals has been investigated in different cross-cultural studies with participants of various cultural backgrounds including Japanese (Beebe et al., 1990; Ikoma and Shimura, 1994; Jungheim, 2006; Kodama, 1996), Chinese (Chang, 2009, 2011; Liao and Bresnahan, 1996), Korean (Kwon, 2004; Lyuh, 1992), Arabic (Al-Eryani, 2008; Al-Issa, 2003; Nelson et al., 2002), Indonesian (Aziz, 2000), Spanish (Félix-Brasdefer, 2006, 2008a; Lauper, 1997), Thai (Wannaruk, 2008), and Vietnamese (Nguyen, 2006). The majority of these studies are interlanguage pragmatic studies focussing on the discourse behaviour of non-native speakers in L2 (e.g. English), often in comparison with their L1 or with native speakers of the L2. The assumption underlying these studies is that the first language of non-native speakers has a significant effect on their comprehension and production in a second language (Kasper, 1992). Despite some methodological differences, almost all of the studies have shown that the realisation of a refusal varies from one language and culture to another, reflecting different cultural norms governing their production. They have also shown that factors such as language proficiency (Al-Eryani, 2008; Wannaruk, 2008); the reason for the refusal (Lauper, 1997); social status differentials (Beebe et al., 1990); and the learner's pride in their first language, perceptions of the second language, and attitude to religion (Al-Issa, 2003) can affect the choice of refusal strategies as well as the degree of directness involved in their production.

Although there is a paucity of research with regard to the production of refusals by Australian English speakers, a few studies have investigated the verbal refusal strategies of Iranian learners of English. Allami and Naeimi (2011), similar to Keshavarz et al. (2006), investigated the speech act of refusal performed by Iranian English-language learners and compared their performance with those of monolingual native Persian speakers as well as with those of native speakers of American English. Both studies utilised a slightly modified version of Beebe et al.'s (1990) discourse completion test (DCT) as their data collection instrument. Keshavarz et al. (2006) also used a set of semi-structured interviews to gather data. Another methodological difference between the two studies was the use of different methods to gather baseline data from the American