

## OSTENSIBLE REFUSAL SPEECH ACT IN THE CHINESE LINGUAL CULTURE: LINGUOPRAGMATIC ANALYSIS

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*Language is not only a cultural phenomenon, but also a cultural carrier. Different national languages contain their unique traditional culture, and reflect their ways of thinking, national customs, social values and so on. Refusal as a face threatening act occurs frequently in people's daily life, which needs to adopt some strategies to decline the damaging of the interlocutors. Therefore, refusal speech act has been regarded as an important research topic in the field of linguistics. In recent years, with the development of pragmatics and the in-depth study of speech act theory, many studies on refusal speech act have appeared throughout the world. According to previous researches, in different lingual cultures, it has different manifestations and characteristics. In Chinese culture, especially under the influence of Confucianism, people respect etiquette and pay attention to politeness. The ostensible refusal speech act as a typical special form of refusal speech act appears in the Chinese lingual culture. However, under this circumstance, it no longer takes the functions of threatening other's face or good intentions; instead it shows politeness in Chinese culture. Due to differences among cultures, there are many misunderstandings or incomprehension situations which may lead to a failure in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, in order to ensure the smooth and successful intercultural communication, the cultural background knowledge of the target language is a necessity. The research has been conducted from the perspective of pragmatics, combined with the Chinese culture background, in order to give a brief introduction of this special speech act, as well as deepen the scientific understanding of it, so as to promote the adequate level of cross-cultural communication in the future.*

## МОВЛЕННЄВИЙ АКТ ЯВНОЇ ВІДМОВИ В КИТАЙСЬКІЙ МОВНІЙ КУЛЬТУРІ

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**Ключові слова:** міжкультурна комунікація, китайська лінгвокультура, прагматична перспектива, дія, що загрожує обличчю, ввічливість.

*Мова є не лише феноменом культури, а й носієм культури. Різні національні мови містять свою унікальну традиційну культуру, відображають спосіб мислення своїх носіїв, національні звичаї, соціальні цінності тощо. Відмова як акт, що загрожує обличчю, часто трапляється в повсякденному житті людей, яким необхідно застосувати певні стратегії, щоб уникнути шкоди співрозмовникам. Останнім часом з розвитком лінгвопрагматики та поглибленим вивченням теорії мовленнєвого акту з'явилося багато досліджень, які мають за фокус мовленнєвий акт відмови. Згідно з попередніми дослідженнями, у різних мовних культурах відмова має різні прояви та характеристики. У китайській культурі, особливо під впливом конфуціанства, склалася певна культура міжлюдського спілкування, де велику роль відіграє ввічливість. Явний мовленнєвий акт відмови у китайській лінгвокультурі як типова особлива форма китайського мовленнєвого акту не загрожує учасникам спілкування щодо втрати ними обличчя і демонструє китайський вимір ввічливості. Через відмінності між культурами при комунікації можуть виникнути певні непорозуміння, які можуть призвести до збою міжкультурної комунікації. Тому для забезпечення успішної міжкультурної комунікації необхідні фонові культурні знання. У цій розвідці у лінгвопрагматичному ключі досліджується мовленнєвий акт відмови у контексті китайською культури, що сприятиме встановленню вищого рівня міжкультурної комунікації між учасниками мовленнєвого акту відмови, один з яких належить китайській лінгвокультурі.*

Refusal is the act of directly or indirectly denying the other party's wishes when the communicator faces the four verbal acts of request, invitation, offer, and suggestion. It is a very common phenomenon of verbal communication in daily life. In recent years, with the development of pragmatics and the in-depth study of speech act theory, many studies on refusal speech act have appeared throughout the world. According to previous researches, refusal speech act is deeply culturally engaged what is characteristic for the other kinds of speech acts. In different lingual cultures, it has different manifestations and characteristics. Refusal speech act comprises two types: a sincere refusal speech act and insincere refusal speech act (also called ostensible refusal). Lu Zhifang pointed out that an ostensible refusal or other speech acts that express other intentions in the form of refusal violate the rules of good faith, being not sincere in its basis [5, p. 5].

As for the ostensible refusal speech act, which is widespread in the Chinese culture, it might be regarded as a typical special form of refusal speech act in the Chinese lingual culture [13, p. 101]. This phenomenon is extremely characteristic for the Chinese culture. However, there are a few relevant studies. The previous studies are mainly connected with the sincere refusals and there is a relative paucity of researches on ostensible refusals. This article attempts to analyze this special speech act from the perspective of pragmatics in order to deepen the scientific understanding of it, and promote the adequate level of cross-cultural communication.

### I. Literature review

Let's deal with the relevant researches abroad. Isaacs and Clark pointed out that the traditional theories of speech acts (e.g. Austin 1962; Bach & Harnish 1979; Searle 1969) have no account for

ostensible speech acts [4, p. 493]. They conducted the systematical research on the specific ostensible speech act in their article of 1990, “*Ostensible Invitations*”. Walton wrote the article “*Ostensible Lies and the Negotiation of Shared Meanings*” in 1998 [12, p. 27]. Link’s dissertation “*The Comprehension and Use of Ostensible Speech Acts (OSAs)*” [9]. Link and Kreuz expounded the notion of Isaacs and Clark in the article “*Comprehension of Ostensible Speech Act (OSAs)*” [8, p. 227], and analyzed the ostensible speech acts from the general perspective summarizing different definitions of it.

As to the Chinese researches, Lu Zhifang conducted a study on false refusal speech act in modern Chinese, which mainly discussed the environment in which the false refusal occurs, the factors that produce it, and the strategies of false refusal [5]. Liu Bao studied the politeness side of sincere and ostensible refusals in Chinese, made the comparison between sincere and ostensible refusals on the background of their features summarizing [6, p. 1]. Yao Ying in her article expounded the features of ostensible refusal speech acts, its performance conditions, pragmatic functions, and related cultural factors [14, p. 31]. Lai Huidi and Ran Yongping did a pragmatic-contrastive study of English and Chinese insincere refusals and found out that there is some similarity between lingual expressions of refusal in English and Chinese, though the differences prevail. Because of different cultural and linguistic factors, the similar expressions of insincere refusal in Chinese would be a kind of persuasion in the frames of English lingual culture [7, p. 33].

In 2014, the study of the interpersonal pragmatic motivations of ostensible refusals was conducted by Ran Yongping and Lai Huidi, who aimed at verifying Isaacs&Clark’s (1990) interpretation of ostensible speech act and uncovering the explanatory deficits of Grice’s Cooperation Principle and Brown & Levinson’s politeness theory in Chinese cultural context&Wang Hui conducted an analysis of the pragmatic functions of ostensible refusals in Chinese, and found out that ostensible refusal has the pragmatic functions of concealing the true intention, testing the attitude of the other party, and promoting the harmony of interpersonal relationships [13, p. 101].

In addition, there are some researches on insincere invitations. Such as Zhao Yingling’s and Li Shifang’s who studied the ostensible invitation in English and Chinese in 2004. They stated that implementation of ostensible invitation speech acts mainly reflects interpersonal skills, which are used to establish, maintain, and develop harmonious and friendly interpersonal relationships to meet the needs of social ritual, phatic, and politeness [18, p. 123]. Yu Xiucheng and Zhang Shaojie in the article, “*The Pragmatic Features of Insincere Invitations*

and *Felicity Conditions of Speech Act in Chinese*”, found out that Searle’s felicity conditions fail to account for such speech acts, and put forward an idea that successful communication depends more on the speaker’s propositional attitudes, rather than satisfaction of these conditions [15, p. 88].

## II. Ostensible refusal speech act and politeness in Chinese

Regarding the study on politeness in Chinese, Chinese scholar Gu Yueguo was the first person who discussed the relationship among politeness, pragmatics and Chinese culture. His article also traced back the historical origin of modern Chinese politeness concept, and the author came up with five politeness principles of Chinese culture, which are: self-denigration maxim, address term maxim, refinement maxim, agree maxim and maxim of virtue. In the article it is also emphasized that politeness is an important factor which puts a certain restrictions on pragmatics. In addition, politeness and pragmatics have obvious cultural characteristics.

The formation and development of Chinese culture is deeply influenced by Confucius and Confucianism. Confucianism is a system of thought and behavior originating in ancient China, and variously could be described as a tradition, a philosophy, a religion, a humanistic or rationalistic religion, a way of governing or simply a way of life [16, p. 38]. The “*仁*” and “*礼*” which were advocated by Confucianism have had a significant impact on the development of Chinese culture and society (“*仁*” as the highest moral principle, moral standard and moral realm. “*礼*” is the code of conduct to maintain the current social inequality). With the time flow, the modern “*礼*” (politeness) has changed on the basis of the ancient “*礼*”. Nowadays, politeness is no longer used as the code of conduct to maintain the current social inequality, but as a behavioral code in people’s daily life. And the social function of modern politeness is to maintain harmony in the relationship between people, eliminate conflicts and promote cooperation [1, p. 11]. In interpersonal communication, people generally appear humble and courteous, trying to be considerate of others, and reduce or not cause trouble to each other, which has already become a social norm in Chinese culture.

On the other hand, Chinese culture focuses on “the beauty of implicitness”, that is, Chinese people don’t think it is necessary to say everything, because most information can be obtained from the environment and context, and they pay attention to roundabout expressions when communicating. According to the concepts of “high-context culture” and “low-context culture” proposed by scholar T. Hall [3]. “High-context culture” is also called strong communicative context culture, which means that information transmission depends on context. A large amount of information is

not encoded into communication through language, but is mainly understood by communicators according to their background knowledge. Only a small part of information is conveyed through language. “High-context culture” emphasizes indirect ways of expressing ideas, opinions, and communicative content. In “high-context culture”, understanding the speaker’s meaning and implication is considered to be the responsibility of the listener, not the speaker [3, p. 99]. Therefore, Chinese culture is of a typical “high-context culture”.

According to the traditional Chinese etiquette and courtesy, when someone sincerely offers you an invitation or help, its immediate acceptance is regarded as a very superficial and impolite behavior. Therefore, people usually practice the act of pretending to refuse the proposal one or more times before accepting the other’s kindness. Respectively, in the Chinese culture, the cultural communicative pattern process of “invite – refuse – invite again – refuse again – persistently invite – accept the invitation...”, is often used in order to finally succeed in interpersonal communication.

On the other hand, such speech acts of refusal are always accompanied by some formulaic expressions, such as “I don’t want to bother you,” “This is too much trouble for you,” or other comments emphasizing the cost of the inviter’s time, money or labor. In the context of the Chinese culture, such discourse expressions do not mean the end of the communication activity. On the contrary, it often represents the completion of the initial stage of the Chinese-style invitation activity. The negative response which the invitee uses in reply actually shows that he/she is willing to continue the negotiation and shows the politeness to the inviter.

Ostensible refusal speech act usually means that the speaker expresses a refusal only on the surface, but he/she is not serious, and does not really mean to reject the proposal. It has four main features of falsity, consensus, contradiction and non-disclosure. Brown & Levinson believe that refusal speech act is a kind of verbal behavior that threatens the face of the communicator, so it might be called the Face-Threatening Act (FTA). However, ostensible refusal speech act in the Chinese culture is not aimed at damaging the face of the recipient; on the contrary, it highlights the politeness of the speaker. Basing on the theory of social regulation and face preservation, Mao proposed “the relative face orientation construct” after comparing the differences between the English and the Chinese cultures [10, p. 45]. The concept states that ‘face’ is a public image that each member of the society wants to win for himself/herself, and this public image indicates a potential politeness orientation. Politeness points either to the ideal social identity or to the ideal individual autonomy. In a particular society, one of these two orientations

appears to be prominent. Politeness in the Chinese culture refers to the ideal social identity. China is a collectively-oriented society; therefore, maintaining interpersonal relationships is a top priority. Therefore, there appears the phenomenon of establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships in the “polite tug-of-war” within communicators. So the Chinese ostensible refusals serve as the embodiment of politeness in the Chinese communicative process.

### III. Analysis of Chinese Ostensible refusal speech act

Inspired by the previous research results, this paper will discuss and analyze Chinese ostensible refusal acts from the point of view of two main pragmatic functions.

#### 1. Obey the principle of politeness and maintain interpersonal relationships.

Scene: A and B are neighbors living in the same community. When B was playing in the yard with her child, she met A, and A immediately invited B and B’s child to play in her own house.

A: (对B的孩子说) 走! 上阿姨家玩儿去!

B: 不了不了, 你们家宝贝估计还在睡午觉吧。

A: 没有, 这会儿已经醒了。

B: 那你爸妈也要休息吧, 我们还是迟一些再去好了。

A: 没关系, 他们没有午睡习惯的。走吧! 我儿子正盼着有人能陪他玩呢!

B: 嗯, 那行, 走吧!

A: (speak to B’s child) Let’s go! Go to Auntie’s house to play!

B: No, no, your baby is probably still taking a nap.

A: No, she has woken up now.

B: Then your parents maybe also having a rest. We’d better come later.

A: It’s okay, they don’t have the habit of taking naps. Let’s go! My son is waiting for someone to play with him!

B: Well, then, let’s go!

[13, p. 105]

In the Chinese culture, “礼” (politeness) played an extremely important role. Ritual is not only a social and political norm, but also a norm of ethics and morality, a norm of personal behavior [14, p. 16]. The aspects of it might range from the political diplomacy to daily meetings, even to every word said and every action made. Everything should be done in line with the requirements of etiquette. Although A made an invitation to invite B to take the child and to be a guest at her own house, because of the accepted within the Chinese culture politeness rules, B wanted to confirm whether visiting A’s house during this lunch break would not disturb her family’s calm, that’s why she had not directly accepted A’s invitation. After confirming two times that the visit would not cause any inconvenience to A’s child and parents, B gladly

accepted the invitation to visit A's house. B's speech act shows the politeness to the inviter (A), because in interpersonal Chinese communication, the major cultural feature is trying to reduce or avoid causing troubles to the others.

Scene: A is inviting her friend B and B's wife to have dinner in her house by telephone.

A: 您带夫人一起到我家吃饭吧!

B: 太麻烦了! 不必啦!

A: 不麻烦, 就备点家常菜。

B: 那也得耗费您大半天的时间, 又得破费! 就见面聊聊, 不用吃饭了!

A: 很简单的, 您和夫人一定得来啊!

B: 那好吧! 越简单越好啊!

A: Bring your wife to my house for dinner!

B: Too much troublesome! No need!

A: No trouble, we will just prepare some home-cooked dishes.

B: That would take you much time, and it would cost you a lot of money! Just meet and chat, no need to eat!

A: It's very simply! You and your wife must come!

B: Well then! The simpler the better!

[6, p. 21]

Gu Yueguo put forward five principles of politeness based on the characteristics of the Chinese culture. Among them, the "maxim of virtue" refers to minimizing the cost paid by the others and maximizing the benefits for others in terms of behavioral motives; in other words, one has to try to exaggerate the benefits others give to you, and try to minimize the cost you pay. So B did not accept the invitation immediately, but refused on the grounds that he did not want to cause troubles to the inviter (A). However, it was not a real refusal, but a stylized refusal in correspondence with Chinese etiquette and socially adopted norm of politeness, which says: in interpersonal communication, try not to cause any trouble to the others. Then A invited B for the second time, and B refused the invitation again. This kind of verbal behavior shows that B is very considerate, because she wants to save A's time, money and labor. Finally, B accepted the invitation, and emphasized that only chatting without any meal would be enough, standing again on the position of the inviter, wanting to minimize causing troubles to him/her.

## 2. Test the other person's attitude and give each other a buffer zone.

Scene: A is B's neighbor, and A has been helping B with the child care for many years. One day, B's mother came from Jilin Province to A's house first. A is calling B to ask B to come over for dinner. Below is the conversation between them.

A: 赵啊, 元元奶奶在我这哪, 晚饭我已经准备好了, 我让你妈在我这儿吃, 你也赶快过来吃吧。

B: 我不过去了, 孟姨, 还是让我妈和元元回来吃吧, 怪麻烦的。

A: 麻烦什么, 菜我已经做完了, 你赶快过来吧。

B: 如果那样的话, 我把元元接回来, 你和我妈吃顿消停饭。

A: 唉呀, 快过来一起吃吧, 我准备那么多菜, 不然也剩掉了。你自己还得现做。赶快过来吧。

B: 那好吧, 我就过去。

A: Zhao, Yuan Yuan's grandma is here. (Baby's name is Yuan Yuan.) I have prepared dinner. I will let your mother eat it here. You need come and have it as soon as possible.

B: I'm not going, Aunt Meng, let my mother and Yuan Yuan come back for eating, it's too troublesome.

A: Nothing is troublesome, I've finished the dishes, come over quickly.

B: In that case, I will bring Yuan Yuan back, and you and my mother will have a relaxing meal.

A: Oh, come and eat together, I have prepared so many dishes, otherwise there will be leftovers. Otherwise, you will have to prepare dinner yourself. Come quickly.

B: Well then, I'll go over there.

[18, p. 125].

Because A and B have been neighbors and have a very good relationship, A has been helping to take care of B's children. So when A sends out an invitation and wants to invite B to dinner at her home, B is very willing to accept it. However, in accordance with the rules of the Chinese politeness she dares not to accept it immediately, and B's two ostensible refusals are actually made to test the authenticity of the inviting party's attitude. Because in case of an ostensible invitation A would not insist on it, then B could finish the communication in time in order to avoid the embarrassing situations.

In the Chinese culture, there not only exists the speech act of ostensible refusal, but also the speech acts of ostensible invitation: when the speaker sends out an invitation to the addressee, while in fact he does not expect the addressee to get his invitation accepted. This is just a speech act realized for social etiquette. Therefore, in order to test the attitude of the inviter, whether he really wants to invite or not, the ostensible refusal speech act needs to be actualized. ZhaoYingling & Li Shifang in their paper argue that if the inviter does not insist on the invitation, in this case it is not a sincere invitation [18, p. 125]. According to the analysis of the above given dialogue, it can be found that the communicational mode between A and B is "invite – refuse – invite again – refuse again – invite the third time – accept the invitation". Through practicing the ostensible refusal speech act, B can make sure if the invitation is a sincere one, and finally accept.

Scene: A and B are couple in love. A originally asked B to go to the movies together at night, but he got the urgent work to do, therefore there was no chance for him to go to watch the movies as it was planned before. B was very unhappy, but she didn't show it. Later, when A finished, he wanted to ask B to eat out.

A: 终于忙完了, 这么晚了, 没有合适的电影看了吧, 要不要出来一起吃东西, 加班饿死了。

B: 我就不去了, 你饿了自己去吃吧。

A: 真的不去?

B: 嗯, 不去, 很晚了, 我先睡了, 晚安。

A: 那好吧, 晚安。

B: ...

A: I've finally finished my work. It's so late. There is no suitable movie to watch. Do you want to come out to eat together? I'm starving to death after working overtime.

B: I won't go. If you are hungry, you can eat something.

A: Really not going?

B: Well, no, it's very late. I'm going to bed now, good night.

A: Well, good night.

B: ...

[2, p. 165]

According to the above given conversation, it is obvious that the girl (B) is not happy at all with the cancel of the date. And when A came up with the proposal to eat out later, B had not directly expressed the unhappiness, because although the date was suddenly cancelled, she treated it as an excusable thing. Because A had not done it on purpose: only because of some important job affairs. While dating failed after all, so B took the ostensible refusal speech act to hint a little dissatisfaction of hers. However, A had not realized it, just thought that B gave a sincere refusal. Then A did not offer his invitation again, just asking the girl to confirm she really didn't want to eat out with him. This made B very angry.

As it was stated above, the ostensible refusal speech act can test the speaker's attitude. Specifically, it can not only test whether the invitation is true or

not, but also to check if it is sincere enough. As in the context given above, because of A's reason, the date was ruined. If A really wanted to make up for the cancelation of dating, he needed to invite more times to show the genuineness. And B would get back in a good mood through several ostensible refusals, but then is sure to accept the invitation at last. If A could understand clearly about B's true thoughts and intentions, their conversation would end in another way. This example also reflects one of the distinguishing features of ostensible refusal: its "high-risk" of inappropriate identification, misrepresentation or misunderstanding of the true intent of the invitee's refusal; furthermore, there is also the possibility of treating the provider's offering as insincere one [11, p. 67].

Therefore, while implementing or perceiving the ostensible refusal speech act, one should be careful and attentive in order to avoid the pragmatic errors in speaker – listener collaboration.

**Conclusion.** To sum up, the ostensible refusal speech act is a special manifestation of the Chinese culture. Although it goes about verbalized refusal, ostensible refusal speech act definitely does not belong to the Face-Threatening Act (FTA) in the Chinese culture; instead it serves the politeness function in the communication and meets the needs of social ritual, phatic politeness. Ostensible refusal speech act mainly has the following pragmatic functions: testing the other person's attitude; making sure whether the other's attitude is true or not; checking the degree of the counter partner's sincerity in communication; obeying how the principle of politeness works (and this principle belongs to the main characteristics and requirements of the Chinese culture being focused on maintaining and developing the harmonious and friendly interpersonal relationships). On the other hand, this special speech act has the characteristic feature of "high-risk", so the caution is needed for those who use this kind of the speech act in their communication in order to minimize certain pragmatic errors and promote the harmonious development of interpersonal relationships.

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