A comparison of refusals between Chinese speakers in Taiwan and Malaysia

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Abstract

This study explored regional variations in the refusal speech act between Malaysian Chinese and Taiwan Chinese. The results showed that more similarities were found than differences between the two groups. Overall, Taiwan Chinese employed a higher rate of refusal strategies than did Malaysian Chinese. Both groups employed more indirect refusal strategies to higher-status listeners, whereas direct refusal strategies were used more frequently in refusing listeners of equal-status, indicating that both groups were sensitive to the social status of their interlocutors. With respect to individual strategies used, giving a reason and a statement of regret were the first two preferred strategies, followed by a direct refusal strategy and the suggestion of an alternative, across situations and groups. Moreover, that the great majority of the participants addressed a person of higher-status with an honorific title indicated that they conformed to the maxim-of-address of Chinese social norms. Finally, the pedagogical implication of these findings has implications for the field of teaching Chinese as a second language.

Keywords: politeness, face, refusal strategies, Taiwan Chinese, Malaysian Chinese

Introduction

Recently, research on intra-lingual pragmatic variation has contributed to our knowledge concerning the pragmatic differences between varieties of Chinese Mandarin (henceforth Chinese) spoken in different regions. For example, Bresnahan, Ohashi, Liu, Nebash, and Liao (1999) indicated that the higher imposition of a request, the lower request compliance for both Singapore Chinese and Taiwan Chinese. However, Singapore Chinese were inclined to comply with a friend's request, whereas Taiwan Chinese tended to refuse a friend's request and used significantly more strategies. Second, Lin, Woodfield, and Ren (2012) found that both students from Taiwan and China showed a tendency to compliment on one's appearance, possessions and abilities explicitly. They differed significantly in their uses of different syntactic forms. Taiwanese students tended to use the form of a request as an implicit compliment strategy, whereas Chinese students used a want statement. Finally, concerning the responses to compliments, Spencer-Oatey, Ng, and Li (2008) found that students in China showed a higher tendency to express a disagreement on one's compliment than students from Hong Kong. These studies have demonstrated the pragmatic differences between Chinese spoken in different regions.

In line with previous studies, the present study tried to add the list by investigating the regional factor to the refusal speech act between Chinese speakers in Taiwan, a major Chinese-speaking region and Malaysia, one of the biggest Chinese overseas communities. Two reasons underpin this selection of refusals as the target speech act. First, according to Brown and Levinson (1987) the refusal speech act threatens the positive face of the listener and may jeopardize the relationship between the speaker and the listener. Thus, people in every society will soften or reduce this possible threat to the listener by means of politeness measures or strategies. Second, Chinese people tend to avoid conflicts at all costs due to the value placed on social harmony rather than individual interests (Gu, 1990). It is believed that by investigating refusals between these two varieties of Chinese, we shed some light on how Chinese refusals vary from region to region, and what can be incorporated into classes of Chinese as a second language.

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2. Literature review

2.1 Faces and Chinese 'miàn zǐ' and 'liǎn'

A speech act of refusal is a dispreferred response to a request, an offer, a suggestion, or an invitation, by which the speaker refuses to engage in an action proposed by the interlocutor (Chen, Ye, & Zhong, 1995). According to Brown and Levinson (1987), a model person in a society has two kinds of face wants: positive face and negative face. The former refers to a person's desire of being liked and respected; the latter refers to a person's desire of being left alone. Therefore, a refusal threatens the hearer's positive face of being liked, respected and approved of. Generally, out of respect, depending on the situation and the purpose of communication, a speaker will select appropriate linguistic expressions, known as politeness strategies, to mitigate the potential threats of a refusal in interactions. This act of employment of politeness strategies is universal.

Nevertheless, Mao (1994) argued that Chinese *miàn zǐ* and *liǎn*, two equivalents to Brown and Levinson's faces, concern not only an individual's desire of being respected and being left alone, but also one's public image and social value. Specifically, *miàn zǐ* refers to a person's wish to gain and secure one's prestige and reputation in a society, whereas *liǎn* refers to a person's wish to be liked and to be acknowledged in a community. Moreover, in Chinese society, the interests and harmony of the group are always on top of the interests of individual's. In order to build up and maintain the harmonious relationship between the interlocutors, Chinese people would avoid confrontation at all costs. In other words, the first priority for Chinese people in social interaction is to attend to the listener's needs of *miàn zǐ*, being respected, and *liǎn*, to acknowledge the listener's social standing. As a result, while rejecting, the preferred refusal strategies are the ones that not only can demonstrate the gesture of being polite, but can preserve the listener's face.

In line with Leech's (1983) politeness principles, Gu (1990) proposed four Chinese politeness maxims; namely, Tact maxim, Generosity maxim, Self-denigration maxim, and Address maxim in Chinese social patterns. The Tact Maxim refers to the negative politeness strategies that minimize the imposition of a speech act, and the Generosity Maxim concerns the positive politeness strategies that attend to the hearer's interests and needs. However, the Self-denigration Maxim and the Address Maxim elucidate two unique Chinese politeness behaviors in everyday conversations. While the former relate to the strategies of downgrading self and elevating the hearer, the latter centers on the practices of paying respect toward the hearer by addressing the hearer with a professional title (i.e., *lǎo shī* 'teacher', *jiāo shòu* 'professor'), kinship terms (i.e., *yé yé* 'grandfather', *nǎi nǎi* 'grandmother'), or solidarity boosters such as *tóng xué* (classmate). Ma (1996) pointed out that the core of these polite behaviors is to maintain the harmony of a community, and to avoid face-to-face confrontation. Consequently, instead of rejecting directly, Chinese people prefer a contrary-to-face-value communication refusing style depending on the context. However, it is difficult for students of different language background to understand the possible clues in context.

2.2 Chinese refusals

Chinese refusals are complex speech acts that entail not only long sequences of negotiation, but also face-saving strategies to compensate for the face-threatening nature of the act (Yang, 2008). To date, a few related studies on Chinese refusals have contributed to our understanding of Chinese refusals. As mentioned earlier, a refusal is a responding act to a few initiating acts, such as, suggesting, offering, invitation, and requesting. Chen et al. (1995) discovered that there were two types of refusals: substantive refusals and ritual refusals. While a substantive refusal is a real refusal by saying "no" means "no" to a request or suggestion, a ritual refusal is a politeness behavior by saying "no" means "yes" before accepting an offer or invitation. The authors argued that in Chinese culture, such speech acts as invitations and offers are not considered to be face-threatening, rather these acts are seen as increasing the sense of worth that comes from knowing the hearer's social status. However, it is polite for Chinese people to decline the first or two offers or invitations before accepting them. Thus, depending on the context, the Chinese "no" can mean "yes" and "yes" can mean "no" (Ma, 1996).

On the other hand, few Chinese people refuse directly in real refusals because they believe that the speaker's own face can be preserved only when the other person's face is maintained (Ma, 1996). A direct refusal can be either *bù yà* 'No' or *wǒ méi bàn fǎ* 'I can't'. However, an indirect refusal is more complicated, because the speaker has to choose the appropriate refusal strategies to alleviate the bad effects of a refusal (Felix-Brasdefer, 2008). Common refusal strategies to mitigate the threats are giving reasons (e.g. *wǒ yǒu shì qíng yào zuò* 'I have things to do'), expressing regret (e.g. *bào qiàn* 'I'm sorry'), and promising future acceptance (e.g. *xià cì xū yào wǒ, wǒ yī dìng dào* 'Next time, I will be there definitely'. Chen et al. (1995) found that giving a reason as the most useful strategy, the second expressing regret followed by suggesting alternatives, and the fourth direct refusal. In sum, most Chinese people will redress their refusals to imply that the act of refusals is not the speaker's deliberate preference.

In addition, Chinese people are sensitive to power relationships (Chen et al., 1995). For instance, Liao and Bresnahan (1996), comparing refusals by students in Taiwan and in America, found that most Taiwanese students employed address forms with titles (e.g., lǎo shī 'teacher', jiāo shòu 'professor') to address persons of high-status, whereas the American students did not, indicating Taiwanese students were aware of the power differences. In addition, Taiwanese students observed the principle of Dian-Dao-Wei-Zhi, or marginally touching the point approach. That is when dealing with the awkward feeling caused by refusals, Taiwanese students were more economical at employing fewer refusal strategies than did Americans. Moreover, while both groups were keen on giving reasons as the most common indirect refusal strategy, Taiwanese students tended to give more specific reasons, whereas the Americans gave vague excuses. These authors also found that while both Taiwanese and Americans favored a statement of regret when refusing, Americans would express positive attitudes such as "I'd love to, but...," but Taiwanese did not. Finally, it was considered to be more difficult to refuse a family member for Taiwanese students, whereas families and friends were equal for American students.

More recently, Yang (2008) investigated the speech act of refusals in five TV series shown in China. As expected, Yang found that while ritual refusals occurred in responding to invitations and offers, real refusals took place in refusing suggestions and requests. Depending on the types of requests, giving reasons or excuses was the primary strategy in refusing requests for favors to minimize the uncomfortable feelings caused by a refusal, followed by suggesting alternatives and dissuading the requester to drop the request. Moreover, suggesting alternatives and avoidance occurred more often with a hearer of high- or low-status than with a hearer of equal status. Finally, most Chinese people employed an address form to show respect or solidarity with the hearer indicating this is an essential element in refusing.

For many non-native speakers, the speech act of refusal is a major cross-cultural 'sticking point' (Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990). Investigating how American learners of Chinese refused an invitation from a professor, Hong (2011) found that both Chinese native speakers and American learners employed statements of regret and giving reasons with similar frequency. However, while 26 out of 30 Chinese speakers addressed the hearer with the honorific title "professor" plus the teacher's last name to show respect, only 3 out of 30 Americans used addressing forms. Moreover, while some Chinese native speakers employed alternatives, indirect complaining, and promising for future events to ensure their sincere respect and to preserve the face of the hearer, no Americans employed these three strategies. Finally, the percentage of direct refusals used by the American group was higher than that of the Chinese group. As a result, Hong attributed the differences between the refusals strategies to the lack of knowledge of politeness in Chinese culture on the part of American learners.

In short, in cross-cultural communication, people may observe their usual language patterns of their speech community, which may differ from those of their interlocutor's. In terms of teaching Chinese as a second language, misunderstandings sometimes occur if learners use different refusal strategies, but are unable to say "no" clearly and politely.

3. Methodology

3.1 Tokyo metropolitan area

This study aims to investigate the speech act of refusals by two groups of Chinese speakers from two regions, Malaysia and Taiwan. The reasons for choosing these two groups of Chinese speakers is that while Chinese is the main language in schools in Taiwan, Chinese is the instructional language in Chinese schools for the youth of Chinese in Malaysia, a multilingual and multicultural country. Given the fact that pragmatic variations may occur between different varieties of Chinese, there is a need to meet the learners' needs for cross-cultural communication. The present study aims to answer the following questions:

(1) Do Malaysian Chinese and Taiwan Chinese refuse differently with regard to the number of refusal strategies?
(2) Do Malaysian Chinese and Taiwan Chinese use strategies differently in equal and unequal status situations?
(3) Do Malaysian Chinese and Taiwan Chinese use strategies differently in familiar and unfamiliar interlocutor situations?

3.2 Participants

One hundred participants took part in this study: 50 Taiwanese students and 50 Malaysian Chinese students (all 100 were Tourism majors) who attended the same private university in Taiwan. Both Malaysian Chinese and Taiwanese students included an equal number of males and females.

3.2 Instrument

Data for this study were collected via a written Discourse Completion Test (DCT), a useful instrument for investigating speech acts such as apologies, requests, and refusals. DCTs are useful because of the ease with which they can be administered. In addition, the data elicited via a DCT are found to be consistent with naturally occurring speech, although they are often shorter and less redundant language. Finally, this technique allows the researcher to examine the possible influences of two factors: relative power and social distance on the strategies of refusals (Beebe et al., 1990; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Kasper, 2008).

Two variables, interlocutors' relative power relation (P) and social distance (D), were embedded in six situations in the DCT. All six scenarios involved an obvious power relationship between the interlocutors: to reject a teacher was to reject a high status (+P), to reject a peer was to reject an equal status (=P), and to reject a college sophomore was to reject a low-status (-P). It is believed that by maintaining unequal power and social distance between the speaker and the hearer will stimulate the use of refusal strategies. Table 1 presents the six situations in DCT.

Table 3.1: Written role-play situations in the DCT

Situation types	Example situation
Situation 1 (+P, -D)	To reject a teacher's request to assist in the freshmen reception.
Situation 2 (+P, +D)	To reject a teacher's request to assist in the freshmen reception.
Situation 3 (=P, -D)	To reject a classmate's request to borrow your notes.
Situation 4 (=P, +D)	To reject a classmate's request to borrow your notes.
Situation 5 (-P, -D)	To reject a student's request to postpone his/her oral presentation.
Situation 6 (-P, +D)	To reject a student's request to postpone his/her oral presentation.

3.3 Data analysis

In total, there were six hundred refusals (300 refusals from each group) collected via DCT. In the present study, a refusal was a negative response to a request by an acquaintance. It might contain just one word or one sentence such as "*bù yà*" 不要 (No) and "*wǒ méi bàn fǎ*" 我沒辦法 (I can't) which was considered as a direct refusal. It might include a set of semantic utterances such as expressing regret (e.g., "*bào qiàn*" 抱歉 'I'm sorry'), and giving reasons (e.g., "*wǒ yǒu shì qíng yào zuò*" 我有事情要做 'I have things to do') functioning as indirect refusals. Following the coding framework of Beebe et al. (1990), these semantic formulas collected were classified into three categories: adjuncts, direct and indirect refusals.

According to Beebe et al. (1990), adjuncts are expressions that cannot work as refusals alone without attaching to other semantic formulas such as excuses, explanations or direct refusals. In the present study, two adjuncts were found: address forms (e.g., "*lǎo shī*"老師 'teacher', "*jiāo shòu*" 教授 'professor' and "*tóng xué*" 同學 'Classmate') and pause fillers (e.g., "oh" 喔, "um" 呣). In line with Hong (2011), address form is seen as one type of adjunct functioning as a politeness strategy.

In the data, two sub-types of direct refusals were found: unwillingness and inability. According to Yang (2008), a direct refusal is an explicit refusal by using denying vocabulary such as "*bù xíng*" 不行 (No), "*bù kě yǐ*" 不可以 (Can't be allowed), and "*bù yào*"不要 (Don't want), which indicates negative willingness and inability of the speaker. However, the analysis of the present data showed that while the expression of "*méi bàn fǎ*" 沒辦法 (no way) was found in every situation, "*bù yào*"不要 (Don't want), "*bù xíng*" 不行 (No), and "*bù kě yǐ*" 不可以 (Can't be allowed) never occurred in the refusal responses of all the participants in certain situations. This suggests that "*méi bàn fǎ*" 沒辦法 (no way) belongs to the category of direct refusal, carrying a different degree of directness and politeness from the other three negative expressions. Thus, rather than coding these negative remarks under the same strategy of negative ability/willingness, "*bù yào*"不要 (Don't want), "*bù xíng*"不行 (No), and "bù kě yǐ" 不可以 (Can't be allowed) were coded as one type of direct refusal indicating unwillingness and "*méi bàn fǎ*" 沒辦法 (I can't) another type indicating inability.

Finally, indirect refusals consist of nine sub-strategies: (1) Regret, (2) Wish, (3) Excuse, (4) Alternative, (5) Future acceptance, (6) Hedge, (7) Criticism, (8) Empathy, and (9) Principle. For instance, the response "*'bù hǎo yì sī, lǎo shī, wǒ děng yī xià yǒu shì qíng, xià cì xū yào wǒ, wǒ yī dìng dào'* 不好意思, 老師, 我等一下有事情, 下次需要我, 我一定到."from a Taiwanese student, appearing in the order of Chinese PinYin, Chinese characters, and English translations, was coded as follows:

1. "*bù hǎo yì sī*" 不好意思 ('Sorry'; Statement of regret).
2. "*lǎo shī*" 老師 ('teacher'; Address with title).
3. "*wǒ děng yī xià yǒu shì qíng*" 我等一下有事情 ('I have things to do later.'; Reason).
4. "*xià cì xū yào wǒ, wǒ yī dìng dào*" 下次需要我, 我一定到 ('next time, I definitely be here.'; Promise of future acceptance).

Based on the occurrence of each semantic formula in the data, strategies such as criticism, threat, and lack of enthusiasm were combined and labeled as a criticism, whereas avoidance, joke, and let the speaker off the hook were combined and coded as a strategy of empathy due to these strategies occurring only one of two times in the data.

To answer the research questions, the frequencies of the refusal strategies were counted and then in turn were classified into three refusal categories: Adjuncts, direct refusal strategies, and indirect refusal strategies. When one specific strategy occurred twice, it would count twice. For example, the response "*bào qiàn, wǒ děng yī xià yǒu shì qíng*, Sorry '抱歉, 我等一下有事情, Sorry.'" is counted as using three tokens in

refusing: (1) stating regret ("*bào qiàn*" 抱歉 'I'm sorry'), (2) giving an explanation, and (3) stating regret (sorry in English) again. Table 2 presents the categories of strategies used in the present study.

Table 3.2: The classification of refusal strategies

	Refusal strategies	Examples
Adjunct	1 Address forms	"*lǎo shī*" 老師 (Teacher), "*jiāo shòu*" 教授 (Professor), "*tóng xué*" 同學 (Classmate)
	2 Fillers	喔、恩、吼 (Oh, Uhm, Uhh)
Direct	1 Unwillingness	"*bù yào*" 不要 (Don't want), "*bù xíng*" 不行 (No)
	2 Inability	"*méi bàn fǎ*" 沒辦法 (No way)
Indirect	1 Regret (Apology)	"*bù hǎo yì sī*" 不好意思 (Sorry), "*bào qiàn*" 抱歉 (sorry)
	2 Wish	"*wǒ yě xiǎng bāng nǐ*" 我也想幫你 (I'd like to help, but…)
	3 Explanation	"*wǒ yǒu shì qíng*" 我有事情 (I have something to do)
	4 Alternative	"*wǒ qù wèn qí tā tóng xué yǒu méi yǒu kōng*" 我去問其他同學有沒有空? (I'll ask other classmates if they are available.)
	5 Future acceptances	"*xià cì ba*" 下次吧 (Maybe next time)
	6 Hedge	"*kě néng bù xíng*" 可能不行喔 (Probably not)
	7 Criticism	"*shuí jiào nǐ bù shàng kè*" 誰叫你不上課 (You shouldn't skip the classes)
	8 Empathy	"*méi wèn tí de*" 沒問題的
	9 Principles	"*zhè yàng duì qí tā tóng xué bù gōng píng*" 這樣對其他同學不公平 (This is not fair to other students)

4. Results

This section presents the results in terms of the frequency and content of the refusals. The discussion will include the realization of refusals when the hearer is higher, equal or lower in status (P) as well as with whom the speaker is familiar or unfamiliar (D).

4.1 Regional differences in the frequency of refusal strategies

As can be seen in Table 3, on the whole, the 100 participants produced 1571 refusal strategies; of these, 55% (K=867) were produced by the Taiwan Chinese group, and 45% (K=704) were produced by Malaysian Chinese. As Table 4 shows, on average, every Taiwanese subject employed 2.89 refusal strategies whereas Malaysian subjects employed 2.35 strategies. The results of independent *t*-test showed that the mean difference of the overall refusal strategies used between the Malaysian Chinese and Taiwanese Chinese is statistically significant at $p<0.05$ level ($t=3.962$, $df=98$, $p=.00<.05$). In other words, Taiwanese participants showed a tendency toward verbosity and used significantly more tokens in refusing than did Malaysian subjects across situations.

Table 4.1: The overall frequencies, distributions, means of adjuncts, direct and indirect refusals in each group per person.

Type of Refusal Strategies	Malay (n =50)			Taiwan (n =50)		
	K	%	Mean	K	%	Mean
Adjuncts	89	12.6%	1.78	117	13.5%	2.34
Direct refusals	128	18.2%	2.56	154	17.7%	3.08
Indirect refusals	487	69.2%	9.74	596	68.7%	11.92
Total	704	100%	14.08	867	100%	17.34

N refers to the overall frequency of each type refusal strategy.

Table 4.2: Means and standard deviations (SD) of oval adjuncts, direct and indirect refusals per situation by two groups.

Groups	Statistic	Total strategies	Strategies per situation	Types of refusals per situation		
				Adjuncts	Direct	Indirect
Malaysian (n = 50)	Mean	14.08	2.35	.3	.43	1.62
	SD		.594	.227	.228	.432
Taiwanese (n = 50)	Mean	17.34	2.89	.39	.51	1.99
	SD		.789	.247	.432	.606

4.2 Regional differences in the types of refusal strategies

With respect to the preferred types of refusal strategies, both groups showed more similarities than differences. As shown in Table 3, indirect refusals were the most preferred types of both groups across situations (Malaysian: 69.2%; Taiwanese: 68.7%) followed by direct refusals (Malaysian: 18.2%; Taiwanese: 17.7%), and adjuncts (Malaysian: 12.6%; Taiwanese: 13.5%) respectively. The Malaysian subjects had a higher percentage in both direct and indirect refusals than did Taiwanese students except in the category of adjuncts. Obviously, both groups employed more indirect refusals than direct refusals across situations. While the indirect refusals (69.2%) in the Malaysian group were 3.8 times as frequent as direct refusals (18.2%), the percentage of indirect refusals (68.7%) was 3.88 times higher than that of direct refusal (17.7%) in Taiwanese group. The results of paired-samples *t*-test comparing the mean difference of direct refusals and indirect refusals were significant in each group (Malaysian: t=-16.966, df=49, p=.00; Taiwanese: t=-15.060, df=49, p=.00). Thus, in keeping with previous studies, both Malaysian subjects and Taiwanese subjects showed a preference for indirectness over directness and adjuncts to refusals (Chen et al., 1995; Liao & Bresnahan, 1996).

The independent *t*-test was performed to examine which categories of refusal – adjuncts, direct refusals, and indirect refusals – contribute to the differences. The results revealed that Taiwanese subjects used more indirect refusal strategies than did Malaysian subjects, and the difference was statistically significant (t=3.459, df=98, p=.001<.01).

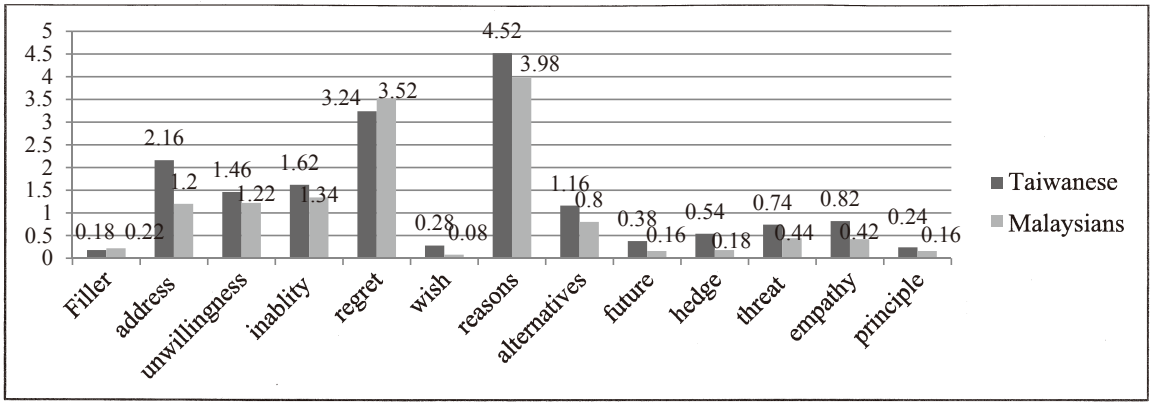

Figure 4.1: The overall frequencies of each refusal strategy used per person in each group.

Finally, Figure 1 presents the most preferred strategies of both groups. Three notable facts were found. First, both groups were identical in terms of the top six favored strategies used; namely, (1) reasons, (2) regrets/apology, (3) address form, (4) inability, (5) unwillingly, and (6) alternatives. These results are consistent with the literature (Chen et al., 1995; Liao & Bresnahan, 1996; Hong, 2011) that Chinese people are inclined to give reasons and express regret while refusing. Second, a few indirect refusal strategies such as criticism, empathy, future acceptances, and principles as well as fillers were rarely used by the participants. Finally, Taiwanese subjects outperformed their Malaysian counterparts on almost every strategy used, except statement of regret (i.e., Malaysian: 3.52 tokens; Taiwanese: 3.24 tokens) and fillers (i.e. Malaysian: 0.22 tokens; Taiwanese: 0.18 tokens).

4.3 Power relationship and social distance on the frequency of refusal strategies

Two social factors, power relationship and social distance, were embedded in each situation to test whether the participants vary their refusing in different situations. Table 5 presents the mean, standard deviation and the total refusal strategies in each situation of two groups.

As can be seen in Table 5, while the total number of refusals strategies used in two power-high situations (situation 1 and 2) were highest, the total number was the lowest in two power-equal situations (situation 3 and 4). The mean number of strategies used by the participants in the Malaysian group ranged from an average of 1.92 strategies in the situation 4 (=P, +D) to 2.86 strategies in the situation 2 (+P, +D). Likewise, the participants in the Taiwanese group produced overall strategies from an average of two strategies in situation 3 (=P, -D) to 3.5 strategies in situation 2 (+P, +D). The standard deviation also reflected a substantial heterogeneity within each group.

Table 5: Mean, standard deviation (SD) and the total refusal strategies in each situation of two groups

Group		S1(+P,-D)	S2(+P,+D)	S3(=P,-D)	S4(=P,+D)	S5(-P,+D)	S6(-P,-D)
Malay	Total Refusals	141	143	96	96	113	115
	Mean (n = 50)	2.82	2.86	1.92	1.92	2.26	2.3
	SD	1.024	.969	.922	.633	1.026	.909
Taiwan	Total Refusals	170	176	101	125	147	148
	Mean (n = 50)	3.4	3.5	2.0	2.5	2.94	2.96
	SD	.857	1.147	.914	1.025	1.420	1.087

Each refusal type includes the frequent use and the percentage (%) in parentheses.

In order to examine whether the power relationship an important factor in the speech act of refusal, One-way ANOVA was carried out to compare the means of situation 1, 3, and 5 (i.e., refusing a familiar person of power-high, equal and low). A multiple comparison of Scheffe was applied if the test results of ANOVA were significant.

For the Malaysian subjects, the results of ANOVA showed the *p* value was smaller than .01 (F=10.492, df=2, p=.000<.01), indicating there were significant differences between situation 1, 3, and 5, a Scheffe multiple test was performed. The results showed that while the difference of mean between situation 1 and 3 (MD=.9000, p=.00<.01) was significant, so was the difference between situation 3 and 5 (MD=.5600, p=.021<.05). However, the mean difference between situation 3 and 5 was not evident. Likewise, for the Taiwanese group, the results of ANOVA revealed that the frequency of refusal strategies used in situation 1, 3, and 5 varied significantly (F=20.642, df=2, p=.000<.01). A multiple comparison of Scheffe was performed. The results showed that while the mean difference between situation 1 and 3 (MD=1.3800, p=.00<.01) was statistically important, so was the difference between situation 3 and 5 (MD=.9200, p=.00<.01). However, the difference between situation 1 and 5 was not evident (MD=.4600, p=.113>.05).

Obviously, a power relationship could predict the number of refusals used for both Taiwanese and Malaysian subjects. Depending on the relative status of the hearers, both groups employed more refusals in asymmetrical situations (power-higher and lower) than they did in refusing a person of equal status. This finding is consistent with Liao and Bresnahan's (1996) in that the refusal expressions used in power-equal situations were semantically less complex than those used in the two asymmetrical situations: status-higher and lower situations. On the contrary, when refusing a person with higher status, the speaker needs to put more efforts to mitigate the uncomfortable feeling causing by a refusal with an expression of regret, reason, and a promising for future events. This finding provides a piece of evidence that lends support to Hong's (2013) statement that Chinese speakers are status sensitive.

Additionally, the influence of social distance (i.e., refusing a close friend or an acquaintance) is tested via Paired-samples *t*-test to compare the frequency of refusals of three paired situations in three pairs situations: the first pair (situation 1 and situation 2), the second pair (situation 3 and situation 4), and the third pair (situation 5 and situation 6) of each group. For the Malaysian subjects, the results showed that social distance did not significantly affect the frequency of refusals used in the present study (situation 1 and 2: t=-.292, df=49, p=.771; situation 3 and 4: t=.000, df=49, p=1.0; situation 5 and 6: t=-.313, df=9, p=.755).

However, it was a slightly different case for Taiwanese subjects. It is found the difference in the second pair situations, where they had to refuse a person of status-equal, that social distance affected overall refusal strategies used and was statistical significant (situation 3 and 4: t=-3.412, df=49, p<.000<.01), but not in the first pair (situation 1 and 2: t=-.742, df=49, p=.462) or the third pair (situation 5 and 6: t=-.123, df=49, p=.903). In short, when refusing a familiar person of equal-status, such as a classmate, Taiwanese subjects spoke less than they did when refusing an unfamiliar one. Two possible reasons for this talk-less phenomenon between close friends are: First, they knew each other so well that there was no need to state explicitly one's intention. Second, Chinese people are inclined to observe the economic principle — "*diǎn dào wéi zhǐ*" 點到為止 (marginally touching the point principle) when dealing with awkward topics (Liao & Bresnahan, 1996).

To sum up, a power relationship was a strong indicator to the number of refusal strategies used, whereas social distance was not. The participants in both groups showed no difference in their total frequency of refusal strategies used between refusing a close or an unfamiliar interlocutor in the asymmetrical situations. However, in the case of refusing a person of status-equal, social distance affected the number of refusal strategies employed by Taiwanese subjects, but not the Malaysian subjects.

5. Discussion

The above analyses indicated that there were similarities and differences with respect to the refusal strategies used between the Malaysian and Taiwanese participants. On the basis of the frequency of refusal strategies used by each group, the answer to the first research question is affirmative in that Taiwanese participants employed more refusal strategies than that of their Malaysian counterparts. Concerning the three major types of refusals used, the results showed that both groups favored indirect refusals over direct refusals or adjuncts.

With regard to the specific strategies of refusals used in each situation, similarities can be found at the level of individual strategy. Among the thirteen refusal strategies, the top five most used strategies of both Malaysian and Taiwanese subjects were as follows: (1) giving reasons, (2) expressing regrets, (3) address forms, (4) unwillingness, and (5) inability.

In addition, both Malaysian and Taiwanese subjects tended to employ a similar set of indirect strategies. For instance, to minimize the awkward feeling in refusing a person of high-status, some participants of both groups would suggest an alternative or promise to help out in the future. However, in the status-equal situations, some participants criticized their peers for skipping class, whereas others promised their friends to have the notebook later or suggested borrowing notebooks from someone else. Finally, in two situations of turning down the request of a person who is lower in status (i.e., refusing the request of postponing oral presentation of a student), the indirect strategies which were used across the two groups were alternatives and empathy. However, Taiwanese subjects employed these two strategies more often than Malaysians did. Finally, the strategy of principle was seldom used by the participants of both groups. Concerning the effects of power relationship on the use of refusals in each group, the results of the analysis of the frequency and the number of semantic formulas used by the participants in each social situation lend support to the view that the types of linguistic strategies use are strongly influenced by the requester's status. For example, both Malaysian and Taiwanese subjects produced the highest frequency of refusals in status-high situations. On the contrary, they employed fewer refusal strategies in refusing in status-equal situations. While the frequency of statements of regret is the highest in status-high situations, it is the lowest in status-lower situations.

Similarly, differences were observed at the level of individual strategy used in both groups as the degree of social distance increased (i.e., the relative familiarities with the requester). For example, when refusing an unfamiliar professor, both Malaysian and Taiwanese subjects employed more regret than they did to refuse a familiar one. In power-equal situations, both groups showed the tendency of expressing negative willingness to deny the requests of close friends, whereas they indicated negative ability to comply with the requests from acquaintances that they did not know well.

In power-equal situations, while both groups did not hesitate to criticize close friends to whom they knew well, they utilized indirect strategies of empathy or principles rather than the strategy of criticism. Finally, in power-low situations, besides using regret and reason, the participants were found to add more indirect strategies of empathy and wish in refusing unfamiliar young students.

6. Conclusion

This study contributes to the field of intra-lingual pragmatics by investigating the speech act of refusal between two varieties of Chinese spoken in two Asian regions: Malaysia and Taiwan.

On the whole, there were more pragmatic similarities than difference in the speech act of refusals between Malaysian and Taiwanese Chinese. First, both Malaysian and Taiwanese participants exhibited clear preferences for indirect refusal strategies such as regret and reasons, in keeping with previous studies. Second, both groups employed direct refusals comprising unwillingness and inability, though situational differences were identified between these two groups. Inability occurred more often in refusing a person of higher-status, whereas unwillingness more frequently in refusing a person of status-equal or lower. Moreover, both Malaysians and Taiwanese were sensitive to social status and employed address form more frequently to a higher-status than to a status-equal.

Finally, the pedagogical implications of these findings is that teachers should teach the cultural aspects of language and introduce learners to different varieties of Chinese along with the linguistic expressions needed to perform a particular speech act. In addition, because learners may employ one specific refusal strategy to all communication situations without understanding the possible differences in terms of different social factors such as power relationship and social distance in the speech act of refusals, learners should be explicitly taught how to refuse appropriately according to the social status of their interlocutors.

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