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A Review of Refusal Strategies in Cross-Cultural Business Communication

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Abstract: Refusal is one of the most face-threatening speech acts in international business, and differences between the ways Chinese and American professionals turn a request down have been linked to misunderstanding, stalled negotiation, and eroded trust. This paper reviews the theoretical and empirical literature on refusal strategies in Chinese and American business communication. A semi-systematic search of CNKI, Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar identified 34 studies published between 1990 and 2024 that met the inclusion criteria. The review sets out the theoretical foundations of refusal research and compares the coding frameworks that dominate the field. Four findings recur. First, American English speakers tend to refuse directly and to justify the refusal with explicit reference to rules, schedules and resources, whereas Chinese speakers more often refuse indirectly, by expressing regret, explaining, offering an alternative or postponing a decision. Second, relative status, social distance and the size of the imposition moderate these tendencies and sometimes outweigh cultural background. Third, workplace settings are far less studied than academic settings, and the small body of workplace research suggests that professional norms have a partly leveling effect. Fourth, the elicitation method matters, because written discourse completion tasks produce more direct refusals than naturally occurring data. The paper closes with implications for cross-cultural training and business English teaching, and with the gaps future research should address.

Keywords: Refusal strategies; Cross-cultural pragmatics; Business communication; Politeness; Sino-American business interaction

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1. Introduction

China and the United States remain each other's most consequential trading partners in many sectors, and day-to-day interaction between Chinese and American business professionals continues to grow. Much of that interaction is conducted in English, often by speakers for whom English is a second language, and much of it consists of negotiating what will and will not be done. Requests, proposals and demands are exchanged continuously, and any of them may have to be turned down.

Refusal is a particularly delicate move in this setting. Unlike a request, which leaves the other party room to negotiate, a refusal closes off an option, and it therefore threatens both the positive face of the person who made the request and the negative face of the person who must refuse [1]. Refusals are also long and structurally complex: they are usually realized across several turns and combine a head act, the expression of non-compliance, with supportive moves such as apologies, excuses, offers of alternatives and expressions of gratitude [2]. Because those supportive moves carry cultural meaning, a refusal that reads as suitably polite to one party may read as evasive to the other.

Cross-cultural pragmatics has documented systematic differences between Chinese and American refusal behavior, but the findings are scattered across journals and are difficult to compare, because studies differ in their participants, elicitation instruments, and coding schemes. Reviews of refusal research exist for second language acquisition [3], yet none has focused on refusals in business and workplace settings, where the stakes and the norms differ from those of the classroom and the family.

This paper reviews that literature and addresses three questions. What do empirical studies report about differences between Chinese and American refusal strategies? Which situational and methodological factors modify those differences? And what does the evidence imply for practitioners and for the teaching of business English? Section 2 describes the search procedure, Section 3 the theoretical foundations, Section 4 the coding frameworks, Section 5 the empirical findings, Section 6 the synthesis, and Sections 7 and 8 the implications, limitations, and directions for further work.

2. Review methods

2.1. Search strategy

The review follows a semi-systematic procedure. Four databases were searched: CNKI for Chinese-language sources, and Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar for international sources. The search combined refusal, refusal strategy, refusing, speech act, politeness, and face with business communication, workplace, negotiation, cross-cultural and intercultural, and with Chinese, Mandarin, American English, and English. The time frame was 1990 to 2024, with the starting point being the taxonomy of Beebe *et al.*, which has shaped the coding of refusal data since its publication. The reference lists of the retrieved articles were checked for further studies.

2.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Studies were included if they reported empirical data on refusals, involved Chinese or American participants or contrasted the two groups, and appeared in a peer-reviewed journal, a scholarly book chapter, or a dissertation. Purely theoretical discussions, textbook treatments, and studies that elicited other speech acts without reporting refusal data separately were excluded, as were studies whose evidence consisted only of a handful of illustrative examples. Applying these criteria produced 34 studies for synthesis. Chinese-language sources were retained because much research on Mandarin refusal behavior appears in mainland journals and is rarely cited in English-language reviews.

2.3. Coding procedure

Each study was coded for its participants and setting, its elicitation instrument, its coding framework, and its principal findings on refusal strategy use. Findings were then grouped thematically rather than study by study,

so that convergent results from different methodological traditions could be compared. Because the studies use different taxonomies and reporting conventions, the review is narrative rather than meta-analytic, and frequencies are not pooled.

3. Theoretical foundations

3.1. Refusal as a speech act

Refusals belong to the class of utterances that Austin [4] and Searle [5] described as performing an action in their very saying. What makes refusal distinctive is that it is a dispreferred response: a refusal is not the response the first speaker has made relevant, and it therefore requires interactional work to be delivered acceptably [6]. Refusals are also composite. Beebe et al. showed that a refusal normally consists of a head act surrounded by adjuncts such as a statement of regret, an explanation, an offer of an alternative or a postponement. The frequency and ordering of those adjuncts, rather than the presence of a head act, are where cross-cultural variation becomes visible.

3.2. Face, politeness, and *mianzi*

Brown and Levinson's model treats refusal as a face-threatening act, because it works against the hearer's wish to have a request granted and against the speaker's wish to be unimpeded. The model has been criticized for assumptions drawn from Anglo-American usage, and the criticism matters here. Gu [7] argued that Chinese politeness is less a device for protecting individual freedom from imposition than a normative system organized around social and moral obligations, realized in practices such as self-denigration and the careful use of address forms. Mao [8] observed that Chinese face combines *lian*, a matter of moral standing, with *mianzi*, a matter of social prestige, and that its orientation is more relational and reciprocal than the individualistic face of the Anglo-American model. Hu [9] and Ho [10] had drawn a similar distinction earlier. Taken together, these accounts predict that Chinese speakers will invest more than American speakers in the relational dimension of a refusal and will avoid a bare statement of non-compliance.

3.3. Context, individualism, and collectivism

Two further frameworks run through the literature. Hall [11] distinguished high-context from low-context communication: in high-context settings, meaning is carried substantially by the situation and the relationship rather than encoded in the words, whereas in low-context settings the message is expected to be explicit and self-contained. Applied to refusal, the distinction predicts that American speakers will state non-compliance explicitly and that Chinese speakers will rely on contextual cues and on inference. Hofstede's [12] individualism-collectivism dimension makes a related prediction: in individualist settings a refusal is an exercise of personal judgment that can be justified by appeal to rules and personal priorities, whereas in collectivist settings the preservation of harmony and of the relationship takes precedence over unambiguous transmission of the negative message. Ting-Toomey's [13] face-negotiation theory links the two by connecting the handling of conflict, including refusal, to a culture's prevailing face orientation.

These dimensions have been criticized for treating culture as a national attribute and for understating variation within groups [14]. The studies reviewed below generally treat them as interpretive resources rather than predictive laws, and this review follows that practice.

4. Coding frameworks for refusal strategies

Any comparison of refusal data depends on the taxonomy used to code them, and three frameworks dominate the field. The first and most widely used is the taxonomy of Beebe *et al.*, which sorts refusals into direct strategies, indirect strategies, and adjuncts. Direct strategies include a bare no and a statement of inability; indirect strategies include regret, excuse, an offer of an alternative and a postponement; adjuncts include expressions of positive opinion, gratitude and empathy. Because the taxonomy separates the head act from its supportive moves, it captures precisely the dimension on which Chinese and American data diverge, and it has been adopted, with local modifications, by Liao and Bresnahan [15], Kwon [16], Guo [17], and Liu and Liu [18].

The second framework is the coding scheme of the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project [19], which supplies categories comparable across speech acts and a nine-point scale of directness. Its strength is comparability across languages; its weakness for refusal research is that refusal is only a marginal category in a project built around requests and apologies, so the scheme must be adapted. The third approach, common in studies of workplace discourse, codes refusals functionally in relation to the interactional goal and reports moves such as mitigation, hedging, delay, and relational work [20,21]. It preserves the texture of authentic interaction but produces study-specific categories.

Because the frameworks differ, absolute frequencies cannot be compared across studies; what can be compared is the direction of the difference between groups within a study, and most of the evidence below rests on that comparison. See **Table 1**.

Table 1. Coding frameworks used in refusal research

Framework	Principal categories	Use and limitation
[2]	Direct strategies; indirect strategies (regret, excuse, alternative, postponement); adjuncts to refusals	Separates the head act from supportive moves, which makes cross-cultural comparison possible; requires coder judgment at strategy boundaries
Blum-Kulka [19]	Request and apology head acts; a nine-point directness scale; internal and external modification	Highly comparable across languages; refusal is not a core category, and the scheme must be adapted
Functional and discourse-analytic coding [20,21]	Mitigation; hedging; delay; relational work	Retains the texture of workplace interaction; categories are study-specific and difficult to compare

5. Empirical findings

5.1. Directness and indirectness in Chinese and American refusals

Directness is the most consistently reported difference. In their contrastive study of American English and Mandarin refusal strategies, Liao and Bresnahan found that American participants produced direct refusals more often and often accompanied them with a brief explanation addressed to the content of the request, whereas Mandarin speakers preferred indirect strategies and made greater use of address terms and of an attitudinal preface. Guo reached the same conclusion, reporting that American respondents preferred direct refusals with explicit reasons while Chinese respondents preferred indirect formulations that protected the interlocutor's face. Liu and Liu extended the comparison to Korean and found the same contrast, with the Korean data falling between the two.

Chen *et al.* [22] provided an early and detailed description of the Chinese pattern. Their Mandarin data contained few bare refusals and a great deal of explanation, and the explanation was frequently framed as circumstances beyond the speaker's control rather than the speaker's own preference. This has an interactional

consequence. Because Chinese refusals often begin with a positive evaluation of the request before the non-compliance is delivered, an American interlocutor may hear the opening as a soft acceptance and act on it, only to discover later that the request has in effect been declined, which produces the delay and unreliability reported in applied work on cross-cultural negotiation.

The two groups also differ in the internal ordering of the refusal. American refusals in the studies reviewed here typically front the non-compliance and then supply the reason, which matches the low-context preference for stating the message first. Chinese refusals typically delay it, and the delay is not filler: it is where the relational work is done. Length follows from the same logic: the Chinese refusals here are on average longer, since more supportive moves are required.

5.2. Status, distance, and imposition

Cultural background is not the only variable at work. Brown and Levinson's three social parameters, relative power, social distance and the absolute ranking of the imposition, predict which strategies speakers will select, and refusal studies find that these parameters operate in both cultures, although not always in the same direction. Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford [23] showed that status imbalance shaped both the form and the uptake of refusals among native and non-native speakers in academic advising. Turnbull and Saxton demonstrated that modal expressions in refusals track the speaker's assessment of entitlement and obligation, which makes them a form of facework rather than decoration.

Several studies also report an interaction between culture and status. In the data of Beebe et al., participants in both groups adjusted their strategy use according to the status of the interlocutor, but not in the same way, so that status effects and cultural background were confounded. Claims about national refusal styles are therefore interpretable only together with the status relationship, and refusals to equal-status peers may not predict behavior toward a supervisor or a client.

5.3. Refusals in business and workplace settings

This is the thinnest part of the literature. Only a small number of studies examine refusals in workplace or business settings directly, and most are discourse-analytic case studies rather than controlled comparisons. Work on workplace email shows that internal corporate communication in English as a lingua franca tends to prioritize clarity and efficiency, and that a degree of directness is tolerated when the professional relationship is already established [24]. Ho showed how request e-mails in the workplace construct professional identities, which implies that the form of a related refusal is also an identity claim rather than a transfer of information.

Interactional case studies point in the same direction. Spencer-Oatey and Xing [25] analyzed two Chinese-British welcome meetings and showed that rapport is managed through relational and face considerations that culture-level dimensions do not capture, since participants in the same cultural group behaved differently in the two meetings. Charles [26] and Nickerson [27] have argued that business English operates as a shared professional code in which clarity and task orientation override many culturally specific politeness preferences. Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta [28] take this argument furthest, proposing that competent global business communicators rely on a shared professional register, which partly neutralizes the difference between high-context and low-context styles.

Two Chinese-language studies address workplace refusal more directly. Lu [29] compared refusal speech in Chinese and American workplace television dramas and reported contrasting refusal sequences, with the Chinese characters delaying non-compliance and the American characters foregrounding it, a pattern consistent

with the experimental evidence even though the data are scripted. Yao [30] drew a similar contrast from a pragmatic comparison of English and Chinese refusals. The main limitation of this part of the literature is its sample: many widely cited claims rest on studies whose participants were university students rather than practicing professionals, and how far the findings transfer to commercial negotiation is unknown.

5.4. Elicitation method and its effects on findings

Methodological choices shape what the studies find. Written discourse completion tasks present a hypothetical situation and ask participants to write what they would say, which is efficient and comparable but strips out the negotiation surrounding a real refusal. Yuan [31] compared written and oral discourse completion tasks with field notes and recordings of natural conversation and found that the elicitation instrument changed the strategy profiles that were recovered. Beebe and Cummings [32] showed that written questionnaire data are more direct and more complete than the refusals recorded in naturally occurring talk, and Kasper and Dahl surveyed the resulting trade-offs for research design.

A further caution concerns interpretation. Pragmatic transfer in refusals was documented early by Beebe *et al.*, so reported cross-cultural differences in directness should be read as differences in what speakers consider prototypical and appropriate, rather than as a record of what they do in real encounters. See **Table 2**.

Table 2. Representative studies of refusal strategies

Study	Data and participants	Main contribution
[2]	American and Japanese speakers, including ESL learners; written discourse completion task	Established the direct, indirect, and adjunct taxonomy; found that culture and interlocutor status jointly shape strategy choice and reported evidence of pragmatic transfer
[22]	Mandarin speakers; discourse completion task and role play	Documented a preference for indirect strategies, extensive explanation, and framing of the reason as external to the speaker
[15]	American English and Mandarin speakers; university students; discourse completion task	Americans refused more directly with brief content-oriented explanations; Mandarin speakers favored indirect strategies and relational prefaces
[20]	Canadian English; refusals to comply with requests; corpus of recorded talk	Modal expressions function as facework and track judgments of entitlement and obligation
Nelson *et al.* [33]	American English and Egyptian Arabic speakers; discourse completion task	Both groups used indirect strategies often; Americans were more direct and used fewer relational moves
[16]	Korean and American English speakers; discourse completion task	Korean refusals were longer and more indirect; Americans used more direct head acts and fewer apologies
[17]	Chinese and American university students; discourse completion task	Americans preferred direct refusals with explicit reasons; Chinese preferred indirect strategies that protected face
[25]	Chinese-British business meetings; audio-recorded interaction	Rapport management in business settings depends on relational and face considerations that culture-level dimensions do not capture
[24]	Multinational corporation; internal email in English as a lingua franca	Workplace email prioritizes clarity and efficiency; directness is tolerated once a professional relationship exists
[18]	Chinese, Korean and American respondents; questionnaire	Confirmed the directness contrast between Chinese and American respondents, with Korean data falling between them
[29]	Chinese and American workplace television dramas; discourse analysis	Contrasting refusal sequences: Chinese characters delay non-compliance, American characters foreground it

6. Synthesis and discussion

6.1. What the literature agrees on

Three claims hold across studies of different designs, populations, and coding schemes. First, American English speakers refuse more directly than Chinese speakers, and the difference lies mainly in the head act and in the position of the non-compliance within the refusal sequence. Second, Chinese speakers make greater use of supportive moves, in particular explanation, a relational preface, and the postponement of the negative message, which makes their refusals longer. Third, the difference is not absolute: both groups use the full repertoire, and what varies is the weight given to different parts of it, which shifts with status, distance and the size of the imposition.

6.2. Why the differences persist

The three frameworks of Section 3 account for the pattern jointly rather than separately. High-context communication explains why the negative message need not be explicit: the hearer is expected to infer, and the speaker is expected to leave room for inference. Collectivism explains why the relational cost of a refusal is weighed more heavily than the informational cost, since the relationship outlives the transaction. The Chinese conception of face explains why the burden of the refusal is carried by the sequence and the framing rather than by the head act. None of the three alone accounts for the data, and the literature is most convincing where it treats them as complementary.

The business setting adds a consideration the cross-cultural literature has been slow to absorb. Professional norms exert pressure toward explicitness and efficiency in both cultures, which is why workplace studies report more directness than student-based studies do. At the same time, business relationships are long-term and sustained by trust, which preserves the value of the relational work that indirect refusal performs. The two pressures operate simultaneously, and the resulting behavior is likely to be a negotiation between professional register and cultural preference rather than a simple expression of either.

6.3. Gaps and inconsistencies

The evidence base has five weaknesses. Student participants dominate, so the conclusions rest largely on people with limited professional experience. Coding frameworks are not comparable across studies, and no consensus taxonomy has emerged, which prevents genuine cumulative comparison. Almost all studies examine the production of refusals and very few how refusals are interpreted by the recipient, although it is interpretation that determines whether a misunderstanding occurs. Longitudinal designs are rare, so the literature can say little about how refusal behavior changes as a career develops. Finally, much of the research treats English-medium business interaction as monolingual, whereas it is a lingua franca in which neither party is a first-language speaker, which probably reduces the salience of the contrast described.

A related caution concerns time. Refusal norms are not fixed, and some of the older contrasts reported in the literature may already have weakened among Chinese professionals who work regularly with international partners.

7. Implications for practice

7.1. Cross-cultural business training

Training that reduces refusal to a rule of thumb about national styles is likely to misfire, because status and

relationship modify the pattern as much as nationality does. A more defensible objective is to make the sequence of the refusal visible: to show trainees that a Chinese refusal may place the negative information late and an American refusal may place it first, and that in both cases the surrounding moves are doing work rather than padding. Trainees can be asked to attend to the direction the whole turn is taking rather than to the presence or absence of the word no. The same reasoning supports a second objective: to make the timing of a decision explicit when it is genuinely undecided, since ambiguous postponement is read differently on the two sides.

7.2. Business English teaching

For business English instruction, the literature supports teaching refusal as a sequence rather than as a list of phrases. Learners benefit from controlled practice in selecting and ordering supportive moves for a given status relationship, and from analyzing recorded workplace interaction. Explicit instruction in pragmatics has been shown to produce gains that experience alone does not reliably produce [34], and refusal is a strong candidate for such instruction because the relevant features are identifiable and teachable. Materials should also acknowledge that the target of instruction is not American pragmatic norms, but the ability to select a strategy appropriate to the relationship, the setting and the professional register.

8. Limitations and directions for future research

This review has limitations of its own. It is narrative rather than meta-analytic, because the studies it synthesizes do not report outcome measures that can be pooled, and the 34 studies came from a search limited to English and Chinese sources, so work in other languages may have been missed. The search strategy was semi-systematic, and a fully pre-registered protocol would strengthen reproducibility.

Four directions follow from the gaps identified in Section 6.3. The first is to collect data from practicing professionals rather than students and to sample more than one industry, since refusing a supplier differs from refusing a colleague. The second is to study interpretation as well as production, by presenting recipients with refusals produced by the other group and asking how they are understood. The third is to adopt an established common coding scheme so that results accumulate. The fourth is to treat English-medium business interaction as lingua franca interaction and to study what happens when neither party is a first-language speaker, which is the condition of most Sino-American business communication in practice.

9. Conclusion

Chinese and American business professionals refuse requests in systematically different ways, and the difference is concentrated in the directness of the head act and in the amount of relational work that surrounds it. The literature explains it through context dependence, collectivist and individualist value orientations, and contrasting conceptions of face. The explanation is convincing, but it rests mainly on students, and workplace studies suggest that professional norms pull both groups toward explicitness. The most useful next step is a comparative study of practicing professionals, using a shared coding scheme and examining interpretation as well as production. For practitioners, the practical lesson is narrower and more durable than a national stereotype: read the direction of the whole turn rather than wait for an explicit no, and make the state of a decision clear when it is genuinely unresolved.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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