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CHINESE AND JAPANESE VAGUE REFUSAL SPEECH ACT: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

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Any language is not only a part of the culture but also its carrier. Different national languages embody their unique traditional culture and at the same time are a reflection of the national way of thinking of their speakers, national customs, social values, etc. According to the division into “high-context” and “low-context” cultures, which was proposed by Edward T. Hall (1959), China and Japan appear to be the representatives of high-context culture. That is, in Chinese and Japanese languages, only a small part of the information is transmitted verbally, while the main part of it is provided through the context and circumstances of communication. Refusal is such a speech act that threatens the face of all communication participants. Therefore, in Chinese and Japanese lingual cultures, the vague speech act of refusal is usually used, on the one hand, to reduce the threat of losing face by both counterparties; on the other hand, to maintain good interpersonal relations. However, each of the two languages has its own typological and cultural characteristics, and in this article, the author sets the main goal – to find out the similarities and differences between the Chinese and Japanese vague refusal speech acts based on the grammatical and cultural peculiarities of the languages in focus.

Keywords: high-context culture, low-context culture, refusal speech act, vague refusal, face-threatening act.

中日模糊拒绝言语行为的异同研究

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语言作为文化的一部分, 它不仅是一种文化现象, 更是一种文化载体。不同的民族语言都包含着其民族所独有的传统文化, 并且反映了其民族思维方式、风俗

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Chinese and Japanese Vague Refusal Speech Act: Similarities and Differences (in English)

习惯、社会观念等。根据学者Edward T. Hall (1959) 提出的“高、低语境”文化的划分，中国和日本是“高语境”文化中的代表。在汉语或日语中，只有小部分信息是借助语言形式来传达的，而主要的信息则是由交际者根据交际的语境和环境来理解。拒绝是一种极易威胁交际双方面子的言语行为。因此，在汉语和日语中经常采用模糊拒绝言语行为，一方面以减少对交际双方面子的威胁；另一方面用来维持良好的人际关系。但由于中日语言文化有各自的类型特征和文化特点，所以本论文基于中日两种语言的语法和文化特点，拟对比研究中日模糊拒绝言语行为的异同。

关键字：高语境文化 低语境文化 拒绝言语行为 模糊拒绝 面子威胁行为

КИТАЙСЬКИЙ ТА ЯПОНСЬКИЙ НЕЧІТКИЙ МОВЛЕННИЙ АКТ: ПОДІБНЕ ТА ВІДМІННЕ

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Будь-яка мова є не тільки інтегральною частиною національної або етнічної культури, а й її носієм і представником. Різні національні (етнічні) мови втілюють унікальні культурні константи та водночас виступають відображеннями національного способу мислення своїх носіїв, їх способу чуттєвого осягнення світу, національних звичаїв, соціальних цінностей тощо. Відповідно до поділу на культури «високого контексту» та «низького контексту», яке було запропоновано у 1959 році Едвардом Т. Холлом, китайська та японська культура є представниками культур високого контексту. Іншими словами, в китайській і японській мовах лише тільки невелика частина інформації передається вербально, словесно, тоді як основна її частина надається через контекст та обставини спілкування (конситуацію). Відмова – це особливий мовленнєвий акт, який може загрожувати обличчю всіх учасників спілкування. Тому в китайській та японській лінгвокультурах зазвичай застосовуються нечіткі мовленнєві акти відмови з метою зменшення загрози втрати обличчя для обох сторін спілкування і підтримування гарних міжособистісних стосунків. Проте кожна з двох мов має свої типологічні та культурні особливості, і в цій статті авторка ставить перед собою головну – з'ясувати подібності та відмінності китайського та японського мовленнєвого акту нечіткої відмови на граматичному і прагматичному рівнях його реалізації.

Ключові слова: культура високого контексту, культура низького контексту, мовленнєвий акт відмови, нечітка відмова, акт загрози обличчю.

Introduction. As a part of the culture, language is not only a cultural phenomenon, but also a carrier of culture. Any national language contains the nation's unique traditional culture and reflects the way of ethnic thinking, social psychology, national customs, value orientation, social concepts, etc. According to the outlining of the “high-context culture” and the “low-context culture” proposed by the anthropologist Edward T. Hall in his book *“The Silent Language”* in 1959, both China and Japan are typical representatives of high-context culture. In a high-context culture, the transmission of information depends on the context. A large amount of information is not encoded into the communication process through language but is mainly understood by the communicators according to the context and circumstances of the communication, and only a small part of the information is conveyed with the help of lingual forms. High-context cultures emphasize indirect ways of expressing ideas, opinions, and communicate content.

Influenced by the ideology of Confucianism, China advocates “propriety”. In daily life, people always uphold the idea “harmony is the most valuable”, and in social etiquette, they follow the etiquette of “respecting others and degrading oneself” alongside “humility and comity” as the main principle of interacting with one another. Japan is also influenced by the statements of Confucianism, which are also reflected in the demand for polite behavior. When interacting with people, one has to pay more attention to preserving the face of others, in particular with the help of euphemistic and subtle language expressions. Therefore, refusing speech acts as a kind of speech behavior that threatens the face of the other party and is supposed to contain certain lingual strategies in order to preserve at the maximum extent the other party's face, to maintain the harmony and stability of interpersonal relationships.

The indirect refusal speech act is widely used in order to reduce the damage to the face of the other communicating party in the process of refusal speech acts implementation (especially in high-context cultures). The latter is mostly represented by the vague refusal speech act. Thus, within high-context culture use of a vague refusal, rather than a direct and explicit refusal, reflects respect for the other communicating party and abides by the social norms of polite behavior. The article tries to introduce and analyze the vague refusal speech act in high-context lingual cultures of China and Japan, in order to give a brief induction and summarization of what vague refusal speech acts are in order to lay the foundation for the next step of comparative analysis.

I. High-context culture in China and Japan

In his book *“Beyond Culture”*, the famous scholar Edward T. Hall introduced in detail the characteristics of high-context and low-context cultures [T. Hall 1976,

p. 99]. High-context culture is also called strong communicative context culture, which means that information transmission depends on the context. A large amount of information is not encoded into communication through language but is mainly understood by communicators according to the context, conditions and situation of their communication, and only a small part of the information is conveyed through language. In high-context cultures, understanding what the speaker is saying, the meaning of what is being said is considered the responsibility of the listener, not the speaker. Therefore, high-context culture requires the listener to understand the communicative content and the speaker's implications according to the communicative context and the speaker's non-verbal elements of communication.

High-context cultures emphasize indirect ways of expressing ideas, opinions, and communicative content. In a high-context culture, a direct expression will not only appear sloppy and abrupt, but it will also give the impression of not doing things seriously and making decisions prudently. Especially when discussing issues, raising different points of view, and making requests to the other party, communicators in high-context cultures are more tactful and vague in their speech because of fear to offend or embarrass the other party.

Within the Chinese lingual culture, the study of “propriety” and “humility and etiquette” conduct in interpersonal communication is being advocated. Chinese scholar Gu Yueguo put forward five rules of politeness based on the mix of modern politeness and ancient “ritual”: self-denigration maxim, address term maxim, refinement maxim, agreement maxim and maxim of virtue [Gu Yueguo 1992, p. 10]. In addition, the Chinese culture pays attention to the hidden beauty of language; in addition, the expression is too straightforward and straight to the point, which often gives a bad impression of being superficial and lacking cultural upbringing. In particular, when implementing the refusal speech acts, more attention should be paid to the face of the other party, and the degree of contusion to the face of the other party should be minimized as much as possible.

Vague refusal is a good strategy, which presupposes the use of vague expressions (some of which even seem to be affirmative expressions in the language form); these vague expressions create a vague effect in pragmatics, and finally, let the other party understand by him/herself what is being said. For example, “A” makes an invitation to invite “B” to dinner, and “B” replies: “再说吧。” (Maybe let's talk about it later.). It looks like a “yes” answer, but when exactly to talk about it again? This is a good example of a vague expression in Chinese. The vague refusal speech

acts are usually adopted and spread in the Chinese culture, within which keeping the face of the other party is very important.

The same is true for Japan. The Japanese culture also advocates the statement “harmony is the most important thing” because refusal is a kind of speech act that goes against others’ good intentions and threatens others’ face. That’s why the Japanese usually use very euphemistic expressions in order to refuse. Japanese studies on speech acts of refusal were started by the scholar Takuro Moriyama, who outlined four types of the refusal speech act: the “straightforward type”; the “lie type”; the “procrastination type” and the “prevarication type” [Takuro Moriyama 1990, p. 8]. Some scholars have pointed out that the Japanese prefer to refuse ambiguously, and trying to avoid refusing directly is one of the recognized ways of polite behavior in Japanese society. In addition, coupled with the characteristics of the Japanese language (lexical, sentence pattern) itself, the “ambiguous” characteristics of refusal expression are demonstrated incisively and vividly.

Keiko Ueda, a Japanese scholar, listed sixteen ways to avoid saying “no” in Japan [Keiko Ueda 1974, p. 185]. Later on, the other study listed 50 ways to say “No” in Japanese; it was conducted by Daniel Maciejewski [Daniel Maciejewski 2020, p. 34]. For example, when one looks for a job in Japan and receives negative written feedback after the interview, it does not contain a single word “no” throughout the whole text. One more example. There is an interesting fact that was shared on an intercultural communication forum: Japanese negotiators tend to use the word “no” less than twice every half hour in bargaining simulations, while Americans use “no” five times every half hour, Koreans – seven times, and Brazilian executives – forty-two times.

II. The vague refusal speech act in China

The so-called euphemistic and implicit language form is an implicit language form of expression, which is dealing not with literal meaning but presupposes an implication in a specific context. It is realized depending on the context and is flexible and changeable in accordance with context changes. The vague method, which is a method of making refusals politely with vague expressions to get mutual benefit by both parties in the conversation [Gao Bo 2015, p. 47], lies in provocative words deliberate omission, and using sentences with more ambiguous meaning as well as conveying the discourse information ambiguously and uncertainly.

Such kind of vague language is often a kind of hint about the content of the discourse as a whole, oriented at the expression of uncertainty or just subjective opinion, that makes the original affirmative tone tend to soften, such as “可能 (may

be)、恐怕 (afraid)、不一定 (not for sure)、谁知道 (who knows)、好像 (seems like)、听说 (heard that)、据说 (it is said that)、我想 (I think)、我认为 (in my opinion)、我觉得 (from my point of view)” and so on. For example, “恐怕不行啊！不过你放心，我会尽力帮忙。” (I’m afraid it won’t work! But don’t worry, I will try my best to help.); “今晚我可能有事。” (I may have something to do tonight.). Chinese people often use vague expressions as a means of moderation. A seemingly ambiguous answer in Chinese is actually a tactful expression of the speaker’s refusal.

In addition, although the respondent adopts a seemingly affirmative attitude in the answer, the information conveyed by the words has obvious ambiguity and uncertainty. That is, for example, no specific commitments are made, time and place are not clear: “下次！” (next time!); “改天！” (let’s do it some other time!); “再说吧！” (let’s talk about it later!). These expressions are regarded as all-purpose sentences used to politely refuse others in Chinese. For example, facing the boy’s invitation, if the girl always says “let’s make appointment next time!”, then it can be understood that she has no interest in this boy at all, and politely refuses the boy. Such responses with ambiguity and uncertainty are often seen as the polite refusals in the Chinese lingual culture.

In Chinese, there is one more feature of the vague refusal speech act: the speaker tries to omit some information in order to give a second party a chance to save the face: “非常感谢您的好意...” (I appreciate your kindness...); “恐怕明天的报告...” (I’m afraid tomorrow’s report...). Usage of the ellipsis leaves space for the addressee, anticipates the direct mentioning of irritating words that express rejection, and let the other party fill in missing content and grasp the conveyed idea. This peculiarity of the Chinese vague refusal speech act leaves a buffer zone for saving the face of the other party and preserves (maintains) the harmonious interpersonal relationship between the two parties.

Context plays the most important role in the Chinese language. As the Chinese researcher Ma Ringo has demonstrated in his article “*Saying “yes” for “no” and “no” for “yes”: A Chinese Rule*”, – an outsider, especially an outsider from a “low-context culture”, will tend to take the “yes” message literally as an explicit form of agreement [Ma Ringo 1996, p. 95]. However, within the Chinese culture, the

authenticity of a “yes” message is usually established through contextual and nonverbal cues, and the surface level is ignored.

III. The vague refusal speech act in Japan

Similarly, in Japanese, there also exists a way of expression which consists in stopping in the middle, leaving the meaning of half of the utterance abandoned for the other party to speculate. For example: After the inviter makes an invitation, the invitee uses the following expressions, such as: “今日はちょっと...” (Today, it’s a little ...); “やっぱり、今度のこと...” (On the second thought it turns out to be, this time...); “ええ、でも一人では...” (Yeah, but me alone...). The task of filling in and guessing the meaning of the utterance is still left to the inviter because the second half of the sentence is “not convenient”. Such incomplete and euphemistic expression leaves a buffer zone between two parties of communication so that the addressee party will not feel too disappointed and frustrated by being rejected.

Such auxiliary words as “が”, “けど”, “けれども” and other are often used at the end of utterances in Japanese conversations, such as: “別に予定はありませんが。” (I have no other appointment.); “少しでもご希望に沿い申し上げたいのですが。” (I would like to follow your wish.); “助けたい気持ちもすごいあるんですけれども。” (I really want to help you.). These auxiliary words “が”, “けど” and “けれども” which appear at the end of the sentence, have no lexical meaning, but they fulfill a pragmatic function. That is, they hide the real intention of the speaker, and the hidden (omitted) content usually has the opposite meaning to the first part of the sentence. Some studies have listed ten situations with omitting after “けど”, and here is one of them, where the rejected content is actually omitted. Therefore, the implication of these three sentences is like: “In fact, there is no arrangement, but I can’t accept your invitation”, “I really want to do it according to your idea, but I still can’t accept your proposal”, “I really want to help you, but there’s nothing I can do”. The pragmatic function of the auxiliary words helps to avoid saying the direct “no”, and omits the verbal exposure of the rejection, thereby reducing the damage degree of rejection to the addressee’s face.

Also, some symbolic adverbs have a negative lexical or grammatical semantic function, that is, they might be followed by negative content which is usually in opposition to the other party’s expectations. Such as: “ちょっと”, “やはり/やっぱり”, “どうも” and “あまり”. These kinds of words have lots of meanings. Coupled with the semantic or grammatical functions of this kind of words, the whole meaning of the sentence will not be so easy to grasp only through the superficial meanings of

the written words. Therefore, special attention should be paid to their function in different contexts. Such as the typical adverb “ちよつと”, which has rich semantics. Because of the limited time of preparation for the upcoming exams, when facing the invitation: “お茶とか飲みましょう。” (Let’s go have tea or something?), the answer: “ちよつと…” (Well…) here is one of the good examples of its classic usage. In this context, it is used to deliver an implied meaning of being in discomfort about the invitation. The precise understanding of what is conveyed in a certain context could be easily grasped by native speakers, while the foreigners usually have difficulties understanding the real pragmatic meaning.

In another case, if somebody gets the invitation to a party, and replies like: “恥ずかしがりやでやっぱり…” (As a very shy person…), it means he or she is not inclined to go to the party but uses the vague refusal speech act. The adverb “やっぱり” (it turns out to be) is usually preceding a negative answer.

The adverb “どうも” (seems like/ still have a feeling of dissatisfaction) can be used to express feelings that are difficult to be satisfied even after thinking and reasoning. The expression “どうも納得できないです。” is frequently used to denote the intention of the utterance “Seems like it’s not quite convincing”. The adverb “あまり” is also usually followed by the negative form of the sentence, for example, as for the request: “英語で質問を教えてください。” (Please answer the questions in English.). “え、英語はあまり…” (Eh, English…). The whole meaning of the utterance implies: “Eh, I do not like English.” or “Eh, my English is bad” or some other negation.

Expressions with positive meanings may also be converted into expressions with negative meanings due to different contexts. Such as “そうですか。” (I see.), “そうですね。” (It looks right to me.). Shibata Takeshi claimed that this kind of expression at the first glance seems to mean “yes”, but in fact, it is neither “yes”, nor “no”: just an ambiguous phrasing [Liu Xiping 2009, p. 111]. The literal meaning is translated into English as an affirmative expression, but the real pragmatic semantics depends on the deep analysis of the context within which these “positive expressions” are being used, that is, literal understanding appears to be not always reliable in the high-context cultural background.

As Li Zhaohui mentions, after listening to the other party’s proposal, the Japanese first always say “そうですね。” (It looks right to me.) regardless of whether he/she agrees or not, and only then the topic is introduced [Li Zhaohui 2006,

p. 74]. This also reflects that the successful extraction of pragmatically engaged information within high-context cultures is not mainly determined by what is verbally expressed, but mostly depends on the broader context and cultural characteristics of communication.

There are also some typical lexical and idiomatic expressions in Japanese. Such as “向き前に” (actively) which contains the emotion of agreement to the other party’s wishes; “考えておきます。” (I’ll consider it.); “検討させていただきま

す。” (I’ll take it into consideration.) and so on. Sometimes they can often be used together, for example, “すぐにはお答えできませんけど、前向きに考えてみます。” that means: “Although I can’t answer you right away, I will actively consider it as you wished”. As was shown in Zhou Geyang’s study, the Japanese frequently use positive evaluation when implementing the refusal speech act. And they usually take the “Yes-but” sequence, which is regarded as one of the most essential features in the Japanese refusal speech act [Zhou Geyang 2007, p. 160]. The “yes” part is literally clear, however, the “but” part is often expressed ambiguously which confuses much the foreigners-addressees.

IV. Conclusion

Both Chinese and Japanese lingual cultures belong to so-called high-context cultures and are strongly influenced by Confucianism. These common cultural features predetermine some similarities in the form and mode of the refusal speech act in both cultures. The vague refusal speech acts are very common in both Chinese and Japanese lingual cultures. On the other hand, due to the typological characteristics of each regarded language, there are peculiar lexical and grammatical features in Japanese if compared with Chinese. It is widely known that the Chinese language belongs to the root, amorphous languages while the Japanese language is characterized as agglutinative one.

Besides, some lingual and cultural differences in the refusal speech acts might be determined by geographical location and natural living conditions, as well as unique collective cultural psychology and other important factors. The perspective of this study might be outlined as accentuating the comparative analysis on the base of exploring the underlying reasons for similarities and differences in the Chinese and Japanese refusal speech acts implementation.

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