A contrastive analysis of Chinese and English refusals

Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the verbal refusals made in Chinese and English, delineating the strategies and semantic formulas (sequence, frequency and content) employed in the two languages. Data were collected via a Discourse Completion Test that documents four initiating acts of refusing--requesting, inviting, offering and suggesting. Participants are 30 Chinese native speakers writing in Chinese (CCs), 30 native Chinese speakers writing in English (CEs), and 30 native English speakers writing in English (EEs). It is found that Chinese respondents (both CCs and CES) prefer the strategies of *Reason* and *Dissuasion* and use the typical sequence of *Reason + Alternative* while the English respondents prefer *Reason* and *Direct refusal* with the sequence of *Positive opinion + Regret + Reason*. It is also found that Chinese participants are more status-sensitive, applying different strategies to higher- and lower-status interlocutors--*Reason, Regret* and *Alternative* to a higher-status vs. *Reason, Dissuasion* and *Direct refusal* to a lower status--whereas their English counterparts in these situations react similarly to status unequals of both types. The excuses cited by Chinese participants for not complying with the interlocutor are more specific and usually family-oriented while those of the English participants are relatively vague and mostly friends-oriented. These findings point to pragmatic transfer in the English refusals made by Chinese learners of English. Cultural elements underlying such transfer are also discussed in the paper.