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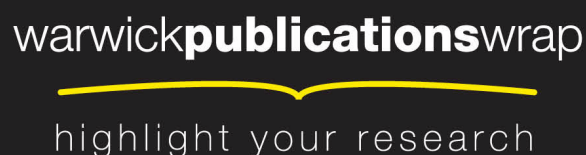
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Stephanie Schnurr* and Olga Zayts

“I can’t remember them ever not doing what I tell them!”: Negotiating face and power relations in ‘upward’ refusals in multicultural workplaces in Hong Kong

Abstract: This paper explores how refusals are constructed and negotiated in multicultural workplaces in Hong Kong. A particular focus is on the ways in which Hong Kong Chinese subordinates negotiate issues of face and power relations when refusing their expatriate superiors.

Despite abundant research on refusals in a variety of contexts across cultures, there are very few studies of multicultural workplaces. This is particularly surprising considering that refusals have been described as a frequent “‘sticking point’ in cross-cultural communication” (Beebe et al. 1990). This paper addresses this gap by drawing on more than 80 hours of authentic audio- and video-recorded spoken workplace discourse and a corpus of emails collected in multicultural workplaces in Hong Kong.

Findings of this exploratory study indicate that refusals are complex communicative activities that are carefully negotiated among participants. We argue that in contrast to earlier studies, participants’ socio-cultural backgrounds do not appear to be the main determining factor of how issues of face and power relations are negotiated in upward refusals. Rather, a range of other factors, including media of communication, normative ways of interacting in a workplace, the relationship between interlocutors, as well as the content of the refusal, are more relevant for explaining participants’ communicative behavior.

Keywords: refusals, face, power multicultural workplaces, Hong Kong

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1 Introduction

Refusals are generally complex and potentially risky communicative acts as they may threaten interlocutors' face needs and challenge existing power relations and the status quo (Daly et al. 2004). These issues are particularly relevant in a workplace context in which the dimensions of power and politeness are closely intertwined (Holmes and Stubbe 2003). In particular, depending on hierarchical structures and prevailing power relations, uttering refusals upwards, i.e., toward more senior people in hierarchically higher positions, is often a risky undertaking that may have potentially far-reaching implications for the professional relationship between interlocutors. In order to reduce or manage this potential threat, speakers may draw on a wide range of linguistic and discourse strategies (e.g., Chang 2009). The specific strategies that are considered to be most appropriate when doing refusals in ways that maintain existing power relations and that minimize potential threats to interlocutors' faces may differ considerably in different cultural contexts (e.g., Chang 2009; Allami and Naemi 2011). It has even been claimed that refusals "reflect fundamental cultural values" (Beebe et al. 1990: 68), which may result in negative pragmatic transfer and the possibility of unintended face-threat in intercultural L2 encounters (e.g., Felix-Brasdefer 2004).

And yet, despite abundant research on refusals in a variety of contexts across cultures (e.g., Beebe et al. 1990; Felix-Brasdefer 2006), there is very little research on refusals in workplaces, let alone multicultural workplaces (with the exception of Daly et al. 2004). This is particularly surprising in the light of the increasing globalization and mobility of the workforce (Wong et al. 2007). However, since refusals have been described as a frequent "sticking point" in cross-cultural communication" (Beebe et al. 1990), an investigation of refusals in multicultural professional contexts is a very timely enterprise that is likely to provide interesting insights into the complexities of intercultural communication. This paper aims to explore refusals in multicultural workplaces in Hong Kong with a particular focus on the processes through which face and power relations are constructed and negotiated in refusals uttered by subordinates toward their superiors (what we refer to as upward refusals). In contrast to most previous research, we employ authentic discourse data in spoken and written form to investigate: (1) how subordinates do refusals upward in their multicultural workplaces; (2) how face and power relations are negotiated and managed in these instances; and (3) what role culture may play in these activities.

Hong Kong is an ideal place for such an undertaking because of its highly multicultural population. The diverse workforce of expatriates from all over the world brings with it not only professional expertise, knowledge, and skills, but also culturally influenced ideas, assumptions, and expectations about how

1 things are to be done most appropriately and effectively in a workplace context
2 (see Imahori and Cupach 2005: 195). However, rather than assuming that culture
3 per se (e.g., in the form of participants' backgrounds) has an impact on the ways
4 in which refusals are negotiated, we take a more critical stance and explore
5 whether culture is indeed an issue and assess to what extent it can actually
6 account for interlocutors' discourse practices.

7 Although there is little agreement among scholars as to what exactly *face* is
8 and what phenomena should be covered by the term (Haugh and Hinze 2003:
9 1582), there seems to be general agreement that face-work is a central aspects of
10 any social encounter (e.g., Turnbull and Saxton 1997). In this study, we follow
11 Goffman (1967: 5), who describes face as "the positive social value a person
12 effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a
13 particular contact." And although this conceptualization of face has been criti-
14 cized (e.g., Yu 2003), it is frequently used in recent studies (e.g., Locher and Watts
15 2005; Schnurr and Chan 2011). However, rather than viewing face as something
16 that interlocutors have, we conceptualize face as being continuously constructed
17 and negotiated in interaction (Geyer 2008). We take a similar view of power rela-
18 tions, which we understand as emerging from "a complex and continuously
19 evolving web of social and discursive relations" (Thornborrow 2002: 7; Foucault
20 1980). Like face, power relations are not fixed attributes that certain speakers,
21 roles, or positions possess but are dynamically negotiated in an interaction. And
22 like face, power relations also influence social interactions in complex ways.

23

24

25 2 Previous research on refusals

26

27 Refusals are generally conceptualized as potentially face-threatening speech
28 acts, which may be realized by drawing on different strategies. In a seminal study,
29 Beebe et al. (1990) developed a taxonomy of direct and indirect refusal strategies.
30 The indirect refusal strategies they identify include "statement of regret, excuse/
31 reason/explanation," "statement of alternative," as well as "acceptance that
32 functions as a refusal" and "avoidance." They also establish the category of
33 adjuncts, which includes several strategies to prepare for the upcoming refusal.
34 Subsequent studies have added further refusal strategies to the list. For example,
35 Campillo et al. (2009) distinguish between refusals and adjuncts to refusals, and
36 further categorize refusals into direct and indirect. They conceptualize refusals as
37 "a semantic expression indicating the refusing nature of the speech act," accom-
38 panying the refusal, whereas, in adjuncts "the expression that accompanies the
39 refusal cannot by itself perform the intended function of refusing" (Campillo
40 et al. 2009: 145).

In order to acknowledge the interactional complexities involved in the act of refusing, we prefer to use the term “communicative acts” (rather than speech acts) when describing refusals (Huang and Wu 2011; Orr 2008). We follow Kline and Ford (1990: 460, in Daly et al. 2004: 948) who describe refusals as “an attempt to bring about behavioural change by encouraging the other to withdraw his/her request.” A core component of this definition is the speaker’s disagreement with the previous speaker’s utterance (e.g., a request), which typically results in an indication of “opposition to granting a request” (ibid.).

Previous cross-cultural research claims that “while the refusal strategies are universal, the frequency of the refusal strategies used and the content of the strategies are culture specific” (Chang 2009: 479). Following this line of argument, several studies have identified specific strategies that are preferred by the speakers of a specific language. For example, Chang (2009: 478) claims that the “Chinese prefer an indirect, implicit and unassertive communication style,” which is allegedly a reflection of their high context collectivist society, “in which in-group interest is considered more important than individual interests and the preservation of harmony among group members is significant.” Following a similar line of argument, Liao and Bresnahan (1996: 706) propose that “[t]he omission of the most direct answer of ‘No, I can’t’ should result from the politeness theory of *dian-dao-wei-zhi* (‘marginally touching the point’),” which they consider to be an instantiation of Chinese cultural values and norms.

However, the static and rather essentialist notions of culture that underlie much of this cross-cultural research on refusals have been heavily criticized. More recent conceptualizations of culture emphasize its dynamic nature and view it as something people *do* (e.g., Roberts and Sarangi 1993; Sarangi 1994; Street 1993). Using culture as an explanatory variable runs the danger of over-generalization and producing or reinforcing (often negative) stereotypes (e.g., Hartog 2006; Sarangi 1994). Thus, in this study we do not assume that culture *per se* offers an unequivocal explanation of how refusals are done, but we rather raise the question of whether culture indeed provides the most useful explanation to account for the complex ways in which the Hong Kong Chinese subordinates in our data express refusals upwards in their multicultural workplaces in Hong Kong.

3 Data collection and methodological approach

Most studies on refusals have used Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) or role plays (or a combination of both) as a means to collect data (e.g., Allami and Naeimi 2011; Beebe et al. 1990; Chang 2009; Ebsworth and Kodama 2011; Felix-

1 Brasdefer 2004, 2006; Hong 2011; Liao and Bresnahan 1996). Although these
 2 methods have some advantages (e.g., they produce relatively large numbers of
 3 refusals and allow researchers to control certain contextual variables such as
 4 speakers' status), they also have some drawbacks, most notably that they do not
 5 produce authentic data. Turnbull (2001: 35) suggests that "DC methodologies nec-
 6 essarily obscure the sequential and co-constructed nature of talk." And Golato
 7 (2003) has shown that what people say in DCTs in terms of how they allegedly do
 8 certain communicative acts may differ substantially from the ways in which they
 9 actually perform them in authentic interactions. She thus concludes that a "DCT
 10 is a valid instrument for measuring not pragmatic action, but symbolic action"
 11 (Golato 2003: 92; see also Morrison and Holmes 2003). In other words, DCTs do
 12 not report on how people *actually* use language to do refusals and other commu-
 13 nicative activities but rather provide information about what participants "believe
 14 would be situationally appropriate responses within possible, yet imaginary,
 15 interactional settings" (Golato 2003: 92; see also Turnbull 2001).

16 We address these issues by using authentic data to explore the ways in which
 17 refusals are constructed and negotiated. Our study draws on a corpus of authen-
 18 tic discourse data that were audio- and video-recorded in a range of multicultural
 19 workplaces in Hong Kong. The corpus contains more than 80 hours of interac-
 20 tional data that were transcribed using simplified transcription conventions tra-
 21 ditionally used in conversation analytic literature (e.g., ten Have 1999). This spo-
 22 ken data is complemented by a sample of several hundred workplace emails that
 23 were written and received by eight professionals in three different workplaces.

24 These primary data were supplemented by a range of additional data, includ-
 25 ing semi-structured interviews with participants to gain a better understanding
 26 of the interactional data and to obtain participants' views on potentially relevant
 27 issues. We also conducted extensive participant observation at the research sites
 28 and consulted organizational documents to obtain valuable insights into "par-
 29 ticipants' normal everyday patterns of interaction in their usual workplace con-
 30 texts" (Daly et al. 2004). Understanding the typical communication practices of
 31 participants (for example, whether they tend to be more or less direct or indirect
 32 when performing certain communicative acts) is crucial for the interpretation of
 33 this communicative act.

34 Using authentic discourse data, however, also has some drawbacks. In par-
 35 ticular, researchers do not have control over what kinds of communicative acts
 36 participants produce. Notwithstanding, the refusals that we have collected are
 37 more complex and more authentic than those that DCTs and role plays typically
 38 produce, which is reflected, for example, in their length and participants' interac-
 39 tional involvement. As our analysis below illustrates, these refusals provide
 40 excellent data for a qualitative in-depth analysis. Thus, rather than making grand

generalizations about the use of refusals by participants from different back- 1
grounds, our focus is on understanding how refusals are actually constructed 2
and negotiated in authentic intercultural encounters. 3

4 Analysis 4

In our analysis we use a broad pragmatic approach drawing on the pragmatic 5
concepts of communicative acts, face, and politeness (as discussed in the previous 6
sections) to address the following questions: 7

1. How do subordinates *do* refusals upward in their multicultural workplaces? 8
2. How are face and power relations negotiated and managed in these instances? 9
3. Is culture (really) an issue? 10

Initial findings indicate that there are only very few direct or explicit upward 11
refusals in the spoken interactions. This is perhaps not surprising given the 12
potential face-threat of refusals, in particular when uttered from a subordinate to 13
his/her superior (see also Allami and Naeimi 2011). This first impression also 14
reinforces participants' own perceptions as reflected, for example, in the com- 15
ment of an expatriate leader from the UK who manages an IT company: "I can't 16
remember them [his Chinese local team members] ever not doing what I tell them! 17
Or at least, not agreeing to it." Moreover, these observations are in line with pre- 18
vious research that claims that in cultures of high power distance (see Hofstede 19
1980), such as Hong Kong, people tend not to question authority and to maintain 20
and reinforce hierarchical relationships (Chee and West 2000; Selmer and de 21
Leon 2003). However, while these cultural practices, expectations, and values 22
may explain the dearth of upward refusals in the spoken interactions, they are 23
challenged to a certain extent by our findings in the email sample in which we 24
identified considerably more refusals upward – some of which are surprisingly 25
explicit and potentially face-threatening. 26

However, since we are focusing here on a relatively small subset of our 27
corpus, namely those refusals that were uttered by subordinates toward their 28
superiors, our analyses are necessarily exploratory and thus do not make any 29
grand generalizations. Rather, we provide an in-depth analysis of the various 30
negotiation strategies found in upward refusals in our data. Below we discuss in 31
more detail two examples of spoken refusals and three instances of written 32
refusals. These examples were chosen because they are representative of the 33
trends in our data. More specifically, following Beebe et al. (1990) and Pomerantz 34
(1984), the majority of the upward refusals identified in the spoken and written 35
data could be classified as indirect and weak. However, as our more detailed anal- 36

1 yeses below illustrate, in spite of these similarities, there are considerable differ-
 2 ences in the ways in which face and power relations are negotiated in the spoken
 3 and the email data.

4

5

6 4.1 Upward refusals in the spoken data

7

8 Examples 1 and 2 are examples of indirect refusals (Beebe et al. 1990) in which
 9 interlocutors negotiate a disagreement before actually going “on record” in the
 10 form of a refusal. In these kinds of refusals, interlocutors typically negotiate and
 11 manage complex communicative activities thereby avoiding more explicit and
 12 potentially face-threatening refusals to their superiors.

13

14 Example 1

15

16 *Context: This is a departmental staff meeting at a large financial corporation, Com-*
 17 *pany K. The Department oversees staff training in the company. Susan (S), a UK*
 18 *expatriate, is the Head of the Department. Margaret (M), a Hong Kong Chinese, is a*
 19 *junior administrator who maintains a spreadsheet for all training courses run by*
 20 *the Department. Other mentioned participants are Cheryl, a newly promoted man-*
 21 *ager; Andy, an IT specialist; and Jenny, another administrator in the team.*

22 1 S: But I think you need to tell them not to change your template=

23 2 M: =I [tell them]

24 3 S: [I think] the solution is to tell them not to do it.

25 4 M: Yeah, I tell them many times but I don't know the PRC administrator
 26 5 why always cha::nge.

27 6 S: Ok, why do you not get Cheryl or myself involved in this matter because
 28 7 we ca:n tell them not to do this.

29 8 M: I alr- already told Andy many times, or maybe every week,
 30 9 some of the: maybe I have this problem and Jenny also have this
 31 10 problem for the spreadsheet problem,

32 11 S: I, OK, if you're not getting a resolution from Andy, if you have told him
 33 12 more than three times,=

34 13 M: °Hm°

35 14 S: =and you're not getting a solution, than you need to raise this matter
 36 15 with your manager=

37 16 M: Hm.

38 17 S: =which is Cheryl.

39 18 M: OK. ((nods))

40 19 S: And if Cheryl is not available you need to raise this matter with me.

- 20 M: Hm. 1
 21 S: Because this is a waste of ti:me and we have a lot of matters that we 2
 22 need to resolve. And they are causing problems and we can tell China 3
 23 to stop doing this. 4
 24 M: OK. 5
 6

This extract occurred during a discussion of a problem that team members have 7
 been experiencing when working with the Mainland Chinese branch of the com- 8
 pany. One of the current problems of Susan's team relates to the fact that the mem- 9
 bers of the Mainland China branch keep changing a specific template that Susan's 10
 team has devised. Susan's comment in line 1 reminds the others that their col- 11
 leagues in the other branch are not supposed to change their template: She explic- 12
 itly addresses Margaret and asks her '*to tell them not to change our template.*' 13
 Although Margaret's response (line 2) indicates that she has done so, Susan explic- 14
 itly repeats her request '*to tell them not to do it*' (line 3). After Margaret explains that 15
 she has repeatedly told them so but without the intended effect (lines 4–5), Susan 16
 asks her why she did not get her or the team's manager (Cheryl) involved in this 17
 issue. By reminding her that '*we can tell them not to do this*' (with emphasis on the 18
 words '*can*' and '*not*') Susan also establishes and reinforces the asymmetrical rela- 19
 tionship and the power imbalance between herself and Cheryl on the one hand and 20
 Margaret on the other (lines 6–7). This comment could thus also be interpreted as a 21
 reminder and a directive from Susan to make sure that in the future Margaret alerts 22
 them earlier to these issues and involves them where necessary. 23

In replying to Susan's comment (line 8), then, Margaret justifies herself by 24
 outlining what actions she did take, i.e., talking to Andy, the IT specialist. She 25
 also indicates that this is not only her problem but that other people (i.e., Jenny) 26
 in the team have similar issues (lines 9–10). What is particularly interesting about 27
 Margaret's reply is that she does not explicitly refer back to Susan's request to 28
 involve Cheryl or herself in her attempts to solve her problems. Rather, she elabo- 29
 rates on alternative ways of handling this problem, which could be described as a 30
 "statement of alternative" – one of the refusal strategies proposed by Beebe et al. 31
 (1990) and also by Chang (2009). And although Susan signals that she has under- 32
 stood Margaret's suggestions '*OK*' (line 11), she then spells out very explicitly 33
 what she expects Margaret to do in case the problem does not get solved, namely 34
 to '*raise this matter with your manager which is Cheryl*' (lines 11–12, 14–15, and 17). 35
 By being very explicit about her expectations and by explicitly naming Cheryl 36
 and positioning her as Margaret's superior (e.g., by emphasizing '*your*') she high- 37
 lights the importance of adhering to this procedure. And Margaret's minimal 38
 feedback (turns 13, 16, and 18) and her nodding (line 18) seem to indicate that she 39
 understands her boss. 40

1 In line 19, Susan once more spells out very explicitly what she expects
 2 Margaret to do, namely to contact her if Cheryl is not available. She accounts for
 3 her firm position regarding the appropriate procedure (lines 21–23), stating that
 4 not dealing with the matter is ‘*a waste of time*,’ and there are other, seemingly
 5 more important ‘*matters*’ that the team needs to deal with. Susan’s authority is
 6 further emphasized in the statement ‘*we can tell China to stop doing this*’ (lines
 7 22–23).

8 This is a very interesting and complex instance of a refusal upward. Although
 9 Susan repeatedly reminds Margaret of the need to involve Cheryl in her attempts
 10 to solve the problem with the templates, Margaret refuses this in a very indirect
 11 and implicit way. In particular, rather than refusing her boss’s directive explicitly,
 12 Margaret carefully negotiates her way around the issue of involving Cheryl by
 13 mentioning alternative actions that she took and drawing Susan’s attention to the
 14 fact that the problem with the template is something that other members of the
 15 team are also experiencing. Noteworthy are several instances of minimal feed-
 16 back (e.g., lines 13, 16, and 20) that make Margaret’s refusal indirect and almost
 17 ambiguous. In their taxonomy of refusal strategies, Beebe et al. (1990: 73) men-
 18 tion “unspecific and indefinite reply” and “lack of enthusiasm” as different ways
 19 of enacting the strategy of “acceptance that functions as a refusal.” Drawing on
 20 minimal feedback as a response strategy to construct her refusal, Margaret merely
 21 acknowledges her boss’s explanations while avoiding explicitly disagreeing with
 22 her. And due to their ambiguous meanings, minimal acknowledgements seem to
 23 be very suitable means to achieve this. Pudlinski (2002) for example, distinguishes
 24 between three different functions of minimal acknowledgements, including
 25 being a continuer, a minimal agreement to a prior statement, or a passive resis-
 26 tance to a prior statement. In this example, Margaret appears to draw on several
 27 of these functions including the passive resistance.

28 In an interview that we did with Margaret after the data collection, she
 29 expressed some discontent with Cheryl’s role as the team’s manager (see also
 30 Schnurr and Zayts 2011), and she explicitly told us that she would not ask Cheryl
 31 for help if she had a problem but that she would rather seek other people’s advice.
 32 In the light of this information and considering Margaret’s evasive and ambiguous
 33 responses to Susan throughout the data excerpt, we thus view Margaret’s perfor-
 34 mance as an act of refusing her boss’s directives to get Cheryl involved in solving
 35 the problem with the template. By drawing on the indirect refusal strategies of
 36 “statement of alternative” and “acceptance that functions as a refusal” (Beebe
 37 et al. 1990), Margaret also skillfully maintains and reinforces the power relations
 38 with her boss by avoiding explicitly face-threatening behavior.

39 The next example of refusal is taken from a team meeting at another company
 40 in Hong Kong.

Example 2

Context: This is a weekly meeting of the administrative team of a language service provider, Lingsoft Inc. The company has 15 employees who are all Hong Kong Chinese with the exception of Janet, the owner and founder of Lingsoft Inc. Janet (J) chairs the meeting. Edmond (E) is an administrator responsible for keeping the timetable of classes. In the meeting Janet has proposed replacing some of the current teachers, which would mean that Edmond would have to rearrange the timetable.

- 1 J: She's good at drama but uh, she's not holding students. So we have to very
2 quickly replace, u:m, John and Martha. (.) We've got to replace them.
3 E: Training?
4 J: No, replace. Because they won't- I mean, (.)
5 E: [But John is] very good to doing to help us to doing the material.
6 J: [Yeah, yeah, yeah.] ((in a skeptical voice))
7 E: And mm, like for example if like kind of course I have the problem and then
8 u:h, like for example like, like the ((name of the course)) last time. Of course,
9 nobody, nobody can capable to u:h write, uh to take up the class. And then,
10 any type of the exam and then he will try and then we do it, like last time,
11 last time the u:h, Cambridge and then two kid, the exam result very good.
12 J: ((coughs)) Now what's in (.) I'm not, I'm not u:m (.) I mean I understand all
13 that but we just can't have too many long, long term students because I think,
14 they were always, just, doesn't feel ((inaudible))
15 E: Mm.
16 J: So I agree for exams he's excellent.
17 E: Mm.
18 J: But Martha she's not, I mean uh I just take little Mark, Mark Kwok.
19 E: Yeah.

In this extract Janet suggests to 'quickly replace' two of the company's part-time teachers, John and Martha (lines 1–2). Although Janet's request is very explicit and direct, Edmond, whose responsibility would be to put this decision into practice – i.e., to accommodate all John and Martha's students within existing classes and to find substitute teachers – disagrees with his boss by putting forward an alternative to replacing the teachers, namely to offer them 'training' (line 3). Janet then repeats her suggestion to 'replace' them and she starts providing some explanations (line 4). Over the next few turns Edmond and Janet discuss this issue. In particular, Edmond disagrees more explicitly with Janet (line 5 'But ...') and provides several reasons for keeping John (e.g., by highlighting his skills in devising teaching materials (lines 5 and 7–11)).

Disagreement is described as an indirect refusal strategy by Campillo et al. (2009: 145), which can be used “to point out the negative effect the act of requesting exerts on the addressee.” Janet appears quite skeptical to Edmond’s arguments (cf. her repeated ‘*yeah*’ in line 6 that is further emphasized by her tone of voice), and she repeats her disagreement in lines 12–14 by using a type of ‘yes but’ structure that is typical for weak disagreements (Pomerantz 1984); i.e., she first signals some understanding of Edmond’s point (*‘I understand all that’*) before she repeats her disagreement (*‘but we just can’t have too many’*). This ‘yes but’ structure is also typical for adjuncts to refusals as described by Campillo et al. (2009: 145). In addition to providing some explanations (i.e., they are unable to keep too many long-term students who enjoy discounted rates as the company loses profit) this ‘yes but’ structure contributes to considerably mitigating the potential impact of Janet’s disagreement. Janet’s explanations are then responded to with minimal feedback from Edmond (lines 15, 17, and 19), which perform ambiguous functions: They may signal some kind of agreement or acknowledgment but as was elaborated above, they could also be interpreted as passive resistance to Janet’s point of view (i.e., Edmond may choose these relatively vague discourse markers to avoid explicitly disagreeing with his boss).

Eventually, Janet seems to – at least partly – agree with Edmond (line 16). However, her initial explicit agreement with Edmond’s judgment of John’s skills is closely followed by her disagreement with his judgment of Martha (line 18). And after her explicit disagreement about Martha, Janet seems to return to her initial suggestion of letting these teachers go by offering to take over one of the students (Mark Kwok) in their course – to which Edmond agrees (line 19). After Edmond’s agreement, this issue is not brought up again in the meeting. Thus, on the basis of this extract it is not possible to say whether one or both of the part-time teachers were actually fired. However, although we cannot say for certain whether Edmond’s attempt not to replace John and Martha was actually successful, we would still classify this communicative act as a refusal as it is in line with Kline and Ford’s (1990: 460) definition of refusals outlined above: Edmond clearly tries to bring about a change in Janet’s behavior by attempting to convince her to change her mind and to withdraw her request to replace John and Martha. As we have seen in this and the previous example, the disagreement between interlocutors is a crucial component of the refusal (see also Daly et al. 2004). In negotiating this refusal, then, Edmond draws on several of the refusal strategies outlined in the previous literature including “statement of alternative” (i.e., training rather than replacement) and “providing explanations.”

Similar to what we have observed in our data, “giving reasons” and “providing explanations” have been identified as frequently used refusal strategies by a number of studies involving participants from different cultural and linguistic

backgrounds (e.g., Chang 2009; Hong 2011; Liao and Bresnahan 1996). For example, in the data gathered by Liao and Bresnahan (1996) via DCT, the authors found that their Chinese subjects employed this strategy frequently when refusing upward (i.e., a teacher's request). However, unlike the subjects in their study, in our (spoken) data, participants do not seem to draw on "politeness markers of apology," such as saying *sorry* or *excuse me*, and our participants also did not use formal address forms (e.g., title) repeatedly to replace the pronoun *you* (see also Hong 2011). Rather, they draw on a range of other strategies to signal their disagreement and to construct their refusal.

In terms of negotiating refusals upward and avoiding potential face-threats, Example 2 shows how interlocutors skillfully negotiate their disagreements and existing power relations (e.g., by using the "yes but" structure and by providing some form of agreement (e.g., in the form of minimal feedback)). Both examples of spoken refusals that we have analyzed here are representative of the overall trends in our data and thus provide a strong indication that some of the claims made by cross-cultural research in terms of culture-specific behaviors are over-generalizations and that the reality of working and communicating with people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds is much more complex. Examples like Edmond's disagreement with his boss and his refusal to put her suggestions into action contradict Liao and Bresnahan's (1996: 704) claim that "in the business relationships, they [Chinese people] generally dare not express their negative opinion in a meeting if they are not sure whether any person will hold the same opinion." As we have seen in the analysis above, there is no evidence that one of the other participants shares Edmond's views, and yet he confidently (albeit indirectly) resists his boss's request. Examples like this show that the ways in which interlocutors interact with each other in multicultural contexts is much more complex than data collected through DCTs or role-plays suggest. We discuss these observations in more detail after an analysis of three instances of upward refusals in our email sample.

4.2 Upward refusals in the email data

We include an analysis of our email data here to illustrate differences in the construction and negotiation of upward refusals in the emails when compared to the spoken examples, and to provide further grounds for challenging a priori assumptions about the crucial role of culture in this context. Moreover, due to the increasing significance of email communication in the workplace, it seems crucial to include this medium in an exploratory analysis of how subordinates do

1 refusals upward in this context. However, in spite of this crucial role of email and
2 other types of written communication in professional contexts, there is compara-
3 tively little research on refusals in written data. Much of the existing research
4 deals with so-called “negative letters,” such as rejection letters of a job applica-
5 tion (Jablin and Krone 1984; Smith et al. 1996); denial letters of a claim to policy
6 holders (Jansen and Jansen 2010; Schryer 2000); and letters refusing credit and
7 admission to postgraduate school (Locker 1999). Most of these studies examine
8 respondents’ reaction to these letters with a particular focus on identifying and
9 describing effective strategies of communicating the negative message. However,
10 in most of these studies, rejection letters were constructed for the purposes of an
11 experiment (often conducted with students as participants) and did not consti-
12 tute authentic letters composed by professionals (for two exceptions see Jablin
13 and Krone 1984; Schryer 2000). Our data sample of authentic emails thus
14 addresses Locker’s (1999) call for studies of *real* refusals that involve real people
15 rather than student participants who take on the roles of specific groups (such as
16 job applicants).

17 A second important point relates to the fact that in all of the studies we exam-
18 ined, rejection letters were written (or said to be written) by representatives of a
19 company to clients or job applicants. The refusals in these letters could thus best
20 be described as “downward” refusals, i.e., from presumably more powerful orga-
21 nizational members (such as admission committees or insurance/bank represen-
22 tatives who all perform gate-keeping functions) to job applicants or clients. Our
23 data, by contrast, consist of authentic emails that were written by subordinates to
24 their superiors as part of their everyday workplace interactions. These specific
25 characteristics are likely to have an effect on the ways in which face and power
26 relations are constructed and negotiated in the documents. In particular, based
27 on the more personal and intimate relationship between the participants in our
28 study and the (real) implications of potential face-threats to their relationship, we
29 would expect the negative messages in the emails to be considerably mitigated.
30 Moreover, our data consist of emails, which compared to business letters are
31 a relatively less formal medium, and have, in fact been described as an “oral-
32 written hybrid medium” combining elements of spoken and written interaction
33 (Schnurr and Rowe 2008).

34 Following Beebe et al.’s (1990) taxonomy that we have applied to the refusals
35 in our spoken data in the previous section, we would classify the refusals in the
36 emails as indirect since they all include some kind of mitigation strategy. This
37 observation aligns with Jablin and Krone’s (1984: 289) claim that “an indirect
38 form of rejection takes more of the ‘sting’ out of being rejected than does a direct
39 form of rejection.” However, when compared to the refusals in our spoken data,
40 the email examples are much more explicit and potentially face-threatening.

We have chosen three examples here that are representative of the ways in which subordinates construct refusals toward their superiors in their everyday workplace emails in our corpus. The first example is an email exchange between Neil, an expatriate from the UK, and Brad, a local Hong Kong Chinese. Neil is the owner of a small IT company, and Brad is a sub-contractor who has been hired to do some small maintenance work for Neil on a Saturday. We first show Neil's request to Brad before showing Brad's refusal.

Example 3¹

(3.1)

Hi Brad,
I'd like to call in a couple of times tomorrow to check on your progress – please can you let me have your mobile number?
Many thanks
Neil

(3.2)

Hi Neil,
You don't have to call but I will email you reporting the progress.
Brad

With his email, Brad refuses to comply with Neil's request; i.e., he does not provide him with his mobile number. Although Brad does not give any explanations for his refusal, he offers an alternative, namely to update Neil on his progress via email. What is particularly interesting about Brad's refusal is its wording '*you don't have to.*' In particular, his choice of the pronoun '*you*' and the '*have to*' construction make it look as though Brad is actually doing Neil a favor by relieving him of some of his responsibility. However, in a study of negative letters in an insurance company Schryer (2000) observed that those letters that offered the recipients "a higher level of activity" rather than restricting their options were judged more positively by readers. Thus, although refusing his boss' request is potentially face-threatening, by offering an alternative (i.e., updates via email), Brad nevertheless manages to maintain Neil's (and his own) face and negotiates the asymmetrical power relation between interlocutors: In a way, he still cooperates with Neil's request for updates while at the same time minimizing Neil's involvement in the job progress and control over how many updates to receive and when.

¹ In all examples, spelling and grammar have been left as in the original emails.

The exchanges in the next two emails involve Robert, an expatriate from the UK who also owns a small computer business, and Carlson, a sub-contractor who has been working for Robert for several years. As in the previous email, Example 4 also involves the refusal of a request.

Example 4

(4.1)

Carlson,

Do you have time for a site visit on a job on Wednesday 10:00am?

[company's address]

(4.2)

Sorry, I need to Shenzhen on Wednesday morning, can you change the time to 16:00 or anytime in Tuesday & Thursday,

Carlson

As in example 3, the refusal upward is relatively explicit and potentially face-threatening. However, Carlson employs several strategies to mitigate the negative impact of his email, such as an apology ('sorry'), which can be described as "statement of regret" (Beebe et al. 1990), providing some explanations (i.e., that he is busy with another job), and offering an alternative (i.e., to do the visit at a different time or day). In combining these strategies, he skillfully communicates the face-threatening message while at the same time reinforcing the interpersonal relationship and existing power relations with his boss. In particular, providing explanations and offering an alternative considerably mitigate the potential face threat of this email message. More specifically, by referring to some prior engagement (which requires him to be in Shenzhen, a city in Mainland China next to Hong Kong) Carlson indicates that he does not really have a choice but to refuse Robert's request. He thereby implies that his refusal is not related to Robert personally, which makes this refusal "impersonal" and hence less face-threatening for his boss (Turnbull and Saxton 1997: 164). These interpretations are in line with the findings of previous studies. For example, in exploring the effects of positive politeness strategies in refusal letters, Jansen and Jansen (2010) observed that the strategy of "giving reasons" had a positive effect on how the receivers interpreted the refusal letter (see also Campbell 1990).

The specific ways in which Carlson refuses the request of his superior also reflect the relatively informal and close yet professional relationship between interlocutors. In particular, since Robert and Carlson have been working together on various projects over the last few years, their emails are characterized by several features reflecting (and reinforcing) this familiarity between interlocutors. For example, Robert's initial email to Carlson (4.1) only contains a minimal greeting and closing ('*Carlson*' rather than '*Hi/Dear Carlson*' and the official and automatically generated company logo rather than a more personal sign-off by Robert). Carlson's reply is equally informal which is reflected, for example in the absence of a greeting and only a minimal sign-off ('*Carlson*'), as well as in the relative direct question form '*can you*' (rather than '*would it be possible/could you*'). Thus, rather than challenging Robert's face needs and the asymmetrical power relationship between interlocutors, the ways in which Carlson refuses Robert's initial request is in line with the ways in which these two normally interact with each other and is also a reflection of their well-established professional relationship.

Example 5

Context: This is the reply email from Peter, one of Robert's subordinates. In this email Peter responds to various actions (which Robert had listed in his initial email) that needed to be done in order to address some problems with one of their projects.

Hi Robert,

1. We don't need to do this anymore as Allan is going to use ((name of system)) email in this coming week.
2. Which mean they will need to put all files to ((system)) which they are using. I do not agree to use another program as this will end up with some file no in here or there.

Peter

As in examples 3 and 4, the refusals in Peter's email are relatively explicit. Under point 1, Peter provides some explanations as to why they do not need to follow through with Robert's first request to undertake some specific work on the company's email system. His second point, which seems to result from and follow up on the first point, provides further explanations as to why he does not want to comply with Robert's suggestion/request to use a particular program to handle the emails. What is particularly interesting about this second point is that Peter's refusal is constructed around a disagreement with his boss (c.f. Example 2 of the spoken data). His very direct disagreement ('*I do not agree*') could be potentially

1 face threatening to Robert and could also challenge the power relations between
 2 interlocutors and the status quo. However, we would argue that as in the previous
 3 example, this kind of explicitness is considered to be normative and unmarked
 4 (Locher and Watts 2005) and reflects the general to-the-point style that character-
 5 izes the emails at this workplace and that could thus be interpreted as reflecting
 6 the norms of this particular community of practice (Wenger 1998).

7 The examples thus show that when refusing in the emails, interlocutors also
 8 draw on a range of different strategies although the email refusals overall appear
 9 less complex – for example because they typically unfold over less turns and do
 10 not involve as much negotiation and conjoint construction as the spoken exam-
 11 ples. However, regardless of the medium of communication, in all the examples
 12 in our corpus interlocutors employ a variety of different strategies to mitigate the
 13 potential face threat of the refusal and to negotiate power relations. And although
 14 refusing the suggestions or requests from one's boss is always potentially face-
 15 threatening and challenging to existing power relations, in the email examples in
 16 our data, the refusals are constructed and negotiated in ways that reflect and
 17 reinforce the discursive norms developed among participants and which charac-
 18 terize the specific workplace or professional relationship among participants.

19 Moreover, in support of the observations that we made regarding the role of
 20 culture in explaining the refusal strategies in the spoken data, it is not easy to
 21 establish a link between the ways in which the subordinates in the emails con-
 22 struct their refusals and culture-specific norms and expectations. In particular, if
 23 we try to explain our observations in the light of established universal cultural
 24 frameworks (such as the cultural dimensions proposed by Hofstede (1980)), we
 25 do not get satisfying answers. For example, based on Hofstede's cultural dimen-
 26 sions, Hong Kong is typically described as a high power distance society in which
 27 power relations are generally not questioned and subordinates are expected to be
 28 loyal and obedient (Chee and West 2000; Selmer and de Leon 2003). These expec-
 29 tations are clearly challenged by the relatively explicit and potentially face-
 30 threatening and challenging refusals of the subordinates in the emails discussed
 31 above.

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5 Discussion and conclusion

37 In this section we discuss the three questions that we formulated at the beginning:
 38 (1) how do subordinates do refusals upward in their multicultural workplaces; (2)
 39 how are face and power relations negotiated and managed in these instances; (3)
 40 what is the role of culture in these intercultural encounters?

5.1 So, how do subordinates do refusals upward? And how are face and power relations negotiated and managed in these instances?

Our first (rather general) observation was that in comparison to the emails, there were very few upward refusals in the spoken data. This difference could, of course, partly be explained by the different medium of communication. For example, as Jansen and Jansen (2010: 2544) maintain, attending to the addressee's face needs "seems to be characteristic of high involvement communication [such as face-to-face], while written language is less suitable for high involvement communication because the writer and reader are absent." It is thus perhaps not surprising that the refusals in the face-to-face interactions were more mitigated than the refusals in the emails. However, in all cases, interlocutors seemed to be aware of the potential face-threat and implications of refusing their superior's requests, and they employed a wide range of mitigation strategies reported in the previous studies, including offering alternatives, providing explanations, lack of enthusiasm, disagreeing, providing an unspecific and indefinite reply, and acceptance that actually functions as a refusal. Overall, interlocutors tended to avoid more direct and face-threatening strategies thereby attending to interlocutors' face needs and reinforcing existing power relations.

Moreover, we also observed that in our spoken data, the refusal sequences evolved around a disagreement. At a first glance, these disagreements seem to resemble so-called "pre-refusals" (Felix-Brasdefer 2004: 605), i.e., strategies that "initiate the refusal interaction and prepare the addressee for an upcoming refusal." However, upon closer scrutiny, it became clear that rather than preparing an upcoming refusal, these rather implicit and indirect utterances constituted the actual activity of refusing and were interpreted as such by interlocutors. These rather off-record ways of doing refusals can at least partly be explained by interlocutors' role and power relationships. In particular, since refusing upward is a face-threatening activity with potentially serious implications, it is understandable why subordinates chose relatively safe (i.e., implicit and hence considerably less face-threatening) strategies when communicating refusals toward their superiors.

In contrast to the spoken data, the refusals in the emails were more explicit and hence potentially more face-threatening. Although interlocutors also employed a range of strategies to mitigate the face-threat of these refusals, the refusals in the emails were overall more direct and seemed to challenge existing power relations (for example, by questioning the boss's requests, as in Example 5). This impression of more explicit and hence more face-threatening refusals

1 may also have been evoked due to the fact that the refusals in the emails were
2 much less negotiated and less conjointly constructed among interlocutors.

3 Thus, although our examples reflect some of the tendencies reported in
4 earlier studies on refusals, such as interlocutors' preference to provide explana-
5 tions to minimize potential face threats, they have also shown how complex *real*
6 refusals are. The refusals we found (especially in the spoken data) involved a con-
7 siderable amount of negotiation among interlocutors and typically unfolded over
8 several turns and involved several refusal strategies. Similar tendencies were
9 observed in a small scale study by Morrison and Holmes (2003), who compared
10 the refusal strategies produced by the same participants in natural encounters,
11 role plays, and DCTs, and who found that subjects differed in the number of turns
12 and strategies they used when refusing offers and requests as measured by these
13 different methods.

14 In line with our argument throughout the paper, we propose to move beyond
15 a (rather static) focus on speech acts toward more dynamic explorations of how
16 certain communicative activities (such as refusing) are being performed in *real*
17 situations by *real* people who have to manage *real* interpersonal relationships in
18 their interactions. Such an approach would obviously include focusing on explor-
19 ing authentic data rather than relying on role-plays or DCTs. We believe that more
20 studies are needed to analyze the complex ways in which refusals are constructed
21 and negotiated in authentic interactions, and that challenge some of the often too
22 general claims based on less authentic data. This applies, as we have shown, not
23 only to the ways in which interlocutors actually use refusal strategies but is also
24 reflected in how they orient (or not) to culturally influenced perceptions, norms,
25 and practices when actually refusing. Which brings us to the third question
26 addressed in this study.

27

28

29 5.2 Is culture (really) an issue?

30

31 Research findings, in particular in cross-cultural studies that compare the use of
32 specific refusal strategies by members from different countries, seem to generally
33 agree that culture is an issue and that participants' sociocultural background
34 impact on how refusals are constructed. Generalizations about the ways in which
35 members of a specific cultural group allegedly construct refusals seem to be
36 counterproductive as they create and reinforce stereotypical perceptions rather
37 than provide an adequate picture of the complexities of real-life interactions. We
38 thus believe that cultural generalizations, such as "the Chinese prefer to use X
39 and Y strategies when refusing upward," need to be treated with caution when
40 trying to understand the complex behavior of actual people in actual situations.

And while we do not want to deny that participants' sociocultural or linguistic backgrounds may influence the ways in which they construct and negotiate refusals, there is very little evidence in our data to support this claim. So rather than assuming that culture necessarily plays a role in interlocutors' refusal behavior, we would suggest that a more productive approach would be not to treat culture as an *a priori* variable but rather to start by critically asking whether culture is an issue and how it is oriented to, enacted, or made relevant by interlocutors themselves (see also Schnurr and Zayts 2012).

A useful construct in this context appears to be the notion of *interculture*, which consists of "a unique set of rules for interaction" that are dynamically created among participants during an exchange (Kecskes 2011: 69). In other words, as members from different cultural backgrounds interact with each other, they not only draw on the norms and practices that they bring to an interaction (and that may be claimed to be characteristic of their cultural backgrounds), but more importantly they blend these norms and practices "with features created *ad hoc* in the interaction in a synergetic way" (Kecskes 2011: 69) thereby creating an *interculture*. The notion of *interculture* seems useful to account for some of our observations – in particular when used in conjunction with another theoretical construct, namely the *community of practice*. As we have argued above, where certain communicative patterns are recurring and are regularly used by members of a particular workplace (Example 5) or in an established work-relationship (Example 4), they can be understood as practices that have been developed by members of a specific community of practice and that constitute appropriate (and to a certain extent expected) behaviors typically displayed by these members. Thus, rather than assuming that interlocutors create a new *interculture* every time they interact with each other, we would suggest that at least in our data where interlocutors have already established a working relationship and are regularly interacting with each other, they draw on and continuously develop, modify, reinforce, as well as challenge and change the norms of their *interculture*, which, in turn, is closely interlinked with the communicative practices that characterize this particular community of practice. The *intercultures* that are developed among colleagues and coworkers over time as they repeatedly interact with each other thus seem to be less *ad hoc* and spontaneous than those developed among strangers and people who only have occasional contact with each other.

However, as our examples have illustrated, in order to account for the ways in which refusals are constructed and negotiated in authentic interactions it is crucial to consider various factors and to look beyond culture. In other words, rather than limiting explanatory attempts to a description of alleged cultural differences (e.g., in the form of relating observed speech behavior to cultural dimensions (which are, in themselves, highly contested (e.g., McSweeney 2002)), a wide

1 range of other factors need to be considered to understand how interlocutors
 2 negotiate issues of face and power relations in these communicative activities.
 3 Such factors include, among others, different media of communication, norma-
 4 tive ways of interacting in a specific workplace or a relationship, as well as the
 5 content and context of the refusal (e.g., whether the refusal occurred as part of an
 6 attempt to arrange for a site visit (Example 4) or a more serious threat of firing
 7 some staff members (Example 2)). These findings are in line with several recent
 8 studies, which have also found that other factors are often more relevant for
 9 explaining observed behaviors (e.g., Akar 2002; Poncini 2002).

10 To conclude, the findings of our study call for a change in the ways in which
 11 refusals (and possibly other communicative activities) are investigated and how
 12 they should be conceptualized. In order to understand the complexities involved
 13 in *real* interactions that take place between *real* interlocutors in *real* contexts, we
 14 need to conduct more studies that draw on authentic data collected in a wide
 15 range of different contexts. There is clearly a need for such studies, and we hope
 16 that our research contributes toward moving in this direction and toward a better
 17 understanding of the complexities involved in refusing upward in specific work-
 18 place realities in which people negotiate face and power relations.

19
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