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REFUSAL STRATEGIES IN ENGLISH AND RUSSIAN

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Abstract. The article explores the speech act of refusal in British English and Russian and investigates British and Russian refusal strategies from the perspective of cross-cultural communication. The study aims to find similarities and differences between the ways of refusing requests, offers and invitations in different social contexts in two languages and cultures. It was conducted with the implementation of Speech Act Theory (Austin 1962, Searle 1969, Searle & Vandervken 1985), Politeness Theory (Brown and Levinson 1987, Leech 1983, 2014, Larina and Leech 2014, Watts 2003), and the Theory of Cultural Scripts (Wierzbicka 1991/2003). The modified version of the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) developed by Beebe et al. (1990) was used for data collection. The study has revealed both quantitative and qualitative differences in refusal strategies which exist due to cultural differences, culture-specific politeness strategies and Communicative Styles (Larina 2015, Larina, Mustajoki, Protassova 2017). It has found that the Russians use more direct strategies than the British and are more taciturn and laconic. The British do more face-work to mitigate their refusal, they use both negative and positive strategies with higher regularity and are more voluble. The knowledge of communicative differences in refusal as well as in other speech acts is necessary for the acquisition and development of pragmatic competence of L2 English learners and successful intercultural communication.

Key words: speech act of refusal, politeness strategies, communicative ethno-style, pragmatic competence

INTRODUCTION

Scholars around the world have devoted their research on different areas of pragmatics with the main goal of better understanding how languages are used. We meet different forms of social behavior in different cultures around the globe that individuals categorize as mutually shared appreciation and consideration for others. Researchers in the field of Intercultural Pragmatics and Intercultural Communication have collected considerable data that illustrate how communicative behaviour varies across cultures [Kecskes 2014, Trosborg 2010, Wierzbicka 2003 and many others]. They suggest that across societies and communities, people speak differently, and these differences in ways of speaking are profound and systematic, they reflect different cultural values, or at least different hierarchies of values [Wierzbicka 2003: 69]. As a result, people often use different language tools and strategies, guided by their values, when performing the same speech act in a similar situation.

The problem of intercultural communication is that one does not only have to understand the sentence in its semantic meaning but also have communicative compe-

tence in order to comprehend what the speaker meant; in other words to have pragmatic competence to understand and perform different speech acts in intercultural contexts. 'Speaking a language means more than uttering a number of grammatically decent sentences' [Ghazanfari et al 2013: 51], one must be aware of the pragmatic meaning of the interlocutors' utterances. People speak different languages and therefore use them in a different way.

Refusal is a speech act that exists in all languages and is used in everyday life. It occurs as a negative response to other acts such as requests, invitations, offers, and suggestions [Houck & Gass, 1999: 28]. Searle and Vander ken (1985) define the speech act of refusal as follows: 'The negative counterparts to acceptances and consents are rejections and refusals. Just as one can accept offers, applications, and invitations, so each of these can be refused or rejected' [Searle & Vander ken 1985: 195]. The speech act of refusing is a non-preferred response and consequently it is a face-threatening act both to the Speaker and to the Hearer. In order not to risk threatening the face, speakers use various strategies to avoid offending the interlocutor but do it in a different way and with varying degrees of effort. As with other speech acts, refusal is culture-specific due to differences in such categories as face, threat, imposition, politeness and impoliteness.

Comparing American English, Hebrew and Japanese Anna Wierzbicka (2003) points out significant differences on how refusal is performed in these languages. She notes that it is not common in English to express refusal by saying 'No' as one does in Hebrew, or to say 'No' in response to a request for information (e.g., in shops, hotels, and restaurants): '*Do you have such and such?*'. In English, when someone indicates that they want something from us we are free to say 'No' but not to say just 'No' it is necessary to say something more. In Japanese culture, the norm seems to be to avoid saying 'No' altogether (in particular, to refuse an offer or a request, to express disagreement and so on). One would prefer to remain silent than utter such words as '*no*' or '*I disagree*'. The avoidance of such open and bald negative expressions is rooted in the fear that it might disrupt the harmony and order of the group. Summing up these differences she suggests cultural scripts for refusal in each culture:

Israeli culture

I say: *No*.

I think I don't have to say anything more about it.

Anglo-American culture

I say: *No*. I don't want you to feel something bad because of this.

I will say something more about it because of this.

Japanese culture

I can't say: *No*.

I will say something else because of this [Wierzbicka 2003: 92—93].

The speech act of refusal has attracted a lot of attention of researchers in different fields. It has been studied in the framework of pragmatics in different languages and cultures (English, Japanese, Arabic, Persian and others) in comparative perspective [Al-Khatani 2005, Ghazanfari, Bonyadi & Malekzadeh 2003, Houck & Gass 1999, Martínez-

Flor and Usó-Juan 2011]. For pedagogical purposes, a lot of research has been conducted aiming to investigate the realization of refusal by native speakers of English and non-native English speakers [Al-Eyrani 2007, Eslami 2010, Ghazanfari 2003, Houck & Gass 1996, Sattar et al. 2011, Tanck 2003], some of them with the emphasis on pragmatic failure in refusal strategies [Umale 2011].

Thus, we can see that there are two categories of studies on the speech act of refusal. The first focuses on analyzing refusal strategies in a specific culture or comparing the speech acts of refusals across cultural groups, the second one aims to investigate the characteristics of native and non-native speaker refusals in English in order to develop pragmatic competence of L2 English learners.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the realization of the speech act of refusal by native speakers of Russian and British English paying attention to both similarities and differences. We will also attempt to explain the revealed differences through politeness and culture. The paper will focus on refusals to offers, requests and invitations in different social contexts.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A speech act in linguistics is an utterance that has performative function in language and communication. According to Austin, the mere act of speaking is ‘doing things with words’ [Austin 1962: 12]. The concept of speech acts was defined as a set of utterances by which people perform a specific function such as apologizing, complaining, requesting, refusing, complimenting, or thanking. It is an action performed by means of language. Austin identified three different features of speech acts: (i) locutionary, (ii) illocutionary, and (iii) perlocutionary acts. A locutionary act refers to a literal meaning of an utterance; an illocutionary act refers to an intended meaning of an utterance; and a perlocutionary act is the actual effect by saying something.

Refusal is a face-threatening speech act which causes damage to both the face of the Speaker and the Hearer and it should be studied in the framework of Politeness Theory. In most of the studies, politeness is viewed as strategic conflict-avoidance or as strategic construction of cooperative social interaction [Eelen 2001: 21, Watts 2003: 47]. Brown and Levinson, authors of a monographic work on politeness (1987), define politeness “as a complex system for softening face threats” [Brown & Levinson 1987: 1]. Using the notion of face by Goffman (1967) they state that interactants have two types of face: ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ which they want to maintain. Negative face is “the want of every ‘competent adult member’ that his actions be unimpeded by others”, “the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, and rights to non-distraction” [Brown & Levinson 1987: 61]. Positive face is the positive and consistent image people have of themselves, and their desire for approval, it is “the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some other executors” [Brown & Levinson 1987: 62]. Applying this notion of ‘face’, ‘politeness’ is regarded as ‘having a dual nature: ‘positive’ politeness’ and ‘negative politeness’. ‘Positive politeness’ is expressed by satisfying ‘positive face’ in two ways: 1) by indicating similarities amongst interactants; or 2) by expressing an appreciation of the interlocutor’s self-image. ‘Negative politeness’ can also be expressed in two

ways: 1) by saving the interlocutor's 'face' (either 'negative' or 'positive'), by mitigating face threatening acts (FTAs), such as advice-giving and disapproval; or 2) by satisfying 'negative face' by indicating respect for the addressee's right not to be imposed on. In short, 'politeness' is expressed not only to minimize FTAs, but also to satisfy the interactants' face.

As Johnson et al. argue in their study of refusals to requests (2009), refusals can threaten both the positive and negative face of the refuser (the person who was asked a favor), and the positive face of the requester (the person asking for a favor). Obstacles, or reasons for non-compliance with a person's request, as they state, can "vary on three dimensions: willingness-unwillingness, ability-inability, and focus on-focus away from the requester" (ibid).

Politeness is tied up with the most basic principles of sociocultural organization and interpersonal relationships within social groups and should be viewed in the context of Social distance and Power distance, which are considered the main dimensions of cultures. Social distance (D) and Power Distance (P) usually go together: more individualist cultures are characterized by a lower P distance index; those which are more collectivist have a higher P distance index. In these terms, English and Russian cultures, as it has been stated in [Larina 2008: 33], maintain the following differences: the scale of social distance (D) (horizontal relations) is longer in English culture since the scale of power distance (P) reflecting the vertical hierarchical relations is longer in the Russian system than in the English one.

It is worth noting that the value of 'distance' varies in different cultures. In the British culture distance is a positive value, associated with independence and respect for autonomy of the individual [Wierzbicka 1985: 156]. By contrast, in the Russian culture distance is often perceived as indifference. The value of distance in English, as opposed to closeness in Russian, has different manifestations at the different levels of language [Leech & Larina, 2014: 24. As far as vertical distance is concerned, it involves a number of different factors, such as power, age, and social status. In cultures with a low vertical distance (e.g., 'Anglo' cultures) equality is valued more than the status, and as a result, an egalitarian style of communication prevails [Larina 2015]. The Russian style of communication is not as egalitarian as the Anglo styles. Due to differences in values rooted in the social factors Russians prefer sincerity to tact which has a significant impact on their communicative style [Leech & Larina 2014: 31].

Thus social organization of society and cultural values impact the understanding of politeness and govern the choice of politeness strategies for performing a particular speech act. To some extent these ideas correlate to Sifianou's definition of politeness as "the set of social values which instructs interactants to consider each other by satisfying shared expectations" [Sifianou 1992: 86].

From an intercultural view of politeness, it is also important to mention that as politeness is different across cultures, the same verbal or non-verbal act of being polite in one culture may be perceived as inappropriate or even rude in another culture. As Larina (2008) puts it, 'Russians are often perceived by Westerners, especially by the British, as impolite people since they often sound over-assertive, argumentative, and

even aggressive. They may ask private questions, they like to give advice and may interrupt conversation. They prefer to express their opinions as well as their communicative intentions directly, and feel at liberty to use imperatives etc. But from the Russian point of view, such conduct in many contexts can be acceptable and is not considered impoliteness. On the other hand, English politeness is not always assessed in a positive way by Russians. English people are often perceived by Russians as over-polite (which is not so good), ceremonious and distant' [Larina 2008: 33]. Thus the comparative study of communicative behaviour in different cultures should take into account communicative values and understanding of politeness (impoliteness) in a particular culture.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The data analyzed in this paper was obtained via the use of a discourse completion test (DCT). The discourse completion questionnaire filled in by 20 English and 30 Russian informants was designed to elicit refusals in writing. Subjects were given a short description of the situation, which specified the setting, the level of familiarity and social power between the participants. The subjects were then asked to complete the dialogue, responding and refusing as they thought the person in a particular situation would do, thus performing a speech act of refusal.

The study follows a similar line as Beebe et al. (1990) but it will be examining refusals in three speech acts — offer, request and invitation in various social contexts characterized by different horizontal and vertical distances between interactants. There are 14 situations in total in which informants were expected to give refusals to the 14 people who were offering (situations 1—5), making requests (situations 6—10), and inviting (11—14) on different occasions. The situations suggested differences in horizontal and vertical distances between the interactants. Regarding the horizontal distance situations were planned to be as intimate (situations 3, 10, 11), acquaintance (situations 2, 9 and 12) and stranger (situations 1 and 8). As for the vertical distance our aim was to study both the symmetrical and asymmetrical relationship between the interlocutors, the situations suggest the status of the person making the refusal to the interactant as low (situations 4, 9 and 13), equal (situations 1, 2, 3, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12) and high (situations 5, 10 and 14). (See Appendix 1 for full description of each scenario). The data collected needs further analyses from the point of view of age and gender differences. Here, however, the focus is on the preliminary results obtained, which demonstrates the most significant differences between British and Russian strategies of refusal.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

The conducted analysis has revealed both some similarities and differences in the way the British and Russians make a refusal. It has shown that while refusing, both Russian and English speakers may say *No*, give an apology, express regret and explain the reason for the refusal. Nevertheless it has revealed a lot of differences. In this paper we will sum up the most significant ones concerning quantitative and qualitative aspects.

1. The analyses show that when refusing Russian speakers, on the whole, are much more laconic and direct in comparison to English speakers. They can say a straight '*No*'

followed by gratitude or explanation and don't often mitigate their refusal as the British do. The most typical Russian refusal consists of 2—3 moves while English speakers can go through 3—4 and sometimes even 5—6 moves.

- (1) **Situation 1** (refusal to the offer to carry a heavy bag):
Russian: *Нет, спасибо* (*No, thank you*).
English: *Thank you, but it's ok, don't worry. I don't have far to go.*
- (2) **Situation 2** (refusal to the offer to water flowers):
Russian: *Не надо. Спасибо / Нет необходимости. Спасибо.* (*No need, thank you*).
English: *That's a kind offer, thank you, but I don't think they'll need watering. / Thank you, but it's all right. I'm not going to be away long.*
- (3) **Situation 8** (refusal to the request):
I'm really sorry, but I do not think I will have time to do it, as I have plans, is there someone else you can ask? (APOLOGY + INDIRECT REFUSAL + EXPLANATION + ALTERNATIVE).

The longest English refusal was given to an invitation (situation 13):

- (4) That would be lovely, thank you, but I'm afraid I can't Saturday. My husband and I have made plans to go away. I hope you have a lovely evening though, and congratulations (POSITIVE EVALUATION + GRATITUDE + REGRET + NEGATIVE ABILITY+ EXPLANATION + WELL-WISHING + CONGRATULATING).

As we can see the refusal here is a complex of positive politeness strategies aimed by the refuser at the inviter's positive face. Russian informants in this situation limited their refusal to 2, maximum 3 moves. They expressed gratitude and softened their refusal with a positive attitude and/or explanation:

- (5) *Спасибо. Не получится / Я бы с удовольствием. Но мы с семьей уезжаем за город / Я бы с удовольствием. Но я уезжаю на выходные. Спасибо.*

2. As it has been already mentioned Russian speakers while refusing feel quite free to say a straight explicit NO. English speakers demonstrate a clear tendency to avoid it:

- (6) **Situation 1** (offering help to carry a heavy bag)
Russian: *Нет, спасибо* (*No, thank you*).
English: *Thank you. I'm fine.*
- (7) **Situation 5** (Your secretary is offering to help you)
Russian: *Нет. Спасибо. Я справлюсь.* (*No. Thank you. I can do it myself*)
English: *I'm fine. Thanks. I can do it myself.*

It is interesting to note that in those cases, when the British informants used negative sentences, their No was focused on the refuser:

- (8) *...I don't think they need watering* (situation 2)
- (9) *...I wouldn't want my colleagues to think I am getting special treatment...* (situation 4)
- (10) *...I'm not sure I'll be able to make Saturday* (situation 12)

3. Though both Russian and British speakers while refusing expressed gratitude (for an offer or an invitation) and apology, the British performed it with more

regularity and quite frequently emphasized their apology (in situations of request and invitations):

(11) *I'm really sorry, but I do not think I will have time to do it...* (situation 8)

(12) *I'm so sorry, but I cannot right now...* (situation 8)

(13) *I'm terribly sorry, but I'm not sure I'll be able to make Saturday...* (situation 12)

Apology was sometimes expressed more than once as in the following example (situation 6: refusal to a request):

(14) *I'm really sorry but I am already running late and need to hurry, so sorry* (EMPHASISED APOLOGY + EXPLANATION + APOLOGY).

4. Giving an explanation for a refusal is also more conventional in the English context while Russian speakers find this act less necessary. In refusing an invitation some of our Russian informants softened their refusal with an expression of gratitude or an apology:

(15) *Спасибо. Не получится. / Спасибо, но не смогу / Простите, но прийти я не смогу*, while the English speakers gave some specific reasons:

(16) *...I have a previous engagement for this weekend and I cannot change my plans...*

...My husband and I have made plans to go away...

... I have made plans 2 weeks ago and I cannot change them...

...We are having a family reunion in NY...

...I'm meeting a client out of town...

... I'll be visiting my parents out of town...

5. Concerning the language differences our data have shown that the English informants use various means of modality to mitigate refusal and to make it more indirect:

(17) *I am not sure... / I don't think.../ perhaps / maybe / could etc.*

Perhaps I could take it another time... (situation 4)

I'm afraid I can't make Saturday (situation 13)

6. Another interesting characteristic of English refusal concerns the use of positive politeness strategies. The data has shown that despite being indirect which is one of the main negative politeness strategies the British informants demonstrate, the tendency to use positive politeness strategies quite regularly:

◆ give communicative gifts to the hearer expressing positive emotion, evaluation and attitude: *This is a kind offer...* / *That's very nice of you...* / *That's kind of you...* (refusing an offer); *I'd love to...* / *That would be great...* (refusing an invitation);

◆ attend to the hearer and his interests: *Is there someone else you can ask? / I'll ask the person next to me to help you* (refusing a request); *I hope you have a lovely evening though / I hope you have a nice time* (refusing an invitation);

◆ say *thank you* and *sorry* regularly;

◆ use in-group identity markers (*mate, buddy*);

◆ are voluble.

In Russian refusals positive politeness strategies are quite rare. They are limited to the use of gratitude, apology and regret.

Concerning the impact of distance on communication our data shows that in asymmetrical relations English speakers demonstrate egalitarian style and use a lot of positive politeness strategies (as in situations 13 and 14: refusal to invitation) (Refusal to the boss's invitation)



(18) **Situation 13** (asymmetrical relations, refusing a higher status person):

(19) *I'd love to come but .../ happy anniversary and hope you have a lovely time on Saturday / That would be lovely... I hope you have a lovely evening though, and congratulations.*



In **Situation 14** (asymmetrical relations) when refusing a lower status person evaluative utterances were less frequent though we came across an informal solidarity address form *buddy*.

Russian speakers in asymmetrical situations are quite taciturn and reserved. Compare examples 20 and 21:

(20) *I am sorry **buddy** but I'm snowed under and I'm going to have to eat at my desk today. Congratulations though, enjoy yourself.* (6 moves: REGRET + FRIENDLY ADDRESS (BUDDY) + REASON + EXPLANATION + CONGRATULATION + WELL WISHING) positive politeness.

(21) Russian: *Простите, но прийти не смогу* (2 moves: APOLOGY + REFUSAL).
Спасибо за предложение, но не могу (2 moves: GRATITUDE + REFUSAL: negative ability)

Similar differences we can observe in the refusal to an offer in examples 21 and 22.

Situation 4: Refusal to the boss's offer to take a holiday:

(22) *English: Wow, thank you, that's really kind. Perhaps I could take it another time? I'd like to get stuck into the next project.*

Here we have a combination of both positive and negative politeness strategies, something that we do not find very often in a Russian refusal: EXCLAMATION SHOWING SURPRISE + GRATITUDE + POSITIVE EVALUATION + INDIRECT ALTERNATIVE + EXPLANATION.

(23) Russian: *Благодарю но в данном момент в отпуске нет необходимости.* (GRATITUDE + DIRECT REFUSAL)

Спасибо я отдохну в другое время (GRATITUDE+ ALTERNATIVE).

CONCLUSION

We have analyzed communicative strategies of the English and Russian native speakers used to perform speech acts of refusal to offers, requests and invitations in different social contexts. The study has shown that in both languages refusal is a complex of acts (moves) which usually involves apology, regret and explanation. It involves indirect strategies as well as mitigating devices to avoid threatening the initiator's positive face. Nevertheless, the findings reveal significant differences concerning both quantitative and qualitative characteristics. Russians tend to say a straight No followed by grati-

tude, apology or explanation. In all types of refusal (to offers, requests and invitations) they prefer fewer words and moves (most frequently 2 or 3 moves). In British culture an explicit 'No' is avoided, English speakers are more voluble than Russians; they use more than 3 moves rising to 5 and even 6. In their attempt to mitigate refusal they use a combination of positive and negative politeness strategies which is less typical of Russian speakers.

The above differences shape features of communicative ethno-styles. Our data confirms the previous statement [Larina 2009, 2015] that Russian communicative style is more laconic and direct, less emotive and more message-oriented than form-oriented in comparison with the English one. English style is more indirect, emotive, form-oriented, person-oriented and voluble. They also confirm A. Wierzbicka's idea discussed in the paper: in Anglo culture it is not enough to say No, it is necessary to say something else. Russian culture in this respect is closer to Hebrew though it is not so direct.

These communicative differences might be explained through cultural differences and values. As Russian people due to their culture are more available and contactable [Larina, Mustajoki, Protassova 2017], they prefer sincerity to tact and can afford to be more direct and straightforward. British culture with its emphasis on distance encourages people to be more vigilant in saving their own and their interlocutors' face and do a lot of face-work. As a result, they are more face-oriented rather than message-oriented.

Based upon current research, it is apparent that the knowledge of communicative differences in refusal as well as in other speech acts is necessary for the acquisition and development of pragmatic competence of L2 English learners and successful intercultural communication.

Also, it should be noted that what we have presented here are only selected and preliminary results. More extensive testing and analysis is required for more detailed and conclusive results.

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Appendix 1

LIST OF SITUATIONS

Offer (horizontal distance)

1. A stranger is offering help with carrying the bags.
2. A new neighbour is offering help with watering the plants.
3. A close friend is offering to give you a lift because you are late.

Offer (vertical distance)

4. Your boss has offered you a holiday after the completion of a project.
5. Your secretary is offering to help you with the paperwork because you are overworked.

Request (horizontal distance)

6. A stranger (old man) is requesting help to cross the street.
7. Your new neighbor is requesting that you walk his dog as he is going away for the weekend.
8. Your close friend is asking you to babysit his baby as he needs to go shopping.

Request (vertical distance)

9. Your boss is requesting you to work overtime on Saturday. How do you refuse?
10. You are the boss and the employee is asking you to give him a day off due to family problems.

Invitation (horizontal distance)

11. Your close friend invites you to his birthday on Saturday.
12. Your new neighbour invites you to his welcoming party.

Invitation (vertical distance)

13. Your boss invites you to his anniversary.
14. Your trainee invites you to lunch after the completion of his internship.

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СТРАТЕГИИ ОТКАЗА В АНГЛИЙСКОЙ И РУССКОЙ ЛИНГВОКУЛЬТУРАХ

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В статье приведены некоторые результаты сопоставительного исследования речевого акта Отказ в английской (британской) и русской лингвокультурах. Цель статьи — показать сходства и различия в реализации отказа на предложение, просьбу и приглашение в различных ситуациях и социальных контекстах с учетом варьирования горизонтальной и вертикальной дистанции между участниками речевого акта. Теоретическую базу исследования составили теория речевых актов (Austin 1962, Searle 1969, Searle & Vandervken 1985), теория вежливости (Brown and Levinson 1987, Leech 1983, 2014, Larina and Leech 2014, Watts 2003), а также теория культурных скриптов А. Вежбицкой (Wierzbicka 1991/2003). Материалом исследования послужили высказывания английских и русских информантов, полученные в результате проведенного анкетирования. Анализ выявил ряд особенностей как количественного, так и качественного характера. В статье предпринята попытка объяснить выявленные различия с позиций различий в культурах, в понимании вежливости и в этнокультурных стилях коммуникации (Larina 2015, Larina, Mustajoki, Protassova 2017). Было выявлено, что отказ русских более краткий и прямой, чем отказ англичан, которые более многословны и используют

комплекс стратегий как негативной, так и позитивной вежливости, для его смягчения. Знание культурно-специфичных особенностей отказа, как и других речевых актов, необходимо для формирования прагматической компетенции и успешной межкультурной коммуникации.

Ключевые слова: речевой акт *отказ*, стратегии вежливости, коммуникативный этностиль, прагматическая компетенция

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