Does it Matter? Speech Acts of Refusal and Pragmatic Failure in an International Business Environment in Germany

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Abstract

This study investigates the directness and indirectness in speech acts of refusals in an international business environment in Germany, specifically the differing use of semantic formulas and strategies by native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) depending on if they are speaking to NSs or NNSs. A further aim was to explore the perceptions of business professionals about the use of direct and indirect refusal strategies and if they cause or contribute to pragmatic failure. The questions used to focus research were: Do speakers use different refusal strategies depending on if the recipient is a NS or a NNS? If so, what are the differences? Are these differences likely to cause pragmatic failure? A Discourse Completion Test designed by Beebe et al., (1990) was modified to reflect if participants were responding to a NS or a NNS. Twenty-five native speakers from the UK, USA, South Africa and Ireland and the thirty-one non-native speakers included business professionals from Germany, Russia, Romania, Japan and the Philippines. The data was analysed and categorised using the refusal taxonomy developed by Beebe et al., (1990). A written open-ended interview was completed by 27% NSs and 87% NNSs to provide additional insight. Results indicated that three times as many NSs compared to NNSs modified their responses depending on if the recipient was a NS or NNS. Where responses were modified, both NSs and NNSs preferred direct interaction with NNSs with almost three quarters of NNSs favouring direct interaction with other NNSs. Where indirect
strategies were used, both NSs and NNSs tended to use similar semantic formulas and often responded the same regardless of the recipient. The main conclusions drawn from this study are that while there are some similarities in the use of directness/indirectness in speech acts of refusals there are also significant differences although these differences do not appear likely to cause pragmatic failure for this group.

**Keywords:** Directness; Indirectness; Pragmatic failure; Politeness; Speech acts; Face-threatening act; Interlanguage pragmatics; Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF)
Introduction and Background

English is widely recognized as the world language for information exchange and as the language of international business communication (Sweeney & Hua, 2010; Charles, 2007).

English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) are not seen as a language belonging to a particular country with its linguistic and its cultural background but rather as a neutral, shared “international code and operating language used at work, to do the work” (Kankaanranta and Planken, 2010:400). This does not mean the language is cultureless, but rather that it creates a new operational culture of its own, although, as Charles (2007) points out, to date a set of rules for English as a business lingua franca have not been established.

Many researchers (Poncini, 2004; Jenkins, 2007; Sweeney & Hua, 2010) include NS to NNS as well as NNS-NNS interaction arguing that NSs are often involved in ELF interactions. Although there is considerable debate (Davies, 2003; McKay, 2003) over the terms native and non-native speaker these terms are used because there is no consensus on alternative terms (Rogerson-Revell & Louhiala-Salminen, 2010).

Globalisation

In an increasingly global world, there are now more non-native speakers using English than native speakers and Crystal (2012) estimates that NNSs will outnumber NSs by 50% by the year 2060. Therefore, business communication in English should not necessarily use native English as a language model (Jenkins, 2007) even though, in a business context, speakers still focus on native speaker correctness as the desired goal (Seidlhofer, 2004). Abandoning the goal of perfect native-like English might free up resources for focusing on other useful skills (Seidlhofer, 2004).
One of those key skills is pragmatic knowledge, that is, the “underlying component” of language ability that lets us extract meaning from a context (Tsunawa, 2013:1).

**Pragmatic competence**

Pragmatic competence is the ability to perform speech acts in socially appropriate ways and pragmatic failure describes the inability to do so although quantifiable definitions of both pragmatic ability and disability are vague (Perkins, 2007). Leech (1983) and Thomas (1983) distinguished between pragmalinguistic failure (when a learner tries to perform the right speech act but uses the wrong linguistic means) and sociopragmatic failure, when the learners choose the wrong act for the social context (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Leech, 1983).

In addition to pragmatic competence, Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2010) argue that business professionals need business competence or ‘business know-how’ (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen, 2013:17) and an integral part of business know-how is competence in using business English (Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen, 2010).

**Interlanguage pragmatics**

Interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) can be described as “the performance and acquisition of speech acts” in a second language (Ellis, 2010:160) and much work in ILP has been done within the framework of speech acts. Speech act theory was founded by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969). A speech act is an utterance that performs a locutionary act (saying something) and an illocutionary act, that is, a language function such as invitations, offers, requests, suggestions and refusals (Ellis, 2010).
Speech acts of refusal are interesting for interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) because they present a major cross-cultural “sticking point” (Beebe et al., 1990:56) particularly for NNSs. Refusal can be a face-threatening act (FTA) where “either the speaker’s or listener’s positive or negative face is risked when a refusal is called for” (Chen et al., 1995:6), an act further complicated by the fact that cultures may differ in what they regard as a face-threatening act (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Pragmatic transfer

Refusals therefore require a high level of pragmatic competence which may include the transfer of the speaking rules of the learner’s native language (L1) into the second language (L2) setting which is a complicated process involving many factors including status, learner’s stage of development, culture and linguistic competence (Ellis, 2010).

Studies have found both similarities and differences in terms of the directness of refusals in L1 (e.g., Beebe et al., 1990; Kwon, 2004; Nelson et al., 2002) as well as evidence of pragmatic transfer (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987; Felix-Brasdefer, 2003; Rose, 2000; Nelson et al., 2002). It appears that while learners have no problems making refusals, they often do not perform them in the same way as native speakers (Ellis, 2010). Positive transfer occurs where the two languages are similar enough to allow successful transfer from L1 to L2. Negative transfer happens when learners mistakenly generalise from pragmatic knowledge of L1 to a L2 setting. Even when learners are aware of similarities between their L1 pragmatic knowledge and L2, they sometimes fail to transfer the speech act rules. Koike (1989) found that only half of his study respondents transferred their politeness rules to the second language even though they were similar to their native language rules. Pragmatic failure occurs when a native speaker (L1) speaker perceives the
The purpose of an second language (L2) utterance as something other than the L2 speaker intended (Thomas, 1983).

**Politeness**

Another dimension of speech acts is degrees of politeness. While theorists such as Leech (1983) and Brown & Levinson (1987) see indirect speech as a form of politeness aimed at some form of cooperative interaction, Pinker (1997) maintains that social interaction and indirect speech involves conflict as well as cooperation. Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that it is in the mutual interest of interlocutors to save each other’s face and the more face threatening an act is, the more indirect the strategy chosen by the speaker will be (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Lee & Pinker (2010), on the other hand, propose the theory of the ‘strategic speaker’ who, when he or she is uncertain of whether the hearer is cooperative or antagonistic, seeks plausible deniability by using indirect speech to identify and negotiate “what kind of cooperation should be in effect between them” (Lee & Pinker, 2010:785).

**Refusals**

Refusals often involve complex negotiations and because of the risk of offending the interlocutor they often include indirect speech strategies (Beebe et al., 1990). As Chen (1996) points out, if refusals are complex for NS, they are even more challenging in NS-NNS or NNS-NNS communication. In addition to the risk of causing offence and the risk of misunderstandings caused by the use of indirect speech strategies, refusals can reflect cultural values and inappropriate refusals may not only threaten the interpersonal relations of the speakers (Kwon, 2004) but could lead to communication or pragmatic failure (Salazar Campillo et al., 2009).
Intercultural

Politeness can be influenced by partner interaction and what is considered polite behaviour may vary across speech communities (Salazar Campillo et al., 2009) and cultures (House and Kasper, 1981). House (2006) notes that indirect formulas can also be rated as less polite and Lee & Pinker (2010) observe that indirect speech can be rated not only as less polite but as rude (Lee & Pinker, 2010). Moreover, as speech acts are culturally and linguistically sensitive NNSs may perceive the politeness of a speech act realisation differently from NSs (Kasper & Dahl, 1991).

English as a business lingua franca is important in successful business communication. However, as Louhiala-Salminen (2009:311) notes there has not been much research into “how and why it matters” and I hope this study contributes some insight into how NNSs and NSs interact in an international business environment.

Method

The Discourse Completion Test (DCT) and classification system developed by Beebe et al., (1990) is one of the most influential and widely used tests in the analysis of directness and indirectness and was therefore an attractive instrument for use in this study. The DCT consists of 12 situations with a short dialogue containing a blank in which only a refusal can be made. One DCT was labelled for responses to NSs (DCT 1) and a second labelled for responses to NNSs (DCT 2). In order to record experiences and insights that might help interpret the data, a qualitative open-ended questionnaire asked participants if they thought differences in use of directness and indirectness caused communication problem or pragmatic failure in the workplace. Answers were collated into 25 categories.
Firstly, many NNSs (74%) and some NSs (28%) reported that they would not differentiate between NS and NNS recipients and would respond the same to both groups. These DCTs were removed from the study allowing the research to focus on DCTs where different responses were recorded.

Secondly, the DCTs where different responses were recorded were analysed in terms of the frequency of use of direct compared to indirect strategies. A Chi-square test was used to evaluate how likely it was that any observed difference between the sets arose by chance.

Thirdly, the frequency and type of direct and indirect semantic formulas used was analysed. The five most frequent semantic formulas used are discussed.

For the questionnaire, 25 topic categories emerged and the percentage of participants mentioning the topic category was presented in table form allowing the researcher to look for patterns of similarity and difference.

**Participants**

25 NSs from the UK (52%), USA (36%), Ireland (8%) and South Africa (4%) and 31 NNSs participants were involved in the study. The NNSs were language students working in an international business environment. 74% were German with one participant from each of the following nationalities: Hungarian, Romanian, Polish, Japanese, Philippino, Belgian, Mexican and Russian.

Participants were a mixture of men and women with NSs 44% men and 56% women and NNSs 45% men and 55% women. The age range was between 25 and 45. All students were upper
intermediate level, that is, they can understand complex concrete and abstract topics and can interact with fluency and spontaneity.

This was a convenience sample although with its range of nationalities, native languages, business contexts and industries it could be argued that it was fairly representative of the target population (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010).

**Findings and Interpretations**

The findings indicated that while there are similarities in the use of directness and indirectness in speech acts of refusals there are also significant differences although these differences do not appear likely to cause pragmatic failure for this group.

While NSs modify their use of directness and indirectness strategies to accommodate NNSs, many NNSs do not modify their responses. Of the participants who did modify their strategies, there were marked differences particularly in the reluctance of NNSs to use direct strategies with NSs. There were also differences in the type of semantic formulas used.

There were no reports of different usage of direct and indirect strategies leading to pragmatic failure. On the contrary, according to interview responses, both NSs and NNSs seem to have a high degree of pragmatic awareness about communication, other languages and cultural norms in an international business environment and a high tolerance of pragmatic errors. Interview responses suggest that participants have developed a range of strategies such as simplifying language, checking and clarifying, and checking body language to avoid misunderstandings in indirect communication. All participants regarded inappropriate directness from NNSs as a
language and/or cultural difference rather than a lack of politeness. Consequently, pragmatic failure for these groups in this environment is unlikely (Nelson et al., 2002:184).

Theme 1. Same Response to NS and NNS

72% of NSs modified their use of directness/indirectness strategies according to if they were speaking to NS or NNS while only 26% NNSs modified their responses (see Graph 1). There are a number of possible reasons:

1. Lack of or perceived lack of proficiency may have been a contributing factor explaining why NNSs did not modify responses (Sweeney & Hua, 2010).

2. NSs may have had a higher level of pragmatic awareness than NNSs which led NSs to modify their responses or NNSs may have chosen not to modify their responses because using the same strategies was seen as appropriate for the social and cultural context.

3. The high percentage of NNSs responding the same may also be because other factors such as social and institutional roles, personality, nationality and culture are of more concern in an international business environment than NS/NNS differences.

Theme 2. Direct or Indirect Strategies?

Of the 72% NSs and 26% NNSs who changed responses depending on if they were speaking to a NS or NNS, NSs used 37% direct strategies and 59% indirect strategies. NNSs used 29% direct strategies and 40% indirect strategies (see Graph 1).

Graph 1: Percentage of Direct and Indirect Strategies used by NSs and NNSs
Because native English speakers usually opt for indirect strategies (Blum-Kulka and House, 1989) one might expect that English NSs would show a general preference for indirect strategies. Because German speakers generally prefer direct speech (House, 2006) and 73% of NNSs were German native speakers with the other participants living and working in Germany and therefore likely to have adopted German preferences, one might expect that NNSs would prefer directness but this was not the case.

It is possible that participants such as Japanese and Mexican favoured indirect responses in their L1 which would modify the results or that the preference for indirect strategies is not from L1 transfer but from other sources such as interaction with a person of higher or lower status (Beebe et al., 1990; Kwon, 2004).

Pearson’s Chi-square Test was used to evaluate how likely it is that any observed difference between the sets arose by chance. Both NSs and NNSs were significantly more direct with NNSs and both NSs and NNSs prefer indirect strategies in interaction with NSs.
Use of Indirect Strategies

Indirect strategies were used in 27% of NS–NS interaction, 25% NNS-NS interaction, 14% of NS-NNS and in 36% NNS-NNS. The choice of indirect strategies is possibly influenced by NS English preference for indirectness (Félix-Brasdefer, 2003), and NNS recognition that English NSs favour indirectness. The marked NNS preference for indirectness in NNS-NS (25%) interactions suggests there might be a stereotype regarding English NS indirectness that may be at odds with the need for clarity and directness in an international business environment (Sweeney & Hua, 2010).

Use of Direct Strategies

Direct strategies were used in half of NS-NNS interaction, 69% of NNS-NNS interaction but only 12% in NS-NS and 2% NNS-NS interaction. There are a number of possible reasons for the preference for direct strategies in communication with NNSs by both NSs and other NNSs.

1. NSs and NNSs believe there are fewer opportunities for misunderstandings in direct communication (Sweeney & Hua 2010).

2. Clarity and effectiveness are more important than hurting the interlocutor’s feelings (Kitao, 1996) and directness and clarity is valued over politeness in a business context (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2006).

3. NSs and NNSs do not necessarily see directness as impolite in this context. German speakers may even see direct communication as the more polite style (House, 2006).
**Theme 3. Differences by Semantic Formulas**

Findings show that NSs said “No” more frequently (65%) to NNSs than to other NSs (17%). NSs also expressed “Negative Willingness” more often to NNSs (43%) than to NSs (10%) although it is important to note that 47% said they would treat both NSs and NNSs the same (see Graph 2).

**Graph 2: Frequency of Semantic Formulas in Direct Refusals**

![Graph 2](image)

**Indirect Semantic Formulas**

The five most frequent semantic formulas used were Regret, Explanations, Principle, Alternatives and Jokes. 73% NSs used excuses, reasons and explanations compared to 48% NNSs regardless of the recipient. These findings are supported by other studies (Allami and Naeimi, 2011; Nelson et al., 2002; Kwon, 2004).
The semantic formula of principle was used almost twice as often by NSs (67%) compared to NNSs (33%). Interestingly, NSs used statements of principle to other NSs in 28% of cases but in only 5% of NS to NNS interaction.

NSs offered an alternative in 46% of responses to other NSs but in only 3% to NNSs. NNSs offered alternatives in 69% of responses to NSs and NNSs alike with 33% to NNSs only and 0% to NSs. Most NSs and NNSs offered statements of alternatives the same to NSs and NNSs which is in contrast to research findings by Kasper (1997) who noted that NSs offered alternatives which NNSs never did. Nguyen (2006) also noted that Americans used roughly three times more statements of alternatives than Vietnamese NNSs.

Interestingly, only 14% NSs used the same jokes compared to 34% NNSs. 72% NSs used jokes in NS-NS interaction. 66% NNSs made jokes in NNS-NNS interaction but no one made a joke to a NS. Although jokes can be used to express indirectness (Tsuda, 1993), positive politeness and as a strategy to reduce the threat in a face-threatening act (Brown and Levinson, 1987) British humour notoriously mystifies NNSs (Chiaro, 2006). The fact that NNSs makes jokes to other NNSs but not to NSs suggests that this may be perceived to be the case. That only 14% NSs used the same jokes regardless of the recipient suggests that NSs are also aware that their jokes may not be transferable.

Insights from the Qualitative Interview

25 common themes were identified from the qualitative data generated by the interview. Participants were aware of many factors that could cause misunderstandings, in particular, the inappropriate use of directness and indirectness and the role of cultural norms in business
communication. However, the observed differences do not appear to cause pragmatic failure for this group.

Firstly, 50% NSs reported that indirectness can cause confusion and 38% NSs noted that indirectness leaves the underlying meaning unclear compared to only 15% NNSs and 4% NNSs respectively, that is, a surprisingly low number of NNSs report that indirectness can cause confusion or lack of clarity in meaning. NNSs may be adept at checking, clarifying and confirming content and therefore feel that there is a low risk of confusion or it may be that NNSs take statements at face value and do not recognize that there might be an illocutionary or underlying meaning (Austin 1962).

Differing attitudes to politeness are also a potential cause of pragmatic failure. Many NSs (63%) and NNSs (55%) recognize that directness can be seen as rude, offensive or as an attack. Interestingly, more NNSs (63%) than NSs (38%) report that indirectness is more polite. Given the importance of notions of face in politeness theory, face saving is mentioned by only a few NNSs.

There was a high level of awareness of cultural differences in international business communication with 81% NSs and 63% NNSs noting that culture was an important factor. Interestingly, 41% NNSs mentioning personality as important factor compared to none of the NSs.

Participants reported using a number of strategies to avoid miscommunication. Almost one third of NSs and NNSs report that they adjust their speech and more than half say they make allowances for others. Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) interactions are known to
include a good deal of checking and re-checking (Bhatia, 1993) and the fact that no one reported misunderstandings as leading to pragmatic failure suggests both NSs and NNSs have strategies such as clarifying, asking for clarification and adapting levels of directness and indirectness to ensure communication success.

**Conclusion**

The present study aimed to contribute to the existing findings on cross linguistic speech act research in an international business environment in Germany because, in an increasing globalised world, international business teams consisting of NSs and NNSs are increasingly having to do business using English as a business *lingua franca*.

Nearly three quarters of NSs modified their responses depending on the recipient compared to only quarter of NNSs. While there were many similarities in the choice of strategies between the two groups, both NSs and NNSs were strikingly more direct with NNSs. Many researchers (Koike, 1995; Thomas, 1983; Wolfson, 1981, 1989) have shown that NSs are more forgiving of second language user’s phonological, syntactic and lexical errors than pragmatic errors. The findings of this study suggest that both NSs and NNSs are remarkably forgiving of both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic errors and that differences in the use of direct and indirect strategies in speech acts of refusal are unlikely to lead to pragmatic failure for this group.

These findings are important because of their implications for teaching, business communication training and future research.
Firstly, there is a need for teaching material and teaching methods in the field of sociocultural competence. Many researchers have shown that teaching pragmatics and the sociocultural variables involved in refusals is one way to reduce instances of pragmatic failure (e.g., Kasper & Rose, 2002; Allami & Naeini, 2011; Salazar Campillo et al., 2009). NSs should be included in training in Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) (Charles & Marschan-Piekkari, 2002) as NSs also both cause and suffer from communication problems. Charles (2002) suggests that corporate training schemes should not focus on any one language but need to investigate the “broad spectrum of international communication” (Charles, 2002:9).

In terms of future research, there is a need for quantitative interview data that might explain the reasons for NNS and NS choice of refusal strategy (Nelson et al., 2002) and might bring insight into why NNSs use direct strategies with each other but rarely with NSs. Further investigation into NNS and NS perceptions of notions of face, politeness, and the relationship between politeness and indirectness in a multilingual, multicultural business context would also be of interest.

The findings of this study also suggest that further investigation is required into the strategies NS and NNS use to avoid pragmatic failure in an international business context in line with results from other studies (e.g., Vuorela, 2005; Charles, 1996; Charles & Charles, 1999; Poncini, 2004; Nikko, 2007).

While effort was made to select a convenience sample, to use appropriate methodology and valid and reliable instruments and while some clear patterns emerged from the data, due to the small scale of the study (only fifty six participants) results cannot be generalised to other business
environments or other NS and NNS groups and additional research is needed to draw any valid conclusions.

**References**


