

SPEECH ACT OF REFUSAL IN ENGLISH AND RUSSIAN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

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Abstract

Nowadays professors and students face situations when they are to refuse or except refusals. The present paper deals with the linguistic phenomenon of refusal speech act in English and Russian languages and investigates it from the perspective of English as a second language teaching (ESL). ESL teaching should include not only linguistic peculiarities but also pragmatic aspects where the efficient refusal strategies can help to regulate the interpersonal relationships between professor and student in order to avoid any kind of communicative failures. The study focuses on similarities and differences between the ways of refusing requests in academic contexts in English and Russian cultures. This research was conducted with the implementation of Speech Act Theory (Searle 1969), 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 study explores the question of controlling the distance between professors and students using the refusal strategies. The paper suggests practical recommendations for the appropriate behavior and speech patterns. The following methods as participant observation, observation, context analysis, communicative and discourse analysis were implemented in this article. The results of the study can be applied in second language teaching for students of secondary and high schools, as far as in theory and practice of translation.

Keywords: refuse, request, academic, discourse, Russian, English.

1. INTRODUCTION

Taking into account a great variation among issues that are involved in discourse analysis, it is worth mentioning one subfield of linguistics that has received a lot of attention over the past few years, that is pragmatics. According to Yule (1996), pragmatics is “the study of intended speaker meaning” [16, 127]. So we should understand pragmatics as “the study of how speakers use and understand speech acts” [12]. It is the indisputable fact that pragmatics plays a really significant role in the production and perception of the language. Therefore, interlocutors resort to diverse strategies during their

communication in order to express their intentions. These strategies cannot be left unattended, otherwise, their illiterate use may give rise to misunderstanding or even to communication failures. That is why pragmatic competence represents one of the main factors in the process of communication. Accordingly, researching this matter is very essential especially for representatives of other cultures or, we should better say, for second language learners because they have a lack of knowledge of the target language and as a result, they would fall under the influence by their native language and transfer their pragmatic knowledge of their native language to the target language. Thus, how people produce and perceive the language in different cultures becomes an important issue in our study.

In addition, one of the main components of communicative competence it is precisely the ability of creating and perception of any speech act in the target language. However, we should remember that every individual has its own communication style. At this point, we face with a new problem: how could we examine these different communication styles to facilitate a second language learning for non-native speakers? According to Nelson at al. (2002) there is a method that can help us to simplify the given task. It is using "small and comparable units of discourse" where speech acts are used for this purpose" (p.42). There are a lot of speech acts such as suggestions, apologies, complaints, requests and others, but in the present study we decided to focus on the *speech act of refusal* [9; 10].

Refusal speech act represents one of the most complex issues in the process of communication, because any speaker should have a knowledge of such phenomena as face-saving. Moreover, people just can't avoid to perform the act of refusal.

The speech act of refusal is the utterance by which a speaker denies to engage in an action proposed by the interlocutor" [3]. In other words, this means that by negating to do an action the speaker refuses to do something. The most important here is not to threaten the listener's face, that is why the refusal should be done correctly. As we have mentioned earlier refusal speech act differs depending on culture and communicative situation. Consequently, there has been paid a considerable attention to the issues related to speech acts over recent years.

There is one more meaningful side of the refusal speech act. It should have been taken into account that even if someone possesses grammar competence it does not mean that he/she is pragmatically competent too, because a person can make a really good-structured phrase, but the problem would be if this phrase is totally coincide with its native equivalent and he/she is likely to make a communicative failure by reproducing the same utterances but only with correct grammar. In English a direct refusal is a wrong use of refusal speech act. This is how you may threaten the speaker's face. As a result it is very important to protect a face while communicating. There is a number of significant factors that can influence on the choice of the strategy in communication, such as gender, age, level of education, power and social distance too.

There is no need to be a researcher to notice that there is a growing number of L2 learners, especially English learners. As our modern life offers so many opportunities to do fellowships in any profession in other countries, you are no doubt aware that it is required knowledge of English at a relatively high level. Thus, the English and Russian academic discourse becomes an important area to investigate. While studying at University we are faced with such problem when a student or a professor should refuse any kind of request depending on situation, but in English and Russian cultures there are so many differences in intercultural communication so we should interpret correctly the refusal or to produce the refusal corresponding to the norms of the target language so that not to offend the professor or not to be offended. That is why we decided to analyze academic discourse to point out the main problems in misunderstanding between professor and student while refusing one to another and to classify the main features in refusal in Russian and English culture in order to help L2 learners not to receive a culture shock and to acquire some useful skills.

Accordingly, we have tried to investigate the type of strategies used by the English and Russian L2 learners to examine the main usage of the strategies, how they are dependent on situation and finally to see the differences in the type of strategies used by students and professors in high school (that is both, MA and BA levels) in academic discourse.

1.1 The purpose of the study

The main purpose of the present study is to point out the main differences between English and Russian refusal strategies used by interlocutors in the professor-student pattern in academic discourse in order to help second language learners

- to avoid threatening face,
- to develop their communication skills in academic discourse,
- to know how to use appropriate strategy to achieve the understanding and not to offend anybody.

1.2 Research questions

In addition to the mentioned aim, the present research puts the following questions:

1. What are the refusal strategies used by English and Russian speakers in Academic discourse?
2. What are the similarities and differences between them?
3. On what depends the choice of any refusal strategy?

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The analysis of literature showed that the sufficient number of researchers have already made discourse pragmatic studies. However, such phenomenon like speech act has been introduced in discourse studies by theorists not so long ago. That is why in recent decades the majority of research investigations have been on types of speech acts. For example, Bella (2010) reported “the literature on refusals is quite extensive and spreads from cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics to education and psychology” [3, 2]. He also added “most of the relevant studies focus on refusal strategies, politeness, face and facework, and the learning of refusals by second language learners” [3, 2].

It's worth mentioning that most of the theoretical studies in pragmatics especially in speech acts began with the work of Austin and Searle [1; 13].

The Speech Act Theory was elaborated by L. Austin in which he identified three features of speech acts:

- locutionary (literal meaning of an utterance),
- illocutionary (intended meaning of an utterance),
- perlocutionary (the actual effect after saying any utterance).

In fact, J. Searle further developed the speech act theory; especially he put forward the famous indirect speech act theory. Therefore the study revealed that theorists divided speech acts into direct and indirect [13, p. 64-65].

According to Cutting (2002) generally the meaning that we implicate in the utterance is actually not in the words themselves but in what we imply [4]. So Searle said that “there is a direct relationship between the form and the function” [13, p.19]. As Cutting (2002) stated we can analyze speech acts on three different levels:

Level I – words (locution, “what is said”)

Level II – function of the words (illocutionary force, “what is done in uttering the words”)

Level III – result of the words (perlocutionary effect, “what is done by uttering the words”)

Refusals are divided into two main classifications: direct and indirect. However, interlocutors often resort to other linguistic resources while refusing, e.g. a reaction of solidarity before or after refusing (adjunct).

We also took into account that the choice of any refusal strategy depends on Social distance and Power distance. They are inseparable: the more individualist culture is, the more lower Power distance index it has. In contrast, if the culture is more collectivist it has a higher Power distance index. Therefore, according to Larina (2008) English and Russian cultures maintain the following differences: the scale of social distance (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 [6, 33].

The significance of ‘distance’ depends on culture and its role varies depending on how differently English and Russian understand this concept. As Wierzbicka (1985) stated, the English culture distance is a positive value [14]. They associate it with independence and respect for personal autonomy. The Russian perception of ‘distance’ is entirely different. In Russian mentality ‘distant’ is equal to ‘indifferent’. Therefore 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.

Taking into account that the concept ‘politeness’ is understood differently, the way somebody is

expressing can sound polite in one culture and inappropriate or even rude in another. Thus especially in the comparative study of refusal speech act in English and Russian culture, we should take into account these differences and understanding of 'tact' and 'politeness'.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The data studied in this article was obtained via the use of a discourse completion test (DCT). The discourse completion questionnaire was filled in by 15 English and 15 Russian working or studying in high school. This study was conducted to elicit refusals in writing. There were given different situations and then we have asked participants to complete the dialogue as they would answer in real life but with only negative answers, thus we have got the different refusal patterns. The specific of this research is that the refusal patterns are studied only in academic discourse. There are 8 situations from academic discourse in total in which participants should answer. 15 people who were offering (situations 1—3), making requests (situations 4—6), and inviting (7-8) in different occasions also we take into account the vertical and horizontal distances in different countries and that's why we have made questions for both professors and students.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

The conducted analysis has shown both some similarities and differences in the way the English and Russians make a refusal in academic discourse. It was revealed that Russian and English speakers may say No in refusal but usually they would add an explanation or an apology, express regret followed by gratitude. The most typical Russian refusal consists of 2—3 moves while English speakers can go through 3—4 and sometimes even 5—6 moves.

Let's study the refusals to the offer; as we can notice from the below examples in both Russian and English language gratitude and explanation are often used, the difference is in the number of moves (in English usually there are 3 - 4 moves) and expression, as in English we can find the exclamation examples, also English speakers likely use the indirect refusal not to offend the communicator.

(1) **Situation 1** (refusal to the offer to write an article): *Russian: Нет, спасибо, но у меня много дел.* (No, thank you, I am busy). *English: Thank you, but unfortunately I am not sure that I have enough time for it now.* Here we can see as Russian refusal consists of 3 moves: Refusal + gratitude and explanation and English answer consist of 3 moves also but the structure is following: gratitude + indirect refusal + explanation.

(2) **Situation 2** (refusal to the offer to take part in the school concert): *Russian: Спасибо, но я не могу.* (Thank you but I cannot). *English: That is a kind offer, thank you, but I do not think I am able to manage it now.* In this example Russian refusal consists of 2 moves gratitude + explanation and English refusal has 4 moves: exclamation + gratitude + indirect refusal + explanation

(3) **Situation 3** (refusal to the offer to help with heavy bags): *Russian: Нет, спасибо.* (No, thank you) *English: oh, thank you a lot, but I am fine.* Here we again can find the typical Russian answer: 2 moves refusal + gratitude but in English answer there are 3 moves with exclamation + gratitude + explanation.

If we start examine the refusals to the request we will find the following picture: Russian speakers feel free to refuse especially if the request from the person who is lower in social status (example situation 6), otherwise the English are very polite in their refusals in spite of the social status.

(4) **Situation 4** (refusal to the request to explain the rules one more time after the lesson) *Russian: прошу прощения, но я не могу.* (I am sorry but I can't) Apology + explanation; *English: I am sorry but I do not think that I have time for it now, the next time I would be happy to do that!* Apology + indirect refusal + alternative

(5) **Situation 5** (refusal to the request to clean the classroom): *Russian: Прошу прощения, но мне нужно идти.* (Sorry, I have to go) Apology + explanation; *English: I am sorry but I am afraid that I need to go.* Apology + indirect refusal + explanation

(6) **Situation 6** (refusal to the request to postpone the exam): *Russian: Это невозможно.* (It is impossible) Only negative ability; *English: Unfortunately I am not sure that we can do that as I have to fill your credits by today's evening.* Regret + indirect refusal + explanation.

Further we have two situations of invitation which are different in formality and addresser, so we can see the difference in refusals. English speaker prefers indirect refusal to direct ones in contrast with Russian.

(7) **Situation 7** (refusal to go to the conference) *Russian: извините, но я не могу, у меня нет времени. (Sorry, I cannot, I don't have enough time)* Apology + refusal + explanation; *English: I am sorry but I am not sure that I have time to prepare for this conference, let us do it the next time.* Apology + indirect refusal + alternative.

(8) **Situation 8** (refusal to go to have lunch) *Russian: Спасибо, но я не могу. (Sorry, I cannot)* Apology +refusal; *English: I am sorry but I am not sure that I have time.* Apology + indirect refusal.

(9) **Situation 9** (refusal to take drafts back) *Russian: Да ну что Вы, бросьте. У меня есть электронная версия. (Come on, forget it. I have e-version).* Direct refusal + explanation.

5. CONCLUSION

In any refusal speech act we should take into account the following pragmatic parameters: gender, age, number of interlocutors, their social status, their cultural differences and also the relations of interlocutors. Talking about speech act of refusal in English and Russian academic discourse in high schools we identify its specificities. We analyzed structural, functional and pragmatic features of discourse patterns in terms of the implementation of the intentions of the speakers; we identified that the intention of the speakers in refusal act influences the language of the refusal in these two languages. Thus, the communicants expressed their refusals to the opinion of the interlocutor; invitations; requests, offers [11].

For example, two Russian-speaking communicators take part in the dialogue: the first is an elderly, experienced professor, the second one is a student. Although the professor's social position is higher, the relations between the interlocutors are friendly (example 9). The Russian speakers mostly use direct way of refusal. As for grammatical and lexical expressing of refusal, it can be attributed to direct meanings and indirectly with a help of the following words and phrases:

a) words of evaluative semantics: Nonsense. / Да бросьте, ну что Вы.

b) expressing doubt: Are you really sure? If you don't mind I would... Не могу. Я не уверен, что смогу...

c) regrets: I am sorry, but...; I am afraid, but... Не могу, извините.

We found that to express refusal in English-speaking interlocutors use grammatical refusal: not, no; and lexical negation: sorry, but...; hardly; impossible, Russian professors and students are more likely to say: да нет, ну что Вы (come on, forget it), ни в коем случае (no way); спасибо, конечно, но (thanks, of course, but) ...; я очень признателен, но... (I am very pleased but).

It was concluded that in English academic discourse in high schools speakers often express their disagreement indirectly, they apologize (examples 5, 7, 8) and give explanations (examples 3, 5, 6, 7). The interlocutors share their opinions, give characteristics of something or someone, give details, they can offer alternative options more often, while they are extremely restrained in the negative assessment of the event or person, which is possible in Russian (situations 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7).

Pragmatic factors, such as gender, age, number of interlocutors, their social status and relationships between them play a huge role in choosing the way of refusal, formal and neutral styles, but friendly way of expressing predominates in communication between professors and students in Russian.

The choice of linguistic means that form a refusal and the organization of the text itself, which contains a refusal, is also influenced by such a factor as the nature of the event which takes place in the situation. For example, official invitations to a banquet or a formal dinner are characterized by a greater degree of formality, a more formal style both in English and Russian.

Based on the classification of J. Searle in the basis of the illocutionary goal, where he distinguishes five classes: representative, directive, commission, expressive and declaration, we conclude that the refusal speech act in various situations of communication can belong to any of the above classes [13]. We also considered the peculiarities of the expression of refusal in this paper, taking into account the specifics of English and Russian speech behavior, since national speech etiquette has its imprint on any speech behavior. According to the study, we can conclude that the distance between professor and student is more flexible and depends on the situation in English (example 3).

Thus, it was established that English-speaking interlocutors are emotionally restrained, expressing refusal indirectly, as the illocutionary force is not part of semantics, but is derived in a logical-inferential way from the literal meaning of the form given, while in Russian culture a more unambiguous expression of refusal is adopted, the Russians also usually do not give explanations. English shows refusal by means, the linguistic semantics of which corresponds to the illocutive force of the speech act. In this study, we

determined the place of disagreement in the context of communication between professors and students.

APPENDIX: Questionnaires with the most popular answers

1) The professor is offering a student to write an article.

Student's answer:

Russian: Нет, спасибо, но у меня много дел. (No, thank you, I am busy).

English: Thank you, but unfortunately I am not sure that I have enough time for it now.

2) The professor is offering a student to take part in school concert.

Student's answer:

Russian: Спасибо, но я не могу. (Thank you but I cannot).

English: That is a kind offer, thank you, but I do not think I am able to manage it now.

3) The student is offering a professor to carry the heavy bags.

Professor's answer:

Russian: Нет, спасибо. (No, thank you)

English: oh, thank you a lot, but I am fine.

4) The student requests to explain the rules one more time after the lesson.

Professor's answer:

Russian: Прошу прощения, но я не могу (I am sorry but I can't)

English: I am sorry but I do not think that I have time for it now, the next time I would be happy to do that!

5) The professor requests to clean the classroom.

Student's answer:

Russian: Прошу прощения, но мне нужно идти. (Sorry, I have to go)

English: I am sorry but I am afraid that I need to go.

6) The students request to postpone the exam.

Professor's answer:

Russian: Это невозможно. (It is impossible)

English: Unfortunately I am not sure that we can do that as I have to fill your credits by today's evening.

7) The professor invites a student to attend a conference.

Student's answer:

Russian: Извините, но я не могу, у меня нет времени. (Sorry, I cannot, I don't have enough time)

English: I am sorry but I am not sure that I have time to prepare for this conference, let us do it the next time.

8) The student invites a professor to go to have a lunch.

Professor's answer:

Russian: Спасибо, но я не могу. (Sorry, I cannot)

English: I am sorry but I am not sure that I have time. Apology + indirect refusal.

9) The professor offers a student to take drafts back, in case he/she needs it.

Student's answer:

Russian: Да ну что Вы, бросьте. У меня есть электронная версия. (Come on, forget it. I have

e-version). Direct refusal + explanation

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