

In the name of God



University of Isfahan
Faculty of Foreign Languages
English department

M.A. Thesis

**A Cross-cultural Study of Refusal Strategies between American
and Persian Speakers in Shopping Negotiations from
Conversation Analysis Perspective**

Supervisor:

Dr. Abbass Eslami Rasekh

Advisor:

Dr. Ahmad Moinzadeh

By:

Zahra Esmaeilian Dehaqani

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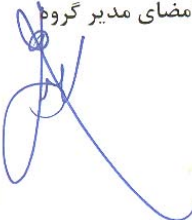


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امضاء 
- ۳- استاد داور داخل گروه دکتر سعید کتابی با مرتبه علمی استادیار
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- ۴- استاد داور خارج از گروه دکتر داریوش نژاد انصاری با مرتبه علمی استادیار
امضاء 
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Dedication

To all I like,

Especially my dear mother

Abstract

Sociolinguists often criticize speech act researchers for using invented sentences and fictional situations to illustrate their points, a practice which fails to capture the complexity and sequentiality of human interactions. Given the complexity of speech, data which are natural and real conversational speech can shed light on the dominant cultural norms of different variations of languages. This study is an attempt to bring speech acts into their conversational context, to discuss the strategies of refusing from a conversation analysis perspective and to explicate the redressive strategies involved in shopping conversations by doing a cross-cultural study between American and Persian speakers. An analysis was conducted on natural data from the shopping negotiations between customers and sellers. Both qualitative and quantitative examinations were carried out to display the differences in the realization patterns across the two cultural systems. The results showed that Persians as opposed to Americans were more considerate about their dispreferred turns as they employed more mitigating devices during shopping negotiations. To justify their dispreferred acts in shopping, Persian speakers tended to use objective reasons as opposed to Americans who mentioned subjective reasons for their refusals. Being involved in different shopping contexts made degrees of politeness variable, in the sense that Persians would use more polite speech in conversations in upper scale shops while a lower level of politeness was revealed in speech acts involving peddlers and street stands.

Keywords: speech act, refusal strategies, conversation analysis, preference organization, politeness.

Table of contents

Title	Page
List of transcription conventions.....	
Chapter One: Introduction	
1.1. Introduction	1
1.2. Objectives of the study	4
3. Research questions	5
1.4. Significance of study.....	6
1.5. Definition of key terms	7
Chapter Two: Literature Review	
2.1. An introduction to pragmatics.....	9
2.2. Pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics	10
2.3. Speech act theory	12
2.4. Conversation maxim	13
2.5. Politeness and interaction.....	14
2.5.1. Politeness strategies	17
2.6. Speech act realization of refusal	18
2.6.1. Classification of refusal strategies	19
2.6.2. Evaluative studies on production and perception of refusals.....	22
2.7. Conversation analysis.....	25
2.7.1. Turn taking.....	28
2.7.2. Sequence organization	30
2.7.3. Adjacency pairs.....	30
2.7.4. Expanding sequence.....	31
2.7.5. Insertion sequence.....	34
2.7.6. Preference structure.....	34
2.7.7. Doing a dispreferred second part	36

Title	Page
 Chapter Three: Methodology	
3.1. Participants.....	39
3.2. Instrumentation	40
3.3. Procedure.....	41
3.4. Data analysis	42
 Chapter Four: Findings	
4.1. The sequential organization of the interaction	44
4.1.1. The opening sequence of shopping conversations.....	44
4.2. The realization of speech act of refusals and politeness in shopping	57
4.2.1. The strategy of insertion sequences between adjacency pairs	58
4.2.2. The strategy of using preface words/ hesitation fillers	71
4.3. Accountability of refusals in shopping	80
4.4. The effect of situational variability on directness of refusals and degree of politeness	84
4.5. The closing sequence of shopping conversations	91
 Chapter Five: Summary and Conclusion	
5.1. Summary and conclusion	98
5.2. Implications of the study.....	100
5.3. Limitations of the study	101
5.4. Suggestions for further research.....	102
References	
Appendix	

List of figures

Title	Page
Figure 2.1. Types of pre-sequences.....	32
Figure 2.2. Preferred and dispreferred second turns	35
Figure 2.3. How to a dispreferred second?	37
Figure 4.2. Percentage of respondents` initiation of opening conversation by 'please' and similar tokens	45
Figure 4.3. Politeness strategies used by Persian shoppers to mitigate the imposition of demanding and ordering	53
Figure 4.4. Mitigating devices used by Persian and American shoppers	84
Figure 4.5. Percentage of kinds of reasons used by American and Persian shoppers.....	83
Figure 4.6. Refusals preferred by Persian shoppers in 3 different situations	84
Figure 4.7. Frequency distribution of direct refusals in 3 different situations	86
Figure 4.8. frequency distribution of excuses expressed by shoppers in 3 different situations	87
Figure 4.9. Percentage of respondents` differentiation in refusing peddlers ...	88
Figure 4.10. Percentage of respondents` differentiation in refusal strategies regarding gender.....	90
Figure 4.11.Types of closings	92
Figure 4.12. Frequency distribution of types of closings.....	93
Figure 4.13. Closing sequences in Persian.....	97

List of Tables

Title	Page
Table 4.1. The frequency and percentage of the results of descriptive questionnaire	43

Keys to the conversation transcriptions (Jefferson, 2004)

// double oblique indicates the point where the current speaker has been interrupted by the next speaker

[a left square bracket indicates the point of overlap

] a right square bracket indicates the point where the overlap or simultaneous talk ends

[[]] double square brackets are used when a sequence of overlap talk is found

= equal symbol has two functions, it may indicate latching between two speakers, or it can indicate the current speaker continues his/her talk in the following line.

(.) a dot in parentheses indicates a brief interval of no talk of less than two tenths of a second

(0.0) numbers in parentheses indicate the time of 'no talk' elapsed in tenths of seconds

----- Underlining indicates an emphasis expressed by placing stress

::: Colons indicate elongation of the prior sound

↑ ↓ arrows indicate shift to higher or lower pitch

WORD letters in upper case indicate loud voice relative to the general tone of voice

°word° degree signs, at the beginning and end of an expression indicates low voice or whisper

XXX unintelligible talk that transcriber was not able to capture

(()) Double parentheses contain descriptions made by the transcriber

-- a dash indicates a cut-off, normally following a false start

@@@ Laughter

hh audible outbreath

.hh audible inbreath

T000 number of turns at talk

<< >> English translation

Abbreviations:

C: Customer

S: Salesclerk/seller

A: Attendant

SPP: Second pair part

FPP: First pair part

[Per 1] Persian language

[Eng 1] English language

CA Conversation analysis

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1. Introduction

In today's increasingly connected world, it is becoming more important than ever that language learner attain true communicative competence. Communicative competence, according to Ellis (1994), 'entails both linguistic knowledge of grammatical rules and pragmatic competence: knowledge of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behavior in a particular situation' (p. 696). It is necessary to produce and perceive the language that is appropriate to the situations in which one is functioning, because failure to do so may cause users to miss the keys that are being communicated or to have their messages misunderstood. Worse yet is the possibility of a serious communication breakdown and the labeling of language users as people who are insensitive, rude, or inept.

Johnston (2008) states that 'knowing a language means not just knowing its grammar and vocabulary but also knowing how to structure paragraphs and participate in conversations the way native speakers of the language do. It means understanding which sentence types can accomplish which purposes in social

interaction: what might work as an apology, for example, or how to decline an invitation' (p. 7). Most ESL instructors can report instances where students participate in grammatical interchanges with native speakers in which there is a miscommunication due to pragmatic failure. The interchange below illustrates such a case:

A: How about another piece of cake?

B: Oh no::, I couldn't, thank you.

A: Come on, just a little piece?

B: Everything was so tasty, I couldn't eat another bite.

While this may appear to be an acceptable conversation to an American audience, perhaps regarding a guest being offered seconds at dessert, it could very well not be satisfying for B. While it is traditional for a member of B's culture to politely decline such an offer twice before accepting the third offer, A, being from the United States does not realize that this is the case. B's involvement in the communication is grammatical but is a pragmatic failure and, hence, he goes away a bit confused and frustrated. Identifying oneself on the phone by saying 'I am Mohammad', instead of 'this is Mohammad' is an example of pragmalinguistic error in which the language used to accomplish this particular speech act is inappropriate. A dinner guest who inquires 'how much did your house cost?' has committed a sociopragmatic error by asking a question inappropriate to the US social context.

Based on Crystal (1985), pragmatics is 'the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication'(p.240). Speech acts are a firmly established topic in pragmatics. As such, the proper use of speech acts has been contended to play a vital role in this regard. Performing speech acts involves both socio-cultural and socio-linguistic knowledge. Socio-cultural knowledge determines when to perform a speech act and which one is appropriate in a given situation and sociolinguistic knowledge determines the

actual linguistic realization of each speech act (Cohen, 1996). To perform the speech acts properly, the challenges faced come not only from the linguistics differences, but also the differences between cultures. The study of speech acts is necessary to the understanding of international communication styles and the differences in this regard. Communicative acts include not only the appropriate use of speech acts but also participation in conversations, and maintaining interaction in complex speech events.

A conversation can be viewed as a series of speech acts. Hence, there is a dispute over the question that speech acts cannot profitably be studied in isolation from the conversations in which they occur, since the meaning of a word is understood in terms of the contribution it makes to an entire sentence or discourse. Researchers of language and social interaction often criticize speech act pragmatists for using invented sentences and fictional situations to illustrate their points, a practice which fails to capture the complexity and sequentiality of human interactions (Schegloff, 1988). This is not to say that speech acts can only be performed in the setting of a conversation; it might reasonably be held that a speech act's natural occurrence is in conversation. In that spirit, while we may be able to remove it from its environment and scrutinize it in isolated captivity, doing so may leave us blind to some of its features.

Conversation analysis (CA) deals with how communicative acts interact with each other in real communications. It is concerned with describing the methods by which people of a culture engage in social interaction to reveal the organized patterns of actions under the assumption that interaction is structurally and sequentially organized. CA holds that talk is an orderly affair. It approaches talk and actions in interaction as sequentially organized and ordered. 'Sequence organization' has been a central concern; the ways in which turns-at-talk are ordered and combined to make actions take place in conversation, such as requests, offers, and complaints. The relationships between turns and actions in

interaction are considered the key resource for participants to manage successfully in a conversation. Ultimately, the sequential linkages between turns at talk are based on adjacency and adjacency pairs. Adjacency pairs together with their preference organization, provide the basis for sequence-organization in conversation. They are the most basic sequence of conversations, by reference to which parties to interaction coordinate and organize actions (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973). The minimal sequence is composed of a first pair part (FPP) and a second pair part (SPP), hence greeting fits after greeting, answers after questions, acceptance and refusal after requests/offers.

However, adjacency pairs are not simply content-less noises in sequence. They represent social actions, and not all social actions are equal when they occur as second parts of some pairs. Basically, a first part that contains a request or an offer is typically made in the expectation that the second part will be acceptance. An acceptance is structurally more likely than a refusal. This structural likelihood is called preference. Preference is an observed pattern in talk and not a personal wish. The term is used to indicate a socially determined structural pattern and does not refer to any individual's mental or emotional desire. Preference structure divides second parts into preferred and dispreferred social acts. The preferred is the structurally expected next act and the dispreferred is the structurally unexpected act (sacks, 1987).

Altogether, this study is an attempt to bring speech acts into their conversational context, on the basis of the premise that a speaker's intention may be conveyed by sequences of acts, because talk is seen as organized and orderly. It is concerned with the sequential organization of shopping conversations and the sequence- organizational features of refusal act. This study demonstrates the usefulness of CA as a method for analyzing talk between customers and attendants as it enhances understanding of the devices that are habitually or unthinkingly used in everyday shopping and of how shoppers and sellers use these devices in the course of performing their work. This is achieved through exploring three of the basic analytical building blocks traditionally used in CA: 1

Turn taking within the conversation —how they are structured and mannered by participants, 2. Exploring specific sequences within conversation through exploiting a conversational rule known as adjacency pairs e.g., opening/closing sequences, 3. The effect of preference organization on the realization of speech acts, specifically the act of refusal in naturally occurring interactions. The speech act of refusing is selected as the unit of comparison, because refusing is generally considered to be a dispreferred second part, and from a structural viewpoint, dispreferred seconds exhibit the following features (Pomerantz, 1984; Sacks, 1987): a) *delays* in the form of pauses before their production and prefacing, and displacement over a number of turns via insertion sequences; b) *prefaces* by means of markers of dispreferred acts (*uh, well*); token acceptance before refusing, appreciations, apologies, qualifiers or hedges (*I don't know, but...*), and various forms of hesitation devices; c) *accounts* (i.e., explanations for why the dispreferred act is performed), and d) *downtoners* (dispreferred acts are accomplished in an indirect and mitigated form).

1.2. Objectives of the Study

The objective of the study is twofold: first, to investigate the sequences involved in the opening and closing of shopping conversations, how turns are structured and mannered by participants and the ways in which turns are organized into conversation as sequences; Second, to explore individual's ability to negotiate a refusal act by examining the dispreferred structure of refusal act in a sample of naturally occurring interactions to see how particular communicative acts unfold within a conversational sequence. The act of refusal is investigated within the framework of conversation analysis and politeness theory. The transcriptions of conversations are examined in order to ascertain how the performance of act of refusal is accomplished through exploiting the politeness strategies deployed by the shoppers. The devices used by the shoppers to mitigate the unpleasant and uncomfortable consequences of a refusal act are verified in detail as well.

1.3. Research questions

This study demonstrates the usefulness of CA as a method for analyzing talk between customers and attendants in the setting of shopping. The study is intended to address the following research questions:

1. What sequences are involved in opening and closing shopping conversations comparing American and Persian speakers?
2. What differences can be discovered between Persian and American speakers in choosing refusal strategies in shopping exchanges?
3. What politeness strategies are used by Persian and American shoppers in order to mitigate the consequences of the speech act of refusal?
4. Does situational variety affect the directness level of refusals which is considered a politeness indicator?

1.4. Significance of the Study

The inter-cultural study of speech acts is necessary to the understanding of international communication strategies and socio-cultural differences as well. The idea of studying speech acts from a conversation analytic (CA) perspective took off seriously during the last two decades of the 20th century (Li Wei, 2002). Hence, this study argues for a conversation analytic approach to the study of speech acts, starting with the premise that spoken conversations can provide valuable insights into the way speakers do things through talk. This study aims at studying the effect of preference organization on the realization of speech act of refusal in naturally occurring shopping interactions. The dispreferred structure of refusal act is analyzed in a sample of naturally occurring interactions. In fact, the main thrust of this paper is devoted to the examination and illustration of these neglected aspects of talk. Furthermore, to our knowledge, studies conducted on refusal strategies have been limited to interpersonal communications in friendly activities and academic contexts. Expectably, refusal strategies employed in everyday shopping might be different; they are concerned about bargaining in addition to the public face.

The findings of this study are useful in teaching conversation analysis, involving such issues as: opening and closing sequences of conversations, turn-taking, adjacency pairs; remarking that speech acts are to be taught in terms of adjacency pairs and their preference organization. They can teach the politeness strategies and mitigating devices used during refusal negotiations in different shopping situations from a CA perspective. The study on speech acts from CA perspective will reveal a picture of how people really interact in real life situations. When students learn to analyze real conversations for themselves, they become aware of how language is used.