

A Comparative Study of Chinese and English Refusal Language Strategies

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Abstract: Using 80 short video examples about refusal language strategies on Douyin short videos as a corpus, this study explores the commonality and individuality, as well as the contradictory relationship between Chinese and British countries in the use of refusal language strategies by combining manual and graphical data analyses. It is found that Chinese people use more indirect ways of using refusal speech acts, and British and American countries use more direct ways of using refusal speech acts. In addition to this, both Chinese and British countries use non-verbal behavior to reject speech as a way of protecting the positive face of the addressee and reducing the threatening behavior to the face of the other party. This study also found that the ambivalent relationship between the emergence of refusal language strategies in both China and Britain is related to their personal psychological state, social values, and personal face. The results of this study have some values for sociology as well as pragmatics, which is conducive to the maintenance of interpersonal relationships.

Keywords: Refusal language; Pragmatics; Non-verbal behavior; Verbal behavior; Face Theory

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1. Introduction

Austin^[1] put forward the theory of speech acts in his book *How to Do Things with Words* in the 1950s, and refusal language as one of the speech acts began to receive widespread attention. According to Ran^[2], it is said to be an “uncooperative” choice for the other’s request, suggestion, or invitation, and in social communication, how to express refusal and interpret the refusal meaning of the other while preserving the other’s face is the communicative competence that should be possessed by the participants. In addition, the “Face Theory” proposed by Levinson and Brown^[3] is related to a refusal strategy, which makes communication sustainable by protecting the positive face and reducing the threat to the other.

Douyin is a very popular social media platform around the world, used by 1/3 of all social media platforms, and Douyin was the first app outside of Facebook to reach the 3 billion downloads milestone. In terms of content, it is rich and interesting, having diversified music styles; psychologically, it could accurately grasp the audience’s reading habits and meet the audience’s reading needs^[4]. Its users frequently post their short videos on the platform to share and record their lives, and refusal language is a common verbal behavior as one of the

parts in Douyin. This study takes Douyin short videos as the research corpus, by analyzing the refusal strategies and characteristics in the video content, comparing and analyzing the commonality and individuality of Chinese and English refusal strategies, as well as the contradictory relationship between refusal behaviors.

2. Literature review

“Rejection” is a sensitive and common behavior, the essence of which is to threaten the positive face of the addressee, contrary to the social goal of establishing and maintaining comity. In recent years, a number of scholars have studied this issue from different perspectives and made a lot of contributions.

Rejection is accomplished through a rather limited set of direct and indirect “semantic formulas.” Specific refusal behaviors are related to the social status and power relations of the two parties to make different “semantic choices”^[5]. The United States and Taiwan region use apologetic politeness with similar frequency, with the United States adopting different idiomatic expressions and pragmatic strategies, and the Taiwan region adopting the pragmatic strategy of “stop where it should”^[6]. Ma^[7] was the first to use pragmatics theory to study the commonality and individuality of Chinese and American refusal strategies at the discourse level. Wang^[8] investigated the expression patterns and social factors of two types of refusal speech acts in English and Chinese, classifying them into central speech acts, auxiliary speech acts and modifiers. Beebe *et al.*^[9] distinguished refusal speech acts into direct rejection, indirect rejection, and auxiliary rejection speech acts. Other than the above studies, Feng^[10] explored the strategies and factors of Chinese refusal speech from rhetorical and pragmatic perspectives, whose cultural and gender differences are the main reasons for the differences in refusal speech strategies.

The above literature review shows that there are many descriptions of refusal strategies, and few studies comparing the commonality and individuality of Chinese and Western refusal strategies for specific contexts, especially non-verbal behavioral rejection. In terms of research content, most studies focus on a single refusal verbal pattern, and this study aims to illustrate the differences between Chinese and Western refusal verbal behavioral strategies in Douyin short videos; in terms of research themes, most studies discuss social status and culture as the main factors affecting refusal verbal strategies, while ignoring other factors, especially about “face theory” proposed by Levinson; in terms of research areas, most studies of refusal strategies have focused on Chinese-speaking countries, and few studies have explored the discourse structure dimension of English refusal strategies. Therefore, this study attempts to investigate the Chinese and Western refusal language behavioral strategies on the short-video software Douyin by means of specific short videos and to analyze their commonality and individuality, as well as the contradictory relationships as an effective complement to the research on the pragmatics of refusal language.

3. Research design

3.1. Research questions

- (1) What are the differences between China and the West in the refusal language of verbal behavior?
- (2) What are the differences between China and the West in the refusal language of non-verbal behavior?
- (3) What kind of contradiction of refusal strategies exists between Chinese and Western and what are the factors?

3.2. Corpus collection

As one of China’s mainstream social media short video platforms, Douyin has amassed more than 3 billion

downloads in less than four years and penetrated one-third of all social media users around the world, with 1 billion active users per month, according to Sensor Tower’s estimates. Douyin users can independently set up topic hashtags when they share a short video, and searching for hashtags will give them free access to all videos with similar topics. After typing “foreigners’ refusal strategies” and “Chinese people’s refusal strategies” into the search bar in Douyin, regardless of the time of publication, this study randomly selected 80 short videos about refusal strategies, of which 40 videos about foreigners’ refusal strategies and 40 videos about Chinese people’s refusal strategies. Considering some factors, this study did not select videos involving political topics.

3.3. Corpus analysis

The sample data of this study is small, so the method of manual analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data, with indirect refusals and direct refusals for verbal and non-verbal behaviors, i.e. (1) the percentage of Chinese and Western pragmatics strategies in indirect verbal behaviors and direct verbal behaviors respectively; (2) the percentage of Chinese and Western pragmatics strategies in indirect non-verbal behaviors and direct non-verbal behaviors respectively. We collated the 80 short videos into a document and analyzed the video contents one by one to summarize the relevant situations of using refusal strategies between China and the West. After counting the data and then importing the pie chart, the data based on Excel input will be able to visually display the macro-situation, which is convenient to directly analyze the proportional relationship. The data results are shown in **Figures 1 to 4**.

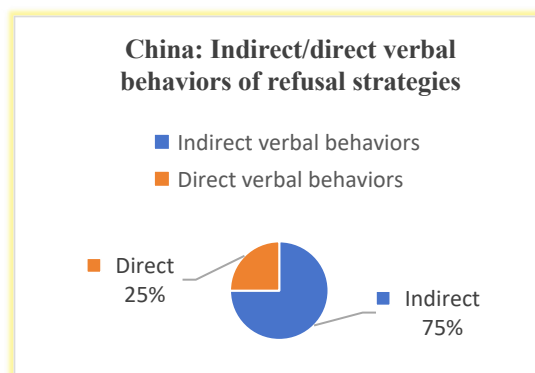


Figure 1. Distribution of verbal behavioral refusal in China

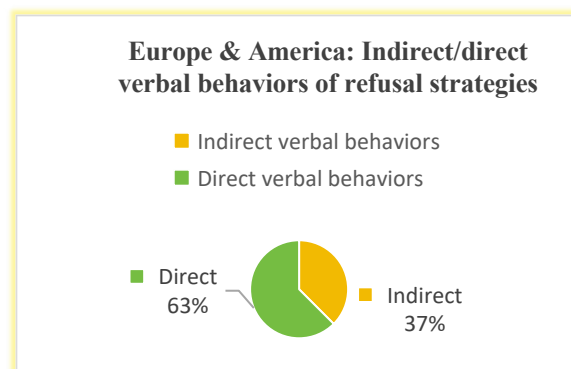


Figure 2. Distribution of verbal behavioral refusals in Europe and America

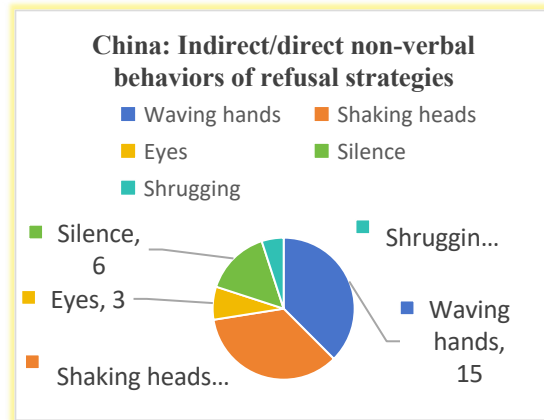


Figure 3. Distribution of non-verbal behavioral refusals in China

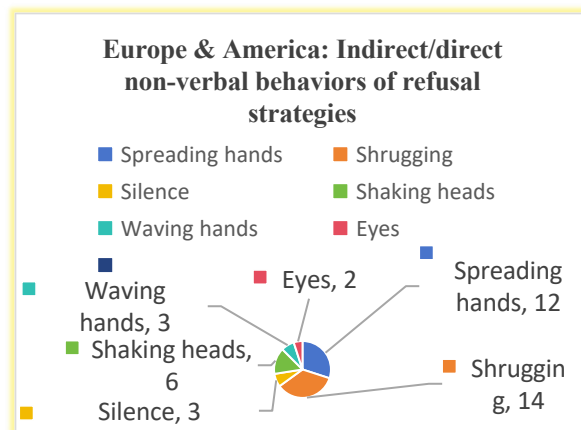


Figure 4. Distribution of non-verbal behavioral refusals in Europe and America

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Comparison of verbal behavioral refusals between China and the West

Speech acts are an important part of research in social communication, speaking is doing things. Refusal is a speech act often performed by everyday communicators. When a speaker directly or indirectly implements refusal behaviors to the addressee, he or she would threaten the addressee's positive face. Therefore, the nature of the refusal speech act is impolite, and it is a face-threatening behavior that threatens the listener's positive face in communication ^[11]. We found that, in terms of verbal behavioral refusal strategies in China and the West, Chinese people prefer indirect verbal behavioral strategies, while the West frequently adopts direct verbal behavioral strategies, which are related to regional cultural values as well as language consumption habits. This paragraph aims to explore the differences between Chinese and Western people about verbal behavioral refusal strategies through a comparative analysis.

4.1.1. Indirect refusal speech act in China

In 1975, Searle, an American linguist, based on Austin's theory of speech acts, put forward the Indirect Speech Acts Theory ^[12], and divided acts beyond speech into five major categories: elaboration, instruction, commitment, expression, and declaration, of which speech acts of refusal belongs to the commitment category ^[13].

We found that Chinese people prefer to use an indirect approach in the implementation of speech acts of refusal^[14]. Refusal speech acts are divided into central speech acts, auxiliary speech acts, and modifiers, in which the central speech act is the center of realizing the refusal speech acts, auxiliary speech acts are used to assist the realization of the refusal speech acts, and modifiers are used to modify the central and auxiliary speech acts^[14]. We found that Chinese people usually satisfy the three dimensions proposed by Wang when they perform refusal speech acts. i.e. “central speech act” + “modifier” + “auxiliary speech act.” Taking the video 22 for example,

“Hello, can we do a brief interview?”

“I have things to do now, it is not convenient for me to do an interview.”

The woman interviewed in the video typically rejects the interviewer by adopting Wang’s dimensional structure, “I still have things to do now” is an auxiliary speech act, which helps the refusal speech act to be realized; “It will be inconvenient for me to do an interview” is an indirect refusal speech act of the central speech act.

We find that the characteristics of Chinese indirect speech acts of refusal exist at both the discourse and semantic levels. Therefore, we explore the features of Chinese indirect speech acts of refusal from the form level and the meaning level. For example, in video 23, a netizen asks a blogger for help in the comments section, and the blogger openly replies in the video, ‘If you really get into trouble, you can contact me, I will offer my help to you.’ Another example is video 24, where a man enjoyed food and wine at home with his wife, and it happened that he heard from his relative who was going to his house for a drink with him, and the man very subtly rejected him.

“Brother, is it convenient for you today? I will come to your house for a drink with you together.”

“Ah, I’m sorry to tell you that I’m not at home right now, I’m going on a business trip in Hangzhou!” (the man was actually enjoying delicious food and drinking at home at that time)

In video 25, there was a pretty lady who was rejected in her pursuit of a man.

“Can I be your girlfriend? I like you a bit!”

“Sorry, I have a girlfriend.”

In video 26, a guy invites a girl to have dinner after work and the girl politely declines.

“Let’s have dinner together after work, we can talk.”

“What an inconvenient time; I have to invite my parents over after work.”

The above videos use “hello,” “Ah,” “sorry,” and “What an inconvenient time” as quotes, i.e. indirect central speech acts of refusal help to moderate the tone of voice when refusing, thereby mitigating the threat to the other person’s face.

However, there is something else going on here. As in video 27, a lady is unsuccessfully selling a car wash cleaner at the roadside.

“Sir, buy some of this car wash cleaner, it works great.”

“Ah, wait, wait, don’t scrub it, I really don’t need it.”

In video 28, a guy borrows money from a WeChat friend but is unsuccessful.

“Are you there? I’m a little strapped for cash, can you lend me”

“I’m not exactly flush with cash these days”

“Okay.”

In video 29, the Emperor finds Ji writing anonymous letters and talks to her.

“So you say that thing is easy to deal with? Ah?”

“I’m afraid it is not an easy thing, let me think about it.”

The above video uses such vague words as “really,” “not exactly,” and “I’m afraid” to moderate a prior affirmative tone and reduce face-threatening behavior towards the other person.

In video 30, the film clip named “What’s Not Between Us” describes the boyfriend rejecting his girlfriend’s intimate behaviors.

“Is it okay tonight?”

“Let’s talk about it tomorrow, okay?”

In video 31, a short-haired lady refuses to lend her car to her neighbor.

“Can I borrow your car?”

“My husband said the car is not to be borrowed, so there is nothing I can do.”

In video 32, one of Xiao’s housemates consults him on how to comfort his girlfriend.

“Xiao, my girlfriend is angry now, what should I do to make her feel better?”

“Are you kidding me? You ask me how to comfort your girlfriend? I don’t even have a girlfriend myself!”

The above video uses the form of “okay?” additional question, “the car not being lent” passive sentence, and “you ask me how to comfort your girlfriend” compound sentence to politely reject the addressee, slowing down the conflict and making it easier for the other party to accept. We find that at the form level, Chinese people use speech acts of refusal mainly in terms of quotations, vocabulary, and syntax, adopting verbal behavioral refusal strategies with unique marking characteristics to respond to the addressee’s requests or invitations, or adopting a combination of various forms to reduce the threat to the other party’s face, respecting the other party’s positive face and taking into account the other party’s negative face, and relying on linguistic expressions to reflect the refusal culture of the Chinese language.

In addition, Chinese indirect refusal speech acts are also reflected in the meaning level^[15]. The category of indirect speech acts includes apologies, willingness, excuses, or explanations, offering alternatives, making conditions, allowing future acceptance, principles, and philosophies, letting the other party give up the request, and accepting the meaning of refusal in verbal expressions.

For example, in video 33, the short-haired girl is confronted with the boy’s confession, and she politely refuses.

“I like you, can you be my girlfriend?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t like you, becoming friends is nice, and I don’t want to be in an intimate relationship.”

Based on the meaning level, the response of the girl above consists of “apology” + “declaration of willingness” + “offering alternatives” + “explaining the reason” in order to politely reject the boy’s fondness, which is more polite than a single word “No.” The girl’s use of “explaining the reason” is the best proof of refusal, and at the same time does not threaten the face of both parties; the use of the “offering alternatives” strategy may be able to meet the needs of the refused person and can reflect the refuser’s sincerity towards the refused person. The strategies of “explaining reasons” and “offering alternatives” both reflect the influence of the Han language and culture of “demeaning oneself and respecting others’ ideas”^[16]. It can be seen that Chinese people are more indirect and polite in expressing the verbal behavior of refusal, which reduces the threat of refusal to others. As in video 34:

“Wang, I think it is better if you take care of this.”

“I will try my best to assist you, but I have been busy with work recently, so if I reluctantly say yes, there may be a big drop in quality, and I’ll feel bad about it in my heart.”

Wang uses the semantic fragment “willingness” + “explanation” + “avoidance” + “apology,” where “I will try my best to assist you” is the willingness and “but I have been busy with work recently” is the explanation, “If I greatly reduced” is avoidance, and “I’ll feel bad about it in my heart” is an apology, thus showing the

sincerity and politeness to the other party, and indirectly refusing the other party's request.

To sum up, the form and the meaning levels both reflect that Chinese people are more inclined to indirect forms of the speech act of refusal, which is closely related to the Face Theory in traditional Chinese culture, preserving the face of both parties and reducing the threat to the face of the other party. In addition, in very few special contexts, Chinese people also use a stronger degree of direct speech acts of refusal when the requests or demands involve the refuser's individual profits or the refuser is put in a disadvantageous position. For instance, in video 35, a man was rejected when he asked for WeChat contact from a pretty girl standing aside in a shop:

“Baby, can I have your WeChat contact?”

“Get away.”

4.1.2. Direct refusal speech act in the West

Similarly, the West also satisfies the three dimensions proposed by Wang's “central speech act” + “modifier” + “auxiliary speech act.” We find that Europeans and Americans tend to be more direct in the implementation of such refusal behaviors. For example, in video 10, a blogger did an interview on a foreign street and asked a foreigner to rate his figure.

“Can you rate my figure?”

“No, it is your body. I cannot do that.”

“Can you rate my figure?”

“I do not want to do that, that is wrong.”

We found that Euro-Americans used marker words or clauses of direct refusal like “No,” “I cannot,” and “I never do that” to express their negative attitude. For example, in video 36:

“Can I borrow your car this week?”

“No way!”

A lady asks to borrow a car from her neighbor but is refused, the neighbor responds to the lady with a sentence with a strong degree of refusal, the potential meanings that may be conveyed are (1) the lady does not have a car; (2) the lady's car has broken down; (3) the lady has borrowed the neighbor's car before and damaged it. We speculate that it is probable that it is the third scenario that leads to the neighbor's unwillingness to lend her car to the lady again, and from the neighbor's verbal behavior, we infer her feelings of anger.

In video 37, a boy asks his classmate if he can help him with cooking and is refused by the classmate.

“Can you help me cook dinner?”

“Heavens, no!”

His classmate strongly refused the boy's request with the simple sentence “Heavens, no.” We are able to infer certain conversational meanings from the speech acts of both parties, such as (1) there is a conflict between the two parties that has not yet been resolved; (2) the boy's home is far away from the classmate's home; and (3) he does not like the hassle of it, and unwilling to do the work. Based on the context, we surmise that the first scenario is more likely.

Again, as in video 38, when Europeans and Americans are asked about a more sensitive topic or a question that involves their individual privacy, they will be averse to answering the question and be hostile to the questioner, which is related to socio-regional and cultural values.

“Hey, how old are you? You look like an old man.”

“Not possible!”

The refuser similarly refused to answer the refused person's question with a strong negative sentence because the refused person's question involved an issue of age privacy, as well as a tone of voice accompanied

by mocking contempt.

In video 39, the refuser expresses the refusal with a tone of voice in place of specific verbal content.

“Do you want to go with me to watch a movie?”

“Mm Mm.....”/“Uh Uh.....”

The man invites the woman to watch a film together, and the woman declines the invitation by using a short tone of voice instead of a word, clause, or composition. The same marker “Mm Mm/Uh Uh” differs in the expression of intonation priming, with descending intonation meaning negative and ascending intonation meaning affirmative.

We find that at the form level, the same marking features of Chinese people’s use of indirect speech acts of refusals are also presented in Western countries’ use of direct speech acts of refusals. Based on the analysis of the five short videos above, Europeans and Americans express their negative meanings through the use of typical refusal vocabularies, imperative sentence patterns, and intonation. This is related to the idea of individualism in the values of Western society, and the speech community in this culture tends to use direct ways to express their meaning, pay attention to the rights and freedom of the individual, and focus on themselves with less consideration for the other party.

Europeans and Americans use indirect speech acts of refusal less frequently. For example, if one refuses to participate in a certain topic, it is customary to say “I am not that into it.”; if one refuses other orders from the waiter, it is customary to say “I am good. Thanks.”; if one refuses to go on a date, it is customary to say “Let’s call it off.”; if one wants to refuse an invitation, it is customary to say “I’d love to, but” Such euphemistic speech refusal strategies, compared to direct speech acts, reduce the level of harshness. This approach helps protect the positive face of the person being refused, making it easier for them to accept the refusal and maintain the relationship between both parties.

We find that both in China and the West, there is a recent trend toward using indirect speech acts to convey refusals. However, there are differences in how these refusals are influenced by social status and social distance^[17]. In China, different social statuses use different forms of refusals, with superiors rejecting subordinates generally using direct speech act refusals and subordinates rejecting superiors using indirect speech act refusals. In the West, however, it is a completely different situation. This is closely related to the hierarchical system in traditional Chinese culture and the individualistic spirit and “the principle of equality” of Western social values. In China, no matter whether the social distance is widened or narrowed, indirect speech acts of refusal are used. However, in certain Western countries, when the social distance is narrowed, direct verbal behavior of refusal is used^[18].

4.2. Comparison between Chinese and English non-verbal behavioral refusals

Non-verbal behaviors refer to physical behaviors other than verbal behaviors, gaze behaviors, silent speech behaviors, body dressing, body gestures, facial expressions, body distance during conversations, and so on. All these non-verbal behaviors can be used to communicate information, convey ideas, and express emotions and attitudes^[19]. Non-verbal behavior is a collective term for all communicative behaviors excluding verbal behavior, and the speech community’s verbal behavior accounts for 1/4; non-verbal behavior accounts for 3/4, including somatic language use, paralinguistic language use, object language use, and environmental language use (Samovar). This paragraph discusses Chinese non-verbal behavioral refusal strategies in comparison with Western non-verbal behavioral refusal strategies, aiming to explore the commonalities and individuality between them.

4.2.1. Non-verbal behavioral refusal strategies in China

In video 1, a blogger randomly interviewed Chinese passers-by on the street about their intimacy with lovers was rejected 16 times, and these 16 passers-by rejected the blogger's interviews by waving their hands, shaking their heads, and so on.

“Hello, can I invite you to do a street interview?”

As for the blogger's request, the first woman looked serious and refused to be interviewed by “waving her hand” as a non-verbal behavioral refusal strategy, and then left in a hurry.

“Could you take part in our street interview? Do you have time?”

“No time ah.”

The second woman, when confronted with the blogger's interview, rejected the blogger's interview with the verbal behavior of marking the negative word “no” accompanied by the non-verbal behavior of “shaking her head.”

In video 2, one supermarket salesperson selling another brand of product to a customer is rejected by the customer's non-verbal behavior of “winking and glancing.”

“Hello, do you have any Qing Piao Piao milk tea? I need 50 pieces?”

“Sorry, we don't have the brand that you said just now, Xiang Piao Piao brand is also very good, do you want to try it?”

“Forget it, I only need Qing Piao Piao brand.”

In the video, the customer rejected the salesperson's suggestion with the non-verbal behavioral refusal strategy “glance” and the verbal behavioral refusal strategy “Forget it,” which indicates the customer's “dissatisfaction” with the shopping experience. In the case of paralinguistic language use of refusal, the customer's original voice is modified by changes in voice pitch, timbre, amplitude, and length to express the meaning of refusal.

In video 3, the woman adopted the non-verbal behavioral refusal strategy of “being silent” to be unwilling to negotiate with the man, when they argued with each other. It is actually a kind of non-verbal behavioral refusal strategy—paralinguistic refusal. What's more, her original voice was modified by a change in pitch without producing any sounds in order to convey her anger and dissatisfaction.

“I was already upset.”

“Stop arguing and speak slowly, I'm surely not at fault, don't confuse right and wrong here”

“.....” The woman was silent.

In video 4 of *The Fragrance of Plum Blossoms* drama clip, the girl confesses her love to Youxin Cheng but is met with a silent response.

“Please tell me, will you be willing to be my boyfriend?”

“.....” Youxin Cheng rejects the girl's confession with paralinguistic “silence,” his silent non-verbal behavioral refusal is already the answer.

In the case of object language refusal, the goods are shown intentionally or unintentionally to express the speaker's meaning. In video 5, the person who pours the tea intentionally pours the tea very full in order to refuse to receive the customer based on the Chinese traditional cultural background “pouring a full cup of tea to others” means “unwelcome.” Therefore, “a full cup of tea” functions to convey the information of “unwelcoming.”

“Hi, bro, can I see the quality of the tea you sell in your shop?”

The shopkeeper made the customer sit down for tea and deliberately filled up the teacup, “Drink tea!”

In video 6, the manager who wishes to access financial assistance in a financial crisis is refused by another

company through object language use of refusal—not pouring a full glass of wine for someone, similarly means “unwelcoming” and “refusal to promise” in Chinese traditional culture.

“Manager Wang, I’m not ashamed to tell you, our company has recently experienced a financial crisis, please ‘take care of’ our small company. If manager Wang can lend a helping hand to assist our company to tide over the difficulties, I will be grateful.”

“Manager Zhang, no worry about it, let’s go for a drink!”

Manager Wang rejected Manager Zhang’s request by not pouring a full glass of wine for him, in which the “wine glass,” as an object, has the function of transmitting information.

Therefore, the information conveyed by Chinese non-verbal behavioral refusals is related to its social etiquette culture, which is regulated in a certain speech community, such as “pouring a full cup of tea to others” and “not pouring a full glass of wine for someone” refusal strategies; and the semiotic meanings attached to the behavioral habits, such as physical gestures. We find that Chinese non-verbal behavioral refusal strategies also exist in both direct and indirect ways, for example, the paralinguistic refusal of “silence” is weaker in nature than the somatic refusal of “waving hands” and “shaking head,” which threatens the positive face of the addressee at a low level and protects the addressee’s face to a certain extent under the “high-context” culture of China. We find that Chinese people usually express their refusal by replacing verbal refusals with non-verbal refusals, and by using indirect or direct refusals to accompany non-verbal refusals, so as to enhance the effect of language expression.

4.2.2. Non-verbal behavioral refusal strategies in the West

Similarly, according to the videos we collected from the video software Douyin about Europeans’ and Americans’ expression of refusal, we found that Europeans’ and Americans’ non-verbal behavioral refusal is mainly reflected in the two aspects of physical language refusal and paralinguistic language refusal.

In terms of physical language refusal behavior, Europeans and Americans usually use facial expressions such as “deflated mouth,” postures such as “shrugged shoulders,” and gestures such as “waving hands” and “spreading hands” to express their refusal. For example, in video 7, a foreigner wearing a red jumper comes to visit a Chinese family, and based on the Chinese traditional excellent values of hospitality, the Chinese host keeps giving him food. He “waved his hand” as a non-verbal behavior and, “said No No No” as a verbal behavior to reject the host’s hospitality.

In video 8, a spokesman for the United States Department of Foreign Affairs refused to take questions from journalists during the interview by using the physical language of “shrugging shoulders” and “showing hands.”

“Would you like to share your view about the war between the two countries? Why provide them with combat-ready resources?”

“.....” The spokesperson responded to the journalist with a non-verbal behavioral refusal in physical languages only, conveying some implicature information to the journalist such as “we don’t want to accept your question,” “there are some things that we don’t want to come out,” or “there are some things that you don’t have a right to know,” etc. The spokesperson’s behavior threatens the positive face of the journalist, which triggers a series of speculations by the journalist.

In video 9, it shows that a foreign couple chatted before bedtime, with the woman asking her husband what he had just said, and the man rejected his wife’s question with a non-verbal behavioral refusal strategy of “deflated” facial expressions and “silent” paralinguistic.

“What did you just say? Ah?”

“.....” The man, named Frank, responded to his wife’s question with a non-verbal behavioral refusal strategy of “deflating his mouth” and “being silent,” which might convey the implicature information: (1) the husband is not interested in the wife’s topic; (2) the husband is speechless to the wife’s behavior; and (3) the husband finds it troublesome to say the content a second time.

A blogger doing an interview on a foreign street asked foreigners to rate others’ bodies in video 10, and many of them rejected the blogger’s request with a non-verbal behavioral refusal strategy of “shaking their heads” to reflect their value of “equality.”

“Can you rate my figure?”

“No, it is your body. I cannot do that.”

“Can you rate my figure?”

“I do not want to do that, that is wrong.”

We found that many of the foreigners interviewed by the blogger resisted the item of “body rating” for others. Similarly, we found that most of them used marked direct verbal behavioral refusal strategies on the topic of “Body Anxiety,” such as “No,” “I cannot,” “I never do that,” etc., or used non-verbal behavioral refusal strategies, such as “shaking heads,” “frowning,” and “shaking hands” to express their refusal.

In video 11, it shows that a Chinese man living in the United States was rejected by his neighbors when he sent a self-made delicious meal of dumplings.

“Hi, David. I made some dumplings just now and I’d love to show you that if you...”

“I am good. Thanks.”

The neighbor rejected the Chinese man’s kindness through implicature speech acts such as “I am good. Thanks” and non-speech acts such as “glancing” and “waving his hand.” Due to the cultural gap, Europeans and Americans consider it extremely rude to knock on a door without making an appointment to visit in advance, and they may mistakenly think that the other party has a conspiracy to hurt themselves, which is why David refused the dumplings sent by his neighbor.

Similarly, Western non-verbal behavioral refusal strategies are regular and situational in nature, which are closely related to the social values, traditional customs, and non-verbal behavioral habits of the culture. Both Chinese and Western non-verbal behavioral refusal strategies exist in indirect or direct forms. The refusal meanings conveyed through such non-verbal behavior have conversational implicature meanings, and the refused individuals can speculate the refusal reasons by the refuser’s non-verbal behavior, which reduces the harm to the positive face of the refused individuals and at the same time accurately conveys the meaning.

4.3. Paradoxical analysis of refusal strategies

Refusal strategies are divided into verbal behavioral refusal strategy and non-verbal behavioral refusal strategy. We find that (1) marked vocabulary and syntax as a verbal behavioral refusal strategy can be used to express the refusal meanings; (2) a non-verbal behavioral refusal strategy can take the place of the verbal behavioral refusal strategy to express the refusal meanings; (3) a non-verbal behavioral refusal strategy co-exists with a verbal behavioral refusal strategy.

Therefore, the contradiction of the refusal strategy mainly exists in the third situation—“a non-verbal behavioral refusal strategy co-exists with a verbal behavioral refusal strategy.” One is that the refusal of verbal behavior is accompanied by the acceptance of non-verbal behavior, and the other is that the acceptance of verbal behavior is accompanied by the refusal of non-verbal behavior. It is a phenomenon occurring in both China and the West, and is called “the inconsistency of speech and behavior.”

4.3.1. The refusal of verbal behavior is accompanied by the acceptance of non-verbal behavior

Such a phenomenon exists in both China and the West. In China, it is closely related to the traditional Chinese cultural values.

For example, in video 12, during the Chinese New Year, a Chinese boy refused to accept the New Year red packet from his grandma with the verbal behavior refusal strategy of “no, no,” but the non-verbal behavior of pulling his pocket wide open to show the other person to put the red packet into his pocket.

Another example is video 13, in which a Chinese primary school student bawled and refused to do his homework, “I don’t want to do homework, I hate it!” He said while pulling out his homework book from his school bag and starting to do it.

In video 14, a Chinese woman tried on a beautiful dress and said to herself, “I can’t buy any more clothes, and my wardrobe at home is stacked up! If I buy it, I’ll cut off my hand, hold on, hold on. Oh my god, this dress is so pretty!” Afterward, the woman went straight to the front desk to pay for the dress.

In the West countries, similar contradictions occur. For example, in video 15, an American man wearing a white sweater refused to drink wine offered by the other party using a verbal behavioral refusal strategy of “No, No, No, No, No.” In fact, his non-verbal behavior acquiesced to the pouring of the other man’s drink. In video 16, a British man wearing glasses and black clothing was interviewed on camera.

“If you were going to guess what that’s called?”

“It looks like a trick egg—kind of like a pickled egg.”

“This dish is actually called Thousand-Year Egg.”

“I remember the last time I ate it was in front of a room full of Chinese businessmen. I won’t pass on it now.”

The man refused to eat the Chinese thousand-year-old eggs during the interview, but his non-verbal behavior defied his verbal behavior, and then he ate it with a toothpick.

In video 17, a European-American woman responded “I don’t kiss strange men” when confronted with a strange man’s kissing and intimacy. The strange man similarly responded, “Neither do I.” The two began to kiss and embrace each other.

The above six typical videos all reflect the paradoxical relationship between Chinese and English on refusal strategies, that is to say—the refusal of verbal behavior is accompanied by the acceptance of non-verbal behavior, which is closely related to certain contexts.

4.3.2. The refusal of non-verbal behavior is accompanied by the acceptance of verbal behavior

Similarly, the paradox that the refusal of non-verbal behavior is accompanied by the acceptance of verbal behavior is one of the paradoxical relationships, which is closely related to the individual’s face, social life, and psychological state.

In China, for example, in video 18, a schoolboy publicly confessed his love for a girl, who said, “I am willing to be your girlfriend,” and then privately explained the situation to the boy and returned the gift he had given to her. In video 19, where a department in the workplace gives a suggestion to a superior department in the hope of implementing a need, and the department promises to cooperate in words but does not do so in practice. Video 20 displayed a man who promised his girlfriend a cup of milk tea when he got home, but in reality, his hands were empty and he forgot about it. In the West, such a paradox still exists. A big country is calling for peace in the world while at the same time sending war material to other countries to start a war for plundering resources.

The above four typical examples all reflect the “inconsistency” between verbal and non-verbal behavior

between China and the West, where both verbal and non-verbal semiotics convey conversational implicature meanings related to their social concepts, traditional social values, personal state of mind, and personal face.

4.3.3. Analysis of paradox phenomenon

The paradoxical relationship between verbal behavioral refusals and non-verbal behavioral refusals that co-exist has to do with social values, personal psychological state, and personal face [20]. Social values refer to people's positions, views, attitudes, and choices about the values of good and bad, gain and loss, good and evil, and beauty and ugliness. By the long-term repeated integration and dissolution of complex and diverse values, a value system embodying a social value concept is finally formed. Individual psychological states that, in the special language environment or social environment, comply with the individual psychology and make verbal or non-verbal behavior [3]. Face theory is a phenomenon of politeness, including the "face-saving theory" of British scholars Brown and Levinson, which is based on Western culture. Face theory has three parts: face, face-threatening act, and politeness strategy. Face is the self-image that everyone wants for himself or herself in front of the public, including negative face and positive face. Negative face means that people have the right to free verbal and non-verbal behaviors without interference from anyone; positive face means that people want to be praised and commended by others.

Therefore, in the process of communication, people should try their best to protect others' positive faces and avoid behaviors that threaten others' faces. If we cannot avoid them, we should try to use politeness strategies to reduce the threat of their behaviors to others' faces.

For example, the contradictory relationship between verbal and non-verbal refusal behaviors in videos 12, 13, and 21 is related to social values. The verbal behavior of the Chinese boy in video 12, who refuses the red packet given by his elders by saying "No, No, No," reflects the cultural value of modesty in traditional Chinese culture, that is to say, even if it is deserved, it is necessary to have the process of politely declining the gift given by others. A symbolic refusal is a reflection of modesty, indicating that the recipient is guilty or does not want to give the other party trouble; after the symbolic refusal and then reluctant acceptance, it reflects respect, courtesy, and sincerity to the other party, which is a way to bring the two sides closer together. Video 13 shows that although the primary school student uses verbal behavior to express the meaning of "refusing to do homework," his non-verbal behavior is to accept the teacher's assignment. This reflects the traditional Chinese culture of respecting teachers and abiding by the rules and regulations of the school, that is, a student should complete the tasks corresponding to their role and obey the relevant system. Video 21 displayed a big country calling for peace while supporting the arms race of other countries, reflecting the ideology of hegemony, power politics, and individualism of that country, which is related to the above social values to some extent.

The contradictory relationship between videos 14, 15, 17, and 20 is closely related to its personal psychological state. In video 14, the lady says she will not buy a new dress but pays for it anyway. This is related to women's personal psychological labels such as "sunshine, fashion, and spontaneity." Beautiful clothes can bring pleasure and satisfaction to women, and when they think they look good, they will be more confident to face life and social occasions. Therefore, the ambivalence of women's "buying clothes" is a way to enjoy and improve their self-image, which can make women show their unique style and make them stand out. At the same time, this personal state of mind of women reflects their love and expectation of life. This well explains the non-verbal behavior of the lady in the video to pay for her beauty without the slightest hesitation. The American man in video 15 pretends to refuse such behavior when they pour wine for him, which is also related to his psychological state. It may be that (1) The American man thinks that drinking is a way to relax temporarily; (2) The American man maintains social relationships through drinking; (3) The American man

thinks that this type of wine is of better quality. The rejection of speech acts is to maintain the self-image of the American man, not to attach a label of “alcoholic.” The two strangers in video 17 both express their refusal to kiss each other, but their non-verbal behavior is a good indication of their willingness, which is related to their personal psychological state, possibly “thrill-seeking” or “love at first sight.” In video 20, the boyfriend promises his girlfriend something but forgets it, which is a side reaction to the boy’s personal psychological state of “unreliability and not caring about his girlfriend.” Some things are not important in nature, but for girls, they are full of expectations, promises, and trust.

Videos 16 and 18 reflect an ambivalent relationship that is closely related to personal face. Although the man in video 16 verbally rejects the special Chinese dish “preserved egg,” they are still brave enough to accept this food that Westerners are opposed to. The man uses his non-verbal behavior to gain a more positive face for himself in front of the camera and build a brave image in front of the public. In order to prevent the personal face of the male student from being damaged, the female student in video 18 adopts the way of “delayed refusal” to protect the male student’s face, minimize the behavior that threatens the male student’s positive face, and adopt the polite conversation mode of “explanation after the event” to better maintain the face of both parties. Relevant politeness strategies are straight talk, positive politeness, negative politeness, euphemisms, and avoidance of face-threatening behaviors.

Therefore, the contradictory relationship between verbal behavioral refusals and non-verbal behavioral refusals reflects the relevant factors of social values, personal psychological state, and personal face. The addressee is able to judge the other party’s real intention and the potential conversational meanings conveyed by the verbal behavior and non-verbal behavior, which is conducive to the addressee grasping the main points of the conversation and thus catering to the speaker’s personal psychological state in a better way, and protecting the other party’s positive face and reducing negative face, thus improving the efficiency of communication.

5. Conclusion

This study has analyzed the commonality and individuality of Chinese and Western countries in using refusal strategies, as well as their contradictory relationship. It is found that Chinese people are more likely to use indirect ways in verbal behavioral refusal strategies, while Western countries are more likely to use direct ways. In addition, both Chinese and Western countries use non-verbal behavior of refusal, as a way to protect the positive face and reduce the threatening behavior of the addressee. We also found that the ambivalent relationship of the refusal strategy between China and the Western countries is related to their personal psychological state, social values, and personal face. The results of this study extend the scope of research on refusal strategies, serve as an effective supplement to existing research on refusal language strategies, and provide practical insights into effective refusal strategies. At the same time, the refusal strategy as an important behavior in interpersonal communication is of great significance in maintaining good interpersonal relationships in communication, and this study also provides some help for sociological research.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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