

A Study on Refusal Strategy for Refusal Verbal Behavior in Online Communication under the Politeness Principle

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Abstract: With the popularity of the Internet and social media, refusal verbal behavior in online communication is more common, which is significant to the construction of interpersonal relationships. Based on the politeness principle, this study takes 300 sets of chat records with clear meaning of refusal collected from social platform. It was found that mitigation strategy appeared most frequently, followed by conflict strategy. Under the politeness principle, using mitigation strategy is to follow the maxim of tact in order to maintain good interpersonal relationships. Conflict strategy, on the other hand, is less likely to reflect the politeness principle, and use more direct expressions to achieve the purpose of effective rejection.

Keywords: Politeness Principle; Online Communication; Refusal Verbal Behavior; Refusal Strategy

1. Introduction

With the popularity of the Internet, people rely more and more on the Internet for communication. It is because of the increase in online communication that people are faced with situations where they need to reject others' speech acts. However, due to the lack of non-verbal messages, refusal verbal behavior may trigger the risk of conflict. Therefore, it becomes crucial to study the refusal strategy of refusal verbal behavior in online communication under the politeness principle. It can provide users with skills to better cope with rejection situations in online environments, and promote effective online communication.

2. Refusal Strategy for Refusal Verbal Behavior in Online Communication

Scholars have proposed various kinds of Chinese refusal strategies. Ma (1998) proposed 11 strategies. This chapter summarizes six rejection strategies for the 300 sets of dialogues collected on the Internet. Referring to Goodwin's (1983) categorization of refusal strategy, this chapter broadly classifies refusal strategy into two types: mitigation strategy and conflict strategy under the help of CorpusWordParser software and the corpus search tool Antconc 4.2.0. The results are shown in Table 1:

Table 1 Mitigation Strategy

Rejection Strategy	Number of Occurrences	Percentage
Mitigation Strategy	208	69.3 %
Conflict Strategy	92	30.7 %

As can be seen, the highest percentage of mitigation strategies is found. And few conflict strategies are used, with about 30.7 percent.

2.1 Mitigation Strategy

In online communication, the mitigation strategy is usually used when refusing something. Combining Ran's (2012) definition of linguistic means, the mitigation strategy involved in the selected corpus of this paper contains the explanatory strategy, compensation strategy, apology strategy and avoidance strategy. The specific distribution is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Mitigation Strategy

Rejection Strategy	Concrete Strategy	Number of Occurrences	Percentage
Mitigation Strategy	Explanatory Strategy	88	42.3%
	Compensation Strategy	62	29.8%
	Apology Strategy	35	16.8 %
	Avoidance Strategy	23	11.1%

2.1.1 Explanatory Strategy

Explanatory strategy aims to explain and express one's reasons for refusal in a polite way. The strategy can help us to reject in a way that respects the other person's feelings and minimizes the possibility of conflict. This strategy has the highest number of occurrences in the selected corpus with 88 occurrences or about 42.3%. The example is as follows:

(1) A: Let's go play ball tomorrow.

B: The weather forecast says it will rain tomorrow.

Example (1) is a piece of dialogue revolving around the rejection of an invitation in which Character B uses an explanatory strategy to explain the objective reasons why they cannot play tomorrow. It helps to mitigate misunderstandings and conflicts.

2.1.2 Compensation Strategy

Compensatory strategy aims to balance the negative impact or disappointment. The key to compensatory strategy is to actively seek solutions to balance the negative feelings associated with rejection. It promotes good communication and reduces the conflict that rejection may bring. It is used frequently, appearing 62 times in the corpus, accounting for about 29.8 %. Such as:

(2) A: My roommate is going hiking tomorrow, so let's go together.

B: I'm going shopping with my girlfriend tomorrow. We can go next time.

In example (2), the final phrase "next time for sure" is a compensation strategy to the inability to go hiking. It is a polite gesture to save each other's face.

2.1.3 Apology Strategy

The apology strategy aims to build trust, repair relationships, and deal with misunderstanding in a positive way. Using this strategy eases the tone of voice so that the other party does not become too disappointed. According to statistics, the apology strategy was used 35 times in the corpus, accounting for about 16. 8%.

(3) A: What are you doing? Are you coming out for dinner?

B: Sorry, I'm not hungry yet.

In this dialogue, Character B responds with an apology strategy, providing a reason for his refusal. By apologizing and explaining his situation, Character B declines Character A's invitation in a polite and respectful manner.

2.1.4 Avoidance Strategy

Avoidance strategy reduces the potential for embarrassment by refraining from directly rejecting the other person. Avoidance strategies are usually used when there is a need to maintain rapport, avoid conflict. Avoidance strategies appear less in the selected corpus, 23 times, accounting for about 11.1%.

(4) A: Let's go to Xi'an for the summer holiday.

B: It's still early in the summer holiday, there's no hurry.

In example (4), the refuser does not directly respond to or accept A's invitation, but expresses the message that the vacation time has not yet arrived, indirectly implying the refusal.

2.2 Conflict Strategy

Conflict strategy in refusal verbal behavior may lead to argument. This strategy emphasizes personal rights and positions and may ignore the feelings of the other person. Conflict strategy is offensive in nature and is used much less frequently than mitigation strategy. In the selected data, the main conflict strategies used are the outspoken strategy and the questioning strategy.

Table 3 Conflict Strategy

Rejection Strategy	Concrete Strategy	Number of occurrences	Percentage
Conflict Strategy	Outspoken Strategy	53	57.6 %
	Questioning Strategy	39	42.4 %

2.2.1 Outspoken Strategy

The outspoken strategy refers to a direct way of expressing disagreement. Instead of using implicit wording, this strategy expresses one's will directly, clearly rejecting the other party's request without providing an explanation. It occurs 53 times, or about 57.6%.

(5) A: Can you lend your camera to me? B: No.

In the above example, character B replies directly with "no". The strategy expresses disagreement without providing much explanation.

2.2.2 Questioning Strategy

Questioning strategy refers to expressing refusal by questioning or interrogating. This strategy usually aims to emphasize one's disagreement. The questioning strategy places more emphasis on questioning or challenging the other person than direct refusal. It occurs 42.4 percent.

(6) A: Can you add more to your living expenses this month? Mum.

B: No. Hasn't this month's living expenses been transferred to you?

In the example sentence, the mother uses a rhetorical question to express her dissatisfaction with the child's request, arguing that child's request is unreasonable.

3. Refusal Strategy under the Politeness Principle

Based on Cooperative Principle, Leech (2014) proposed the politeness principle, including the maxim of tact, generosity, flattery, modesty, agreement and sympathy. Under the politeness principle, the refusal strategy used in online communication is conducive to respecting the rights of the other party.

Under the politeness principle, mitigation strategy is the more recommended choice for refusal verbal behavior in online communication. These four types of mitigation strategies effectively integrate the maxim of tact. Refusal strategies inherently violate the maxim of agreement. Tact is one of the main principles of politeness under Chinese traditional culture. Therefore, mitigation strategies are mostly adopted to follow the maxim of tact.

Conflict strategy is not recommended as the preferred strategy for refusal verbal behavior in online communication under the politeness principle. They are less likely to reflect the six principles proposed by Leech. However, it is necessary to use more direct and firm expressions to achieve effective rejection of the other party sometimes.

4. Conclusion

Based on the politeness principle, this study analyses the refusal strategy of refusal verbal behavior in online communication. Firstly, it explores the refusal strategies used in the 300 sets of dialogue collected in online platforms. Secondly, it investigates the politeness principle embodied in the refusal strategies used as well as their purposes. The study finds six types of refusal strategies, which can be categorized as mitigation and conflict strategy. Mitigation strategy appears most frequently, including explanatory strategy, compensation strategy, apology strategy and avoidance strategy. Conflict strategy appears less frequently, and included outspoken strategy and questioning strategy.

And mitigation strategies almost follow the maxim of tact in order to maintain good interpersonal relations. Conflict strategies are less likely to reflect Leech's six principles, using more direct and firm expressions to achieve effective rejection.

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