

Comparison of Refusal Expressions by Native Speakers of English and Japanese Learners

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The purpose of this study is to compare how Native Speakers of English (NSEs) and Japanese Learners of English (JLEs) try to refuse invitations, requests, offers, and suggestions with less face-threatening acts. A discourse completion test was conducted with NSE students in the UK and JLE students in Japan. An analysis of refusal expressions by NSEs and JLEs in the context of a short term home-stay in an English-speaking country is presented. This research procedure is based on the previous study of Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990).

本研究は、招待、依頼、申し出、提案に対して断るとき、イギリスに住む英語母語話者（以下略してNSE）と日本に住む日本人英語学習者（以下略してJLE）では、使用する英語表現にどのような差異があるのかを比較、検証する。短期海外ホームステイで起こりうる場面を想定して「談話完成テスト」を作成し、イギリスと日本の大学において筆答による断り表現の調査を行った。「談話完成テスト」で得た英語表現をBeebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz (1990)の意味公式に照らして分析し、発見されたNSEとJLEの断り方の差違を報告する。

When Japanese people refuse invitations, requests, offers, and suggestions in Japanese, they usually try to refuse in a polite way. However, when they speak in a second language, it seems that Japanese speakers encounter many difficulties in refusing. This may be not only because of a lack of proficiency but also because of a lack of sociolinguistic knowledge in the target language. I will compare and analyze refusal expressions by Native Speakers of English (NSEs) and Japanese Learners of English (JLEs) in the situation of a short term home-stay in an English-speaking country. A discourse completion test (DCT) was conducted with NSE subjects and JLE subjects.

Research Procedure

Using Beebe, et al.'s (1990) research procedure, I collected data from two different groups, with a total of 42 subjects. One of the groups consisted of 18 NSEs, 9 male and 9 female, living in England, and the other consisted of 24 JLEs, 6 male and 18 female, living in Japan. The NSEs were science majors at Imperial College in London and the questionnaire survey was conducted in London in March, 2003. Their average age was 20. The JLEs were first-year students at Shizuoka University, majoring in education. The questionnaire survey for JLEs was conducted at Shizuoka University in May, 2003, and the students had just graduated from high school in Japan two months earlier. Their average age was 19.

All 42 subjects were asked to fill in a discourse completion test (DCT) in English, which was written as a role-play questionnaire consisting of 12 situations. The 12 situations were categorized into four types of refusal: requests, invitations, offers, and suggestions. An instance of each situation type was provided by 3 different statuses in the home-stay family, that is, a host mother / host father who is older than the respondent, a host sister who is the same age as the respondent, and a host brother who is younger than the respondent (see Appendix).

All 12 situations had Japanese translations for the JLEs. In this study, the JLEs' proficiency levels and their previous experience abroad were not examined. Neither were JLE respondents' gender differences examined in this study. The focus of this research is differences with frequency of semantic formulas between NSEs and JLEs when refusing to someone older, someone the same age, and someone younger.

I analyzed the results of the DCT with semantic formulas, i.e., classification by the meaning of the words. Beebe, et al. (1990) illustrated this method of classification as follows:

For example, if a respondent refused an invitation to a friend's house for dinner, saying "I'm sorry, I have theater tickets that night. Maybe I could come by later for a drink," this was coded as: {expression of regret} {excuse} {offer of alternative}. (Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990, p. 57)

Results Obtained

I applied Beebe, et al's semantic formulas. They initially categorized each response into two semantic formulas such as *direct decline* and *indirect decline*. They also categorized the *indirect decline* responses into 11 semantic formulas with subcategories. I used some of their semantic formulas and categorized my respondents' responses into 18 categories of functions as listed as in Table 1 following, such as *direct decline*, *attack or insult*, *curse*, *agreement*, *alternative*, *appreciation*, *asking-back*, *back-channeling*, *criticism*, *excuse*, *letting off the hook*, *pause filler*, *praise*, *promise*, *regret*, *joke or sarcasm*, *self-reliance*, and *setting of conditions*. Then I added up the frequency of the semantic formulas found in the respondents' answers and compared the tendencies of JLEs and NSEs.

An upward arrow [↑] in the table means refusing to someone older, an equal sign [=] means refusal to someone the same age, and a downward arrow [↓] means refusal to someone younger. They also are marked as 1, 2, and 3 for the next section. The semantic formulas which were strongly peculiar to JLEs were marked as [+], whereas those peculiar to NSEs were marked as [-] in Table 1. The blank cells mean "not any big differences."

The results obtained are as follows:

Table 1. General Comparative Results

A: Invitation			B: Request			C: Offer			D: Suggestion			Semantic formulas
↑ 1	= 2	↓ 3	↑ 1	= 2	↓ 3	↑ 1	= 2	↓ 3	↑ 1	= 2	↓ 3	
		-	+						-	-	-	Direct decline (e.g., “No. no, thanks.”)
												Attack or Insult (e.g., “Mind your business!”)
												Curse (e.g., “Shame on you!”)
								-				Agreement (e.g., “I’d really love to but....”)
-			-									Alternative (e.g., “How about asking your father?”)
							+	+	-			Appreciation (e.g., “Thank you for the offer but....”)
												Asking-back (e.g., “Could you please explain...?”)
												Back-channeling (e.g., “Really??”)
-	+											Criticism (e.g., “It’s completely inappropriate.”)
												Excuse (e.g., “I’m tired.”)
	-					+	-					Letting off the hook (e.g., “Don’t worry.”)
												Pause filler (e.g., “Uhh. Mmm.”)
												Praise (e.g., “I really like it on you though,...!”)
												Promise (e.g., “...next time.”)
+		+							+	+	+	Regret (e.g., “I’m sorry.”)
												Joke or Sarcasm (e.g., “I’ll look like a farm yard animal.”)
												Self-reliance (e.g., “I’ll do it myself.”)
			-									Setting of conditions (e.g., “...if you would give me more notice....”)

According to these results, the frequency of the semantic formulas is remarkably different between JLEs and NSEs when they refuse invitations in the categories of *direct decline*, *criticism*, *letting off the hook*, *alternative*, and *regret*. Second, when they refuse requests, JLEs and NSEs use remarkably different semantic formulas in the categories of *direct decline*, *alternative*, and *setting of conditions*. Third, when they refuse offers, JLEs and NSEs use remarkably different semantic formulas in the categories of *agreement*, *appreciation*, and *letting off the hook*. Fourth, when they refuse suggestions, JLEs and NSEs use different semantic formulas in the categories of *direct decline*, *appreciation*, and *regret*. I will analyze each of the results in more detail in the next section.

Refusing Invitations

When the respondents had to refuse the host father's invitation to go to the movies while his wife was out (Table 2, A-1), NSEs tended to *criticize* the invitation (14%) even though the interlocutor was older than the respondent. NSEs *criticized* the invitation by saying, "No, I don't think it is appropriate," or "It's completely inappropriate," or by offering an *alternative* (7%), "I think maybe you should ask them (the children) first." On the other hand, JLEs neither *criticized* nor presented an *alternative* (0%), but rather expressed feelings of *regret* (20%) with ambiguous expressions such as "I'm sorry. I am busy today," or "I have some plans." Actually, it is not clear whether JLEs realized that it was quite a dangerous invitation, but we can at least say that JLEs were less suspicious or tended to meekly disagree with older people, or tended to respond politely to

older people even if they realized that the invitation involved inappropriate implications.

The next invitation situation is when a host sister, the same age as the respondent, was asked to smoke marijuana (A-2). NSEs did not use the expressions of *criticism* (0%) but let the interlocutor *off the hook* (13%) by saying, "No, I'm fine," "I'm fine as I am," or asserted their own personal principles by saying, "It is not really my sort of thing." However, JLEs refused with *criticism* expressions (19%) but did not use *letting off the hook* expressions (0%). JLEs refused but tried to influence the interlocutor's habits or actions by saying, "No! You should stop smoking right now," or "It is bad for you to smoke marijuana."

Last, when a younger host brother invited them to come to his singing lesson (A-3), NSEs tended to refuse with *direct decline* (27%) but JLEs often used expressions of *regret* (38%).

Refusing Requests

When the host mother requested that the respondents take care of her baby for a day (Table 3, B-1), NSEs refused with *setting of conditions* (8%) by saying, "Oh, I'm sorry, I've already arranged to meet up with some friends, perhaps if you had asked me earlier," or "Maybe if you would give me more notice, next time I'd be happy to." They also used *alternative* (6%) expressions by saying, "I think it would be best if you got a babysitter." On the other hand, JLEs used neither *setting of conditions* nor *alternatives* but tended to use *direct decline* (11%) with ambiguous *excuses* by saying, "I can't do that," "I'm busy; I have something to do," or "Sorry, I can't; I have to study."

Table 2. Frequency of Semantic Formulas when Refusing Invitations

DCT item	Situation of Invitation	Refuse to the	Semantic formula	NSE (%)	JLE (%)
A-1	Go for a date	older	Excuse	34	39
			∴		
			Criticism	14	0
			Alternative	7	0
			Regret	5	20
A-2	Smoke marijuana	peer	Direct decline	53	49
			∴		
			Criticism	0	19
			Letting off the hook	13	0
A-3	Come to the singing lesson	younger	Excuse	35	41
			∴		
			Direct decline	23	7
			Regret	0	38

Table 3. Frequency of Semantic Formulas when Refusing Requests

DCT item	Situation of Request	Refuse to the	Semantic formula	NSE (%)	JLE (%)
B-1	Take care of baby	older	Excuse	42	45
			∴		
			Setting of conditions	8	0
			Alternative	6	0
			Direct decline	0	11

There are not any peculiar differences of semantic formulas between NSEs and JLEs in refusing requests from the peer's or the younger child's request. Both NSEs and NSEs refused with *excuse* or *criticism* but the contents were different. When the host sister asked them to do her homework while she was dating with her boyfriend (B-2), NSEs refused, using alternatives such as "I can give you some hints but I have too much to do tonight already." On the other hand, JLEs refused by saying, "No, I can't; that's not good for you." This expression also tends to interfere with the questioner's act, just like refusing the invitation (A-2).

Refusing Offers

When NSEs refused the elder's offer to drive them to school (Table 4, C-1), NSEs often used *appreciation* expressions (14%) and JLEs also often used *appreciation* expressions (18%). However, when refusing the peer's offer (C-2) to ask someone you like for a date, JLEs used *appreciation* expressions (23%), but NSEs used few *appreciation* expressions (5%) and instead, used *letting off the hook* expressions (11%) by saying, "That's OK, I'll do it myself."

It is an interesting finding that JLEs didn't use expressions of *letting off the hook* for the peer's offer at all (0%) but often used them for the elder's offer (22%) with *appreciation* by

Table 4. Frequency of Semantic Formulas when Refusing Offers

DCT item	Situation of Offer	Refuse to the	Semantic formula	NSE (%)	JLE (%)
C-1	Drive you to school	older	Excuse	47	31
			∴		
			Appreciation	14	18
C-2	Ask someone you like for a date	peer	Letting off the hook	11	22
			Self-reliance	32	43
			∴		
C-3	Do your homework	younger	Appreciation	5	23
			Letting off the hook	11	0
			Self-reliance	31	35
C-3	Do your homework	younger	∴		
			Appreciation	18	29
			Agreement	12	0
			Alternative	6	0

saying, “Thank you very much, but it’s okay,” or “Thanks, but I’m O.K to go to school; I’m just fine.” JLEs seem to be conscious of the age differences in refusing the offer.

When NSEs refused the youngster’s offer to do their homework (C-3) they tended to give *agreement* (13%) first and then gave the reason or *alternative* (12%) by saying, “I’m sure you do; but it’s important I do this for myself,” or “OK, here’s some paper to try on; if I’m still stuck in 1/2 hour I’ll ask you,” but JLEs didn’t give *agreement* (0%) or *alternatives* (0%).

Refusing Suggestions

When the host mother asked the respondents to go to church to study religion (Table 5, D-1), JLEs often used *regret* (27%) more often than NSEs (0%). JLEs used the

expressions of *regret* first then made *excuses* by saying, “I’m sorry, I will go shopping with my friends,” or “I’m sorry, I believe Buddha.” They often used the expression “I’m sorry,” even though they did not make a mistake. JLEs also expressed *regret* when refusing the host sister’s suggestion to get their nose pierced (D-2) (11%) and the suggestion from the younger host brother to have cookies they disliked (D-3) (23%). JLEs used *regret* for all ages of interlocutors. On the other hand, I found interesting expressions of NESs’ refusal to elders. They used expressions of *appreciation* (19%) first, then gave more specific reasons by saying, “Thanks but I think my parents would feel uncomfortable about it,” or “I’d rather not, thank you anyway, but I’m not sure my parents would be happy with me coming.” It seems that the excuse is on behalf of someone else in these refusals.

Table 5. Frequency of Semantic Formulas when Refusing Suggestions

DCT item	Situation of Suggestion	Refuse to the	Semantic formula	NSE (%)	JLE (%)
D-1	Go to church to study religion	older	Excuse	46	47
			:		
			Appreciation	19	2
			Regret	0	27
D-2	Make nose pierce	peer	Excuse	43	55
			Direct decline	37	28
			Regret	0	11
D-3	Suggest to eat cookies you dislike	younger	Excuse	47	49
			:		
			Direct decline	30	10
			Regret	7	23

In addition, NSEs often used *direct decline* to peers (39%) by saying, “No way!” “No thanks.” and also used *direct decline* to the younger (30%). We can see that JLEs tend to use the expressions of *regret*, but NSEs tend to use *direct decline* with more sophisticated excuses to the questioners.

Conclusion

I analyzed the data obtained from this research, described the similarities and differences between the politeness strategies of NSEs and JLEs, and found that NSEs and JLEs use different strategies for politeness. One of the interesting findings is the sense of politeness to elders. JLEs did not use *criticism* expressions to older people, but *criticized* people the same age. However NSEs *criticized* even when refusing someone older.

I also found in my research that JLEs tend to use expressions of *appreciation* when they refuse offers, but they do not use them in refusing suggestions. They often use *regret* expressions for the suggestions instead. JLEs often refused with *regret* expressions such as “I’m sorry, but I’m busy now,” or “Oh, I’m sorry, I have a plan.” JLEs’ expressions were also ambiguous. On the hand, NESs frequently gave *alternatives* by saying, “If I’m still stuck in 1/2 hour, I’ll ask you.” These findings relate to sociolinguistics, and I need to do more studies in this field.

NESs naturally refused with a greater variety of expressions than JLEs.

I must also mention that there are some limitations in this research. First, I collected data by Discourse Completion Test written in English. Therefore, the Japanese respondents’ responses might have been more limited than

what they would have said in a real interaction. The study should be undertaken with a larger number of subjects in order to improve its validity. This research needs further improvement in these areas. However, the 12 situations I employed in my research might happen when students attend short home-stay programs in a foreign country in the future. The refusal strategies of these NSEs may provide a useful resource for a class in cultural understanding, and I hope to conduct further research in this field in the future.

Reference

Beebe, L. M., Takahashi, T., & Uliss-Weltz, R. (1990). Pragmatic transfer in ESL refusals. In R. C. Scarcella, E. Andersen, & S. C. Krashen (Eds.), *On the developing of communicative competence in a second language* (pp. 55-73). New York: Newbury House.

Appendix: Discourse Completion Test Invitations

A-1 Refusal to the older age

You are watching TV in the living room. Your host father comes in and asks you the following:

Host father: Well, I’ve been thinking I would take you out for a date. My wife is out now. Shall we go to the cinema together?

You: _____

Host father: No, really, it’s okay.

You: _____

A-2 Refusal to the same age

Your host parents are out now. Your host sister (same age as you) is smoking marijuana.

Host sister: Would you like to try some?

You: _____

Host sister: Okay. But don't tell my parents about it, okay?!

A-3 Refusal to the younger age

When you come back from school, your host brother (5 years old) comes in and says the following:

Host brother: I'm going for my singing lesson. I'm really very good. Would you like to come listen to me sing? (You are not interested in listening.)

You: _____

Request

B-1 Refusal to the older age

On Sunday morning, your host mother comes and says to you the following:

Host mother: I'm going out with my friends today. I'll come back a little bit late tonight, so could you take care of my son for the day?

You: _____

B-2 Refusal to the same age

You are watching TV after school when your host sister (same age as you) comes in and asks you the following:

Host sister: I'm going out to see my boyfriend but I have some homework that I don't think I can finish by tomorrow. Could you finish it for me?

You: _____

Host sister: I'm sure it wouldn't be difficult for you. You could probably do it really quickly.

You: _____

B-3 Refusal to the younger age

Your host brother (5 years old) comes in and says the following:

Host brother: Hey, I'm building a plastic model airplane right now but I can't do it very well. Can you help me? (You are not interested in building models.)

You: _____

Host brother: Come on. I really need your help.

You: _____

Offer

C-1 Refusal to the older age

One morning, when you are about to go to school as usual, your host father comes in and says the following:

Host father: You look too tired to walk to school. Why don't I drive you to school on my tractor? It's a little bit noisy but it must be better than walking. Let's go!

You: _____

C-2 Refusal to the same age

You want to ask someone you really like for a date, but you are too shy to ask him/her. Then, you talk to your host sister (same age as you) about it.

Host sister: Oh, I know him/her. I'll ask him/her if he/she wants to go out with you. (The host sister always pokes into everyone's business.)

You: _____

C-3 Refusal to the younger age

You can't finish your homework but you are trying to do the best you can. Your host brother (5 years old) comes in and says the following:

Host brother: Shall I do your homework for you? I think I know more about our language than you do.

You: _____

Suggestion

D-1 Refusal to the older age

One Sunday morning your host mother comes in and says to you the following:

Host mother: It's Sunday today, so we all go to church (different religion from yours).

Why don't you come with us and learn about it?

You: _____

D-2 Refusal to the same age

Your host sister (same age as you) has a lot of body piercings, including her ears, her nose and her navel.

Host sister: Shall we get your nose pierced? It may hurt a little bit but I think you can stand it.

You: _____

Host sister: Come on! You will look a lot cooler with a pierced nose.

You: _____

D-3 Refusal to the younger age

The country's food is different from your taste. But the host brother loves his mother's cooking and always asks you to try it. The host brother (5 years old) comes and says the following.

Host brother: You have to try these cookies. They're really delicious!

You: _____