

Short Communication**Using Speech Act and Interaction Theory to Capture Learner Difficulties: An L2 Pragmatic Approach***Juliane House^{*1}, Dániel Z. Kádár²*¹University of Hamburg, German / HUN-REN Hungarian Research Centre for Linguistics, Hungary / Hellenic American University, Greece and USA²Dalian University of Foreign Languages, China / HUN-REN Hungarian Research Centre for Linguistics, Hungary / University of Maribor, Slovenia

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Abstract

In this academic note, we aim to outline the foundations of a major L2 pragmatic project that we have been engaged in over the past few years. We believe the readers may find our system and its typology relevant to their own research studies. Central categorical parts of the project; that is to say, *speech acts* and *interaction*, are introduced in detail. More illustrations are followed using typical Persian examples on how refusal, as a popular category of speech acts in L2 (cross-cultural) pragmatics, can be analysed in our system, keeping in mind the target audience of the present contribution.

Keywords: Cross-cultural Pragmatics, Foreign Language Learning, Interaction, L2 Pragmatics, Refusal, Speech Act Typology

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1. Introduction

In this academic note, we aim to present the foundations of a major L2 pragmatic project that we have been engaged in for a number of years and that we believe may be relevant to the readers of the journal. Central categorical parts of the project are *speech acts* and *interaction*.

2. Speech Act Typology

With regard to speech acts, we rely on a minimalist and finite speech act typology. This typology was first created by Edmondson and House (1981), which was much more developed and expanded by Edmondson et al. (2023) in a new form most recently. Figure 1 displays our radically minimal, interactional typology of speech acts:

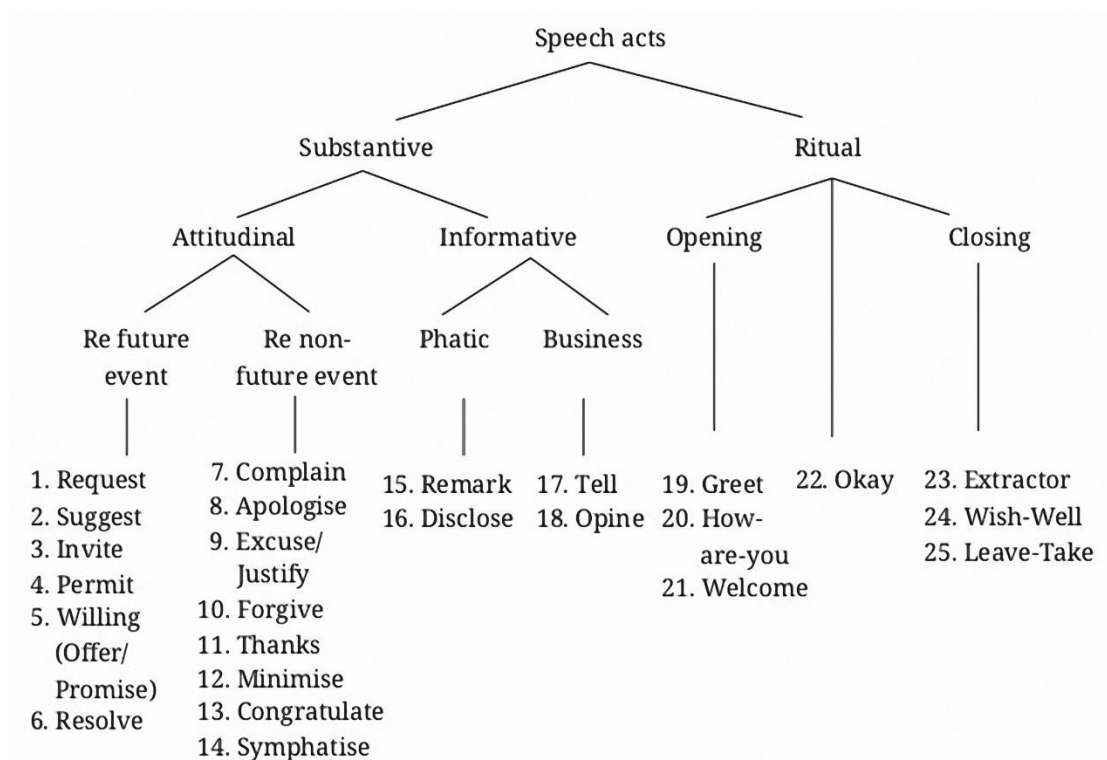


Figure 1.

Minimal, Interactional Typology of Speech Acts

Having a finite typology allows us to identify and analyse speech acts in a rigorous and replicable, avoiding freely creating new speech act categories. Ever since pioneer scholars such as John L. Austin and John Searle developed the Speech Act Theory in

1960s, the idea that speech act categories need to be finite has been present in pragmatics (Habermas, 1979; Kissine, 2013; Levinson, 2017; Vanderveken, 1990). The idea of finiteness precludes ‘discovering’ new and culturally-specific speech acts, including L2-relevant speech acts *ad libitum*. The speech acts in our system are such simple and basic constituents of language use that they can easily be used in a replicable way in the study of interaction across languages and datatypes. We tested the cross-cultural applicability of the speech act categories with the aid of various corpora, including e.g. English, German, Chinese and Japanese data, and also in L2 settings (see an overview in House & Kádár, 2024).

3. Interaction Theory

Our speech act typology is supplemented by our interaction system, originally devised by Edmondson (1981), which we also included in Edmondson et al. (2023). According to this system, a speech act (or speech act-sequence) realised as an Initiating interactional move may be Satisfied, ‘Countered’ or ‘Contra-ed’. Satisfying refers to speech acts through which the Initiating speech act is accepted. Countering refers to speech acts through which the Initiating speech is objected to but not entirely rejected, whereas if an Initiating utterance is turned down entirely, it is ‘Contra-ed.’

This system not only allows us to break down interaction into components but also to bring together speech acts and interactional moves, differentiating illocutionary categories from interactional categories. For example, when analysing cases where a speech act is rejected, we do not talk about the speech act of ‘refusal’ – a popular category in L2 pragmatics – but rather consider which speech acts are used to Counter another speech, i.e., refusal for us is an interactional move which is far more complex than a speech act.

4. Analysis of Refusal as a Speech Act

As an example, let us expand on how refusal can be analysed in our system. The following excerpt from Allami and Naeimi (2011) illustrates how refusal was often treated in the field of L2 pragmatics. Allami and Naeimi considered how Iranian learners of English as a second language realise refusal in various situations – the following excerpt illustrates the case of refusing an invitation:

Regarding the respondents’ declining invitations, expression of excuse and regret was the most frequently used strategy. Broadly speaking, since Iranians mitigated the

refusals more than Americans and used more expressions of regret, solidarity, promise, gratitude, and statement of positive opinion, their overall refusal tone seemed softer than those of Americans. Traces of possible pragmatic transfer were found in EFL learners' content of semantic formulas. For instance, a lower-intermediate student in refusing the invitation of his boss wrote "oh, really. I'm very happy from hearing this suggestion. But if you let me, I don't come because I am sick". Taking a look at the counterpart of this utterance to the Persian questionnaire, we are bound to admit the role of the learners' L1:

- *Man az shanidane in pishnehad xeyli xoshhaalam, vali age ejaze bedid sherkat nakonam.* [I am very happy from hearing this suggestion, but if you let me, I don't take part].

Some other instances are as follows:

- Sorry, but I have visit with my doctor (an intermediate's response).
- No, I can't. I have to go outside for a work (an intermediate's response).
- That is a proud for me. I wanna come, but my son is waiting for me. I'm really sorry (an upper-intermediate's response). (p. 393)

There are two reasons why defining refusal as a speech act is problematic. First, refusal can come into existence through many different speech acts. To illustrate this point, let us consider the three examples from the excerpt above through a more detailed speech act point of view:

Example (1)

Sorry, but I have visit with my doctor.

Here, the speaker first utters *sorry*, which indicates the speech act Apologise, and then he utters a Justify to explain the reason why he cannot accept the invitation of the other. In terms of speech acts, here we have an Apologise → Justify sequence on hand.

Example (2)

No, I can't. I have to go outside for a work.

The utterance "No, I can't" is a typical Informative Tell – the speaker here provides information about his circumstances. He then realises a Justify to explain his situation. In terms of speech acts, we have a Tell → Justify sequence on hand.

Example (3)

That is a proud for me. I wanna come, but my son is waiting for me. I'm really sorry.

The wrongly formulated "This is a proud for me" is a typical Opine through which the other gets complimented. "I wanna come" is a Tell through which the speaker indicates his intention to accept the invitation, and "but my son is waiting for me" is an Excuse. The refusal ends with an Apologise. In terms of speech acts, here we witness an Opine → Tell → Excuse → Apologise sequence. If we put these three examples under a single umbrella

of refusal, we unavoidably overlook the fact that pragmatically, they are very different because they consist of different speech acts of a varying number. By failing to differentiate them, we may also lose sight of the fact that there is one returning speech act in all these cases: Excuse.

It seems that, at least as far as the examples above are concerned, the speech act Excuse is at the heart of how an invitation can get refused, and so if we wish to understand why and how L2 learners can successfully refuse an invitation in the context under investigation, we need to consider realisation patterns and the content of the particular speech act Excuse. In a classroom, it may also be much more efficient for a teacher to discuss the phenomenon of Excuse than talking about the broader and much more ambiguous interactional phenomenon of refusal.

Secondly, another reason why defining refusal as a speech act remains tricky is based on an interaction-centred argument. Interactionally speaking, by using ‘refusal’ as a grand concept to describe phenomena where Requests, Invites and so on are rejected, we unavoidably oversimplify interaction itself. In real-life language use, one often Counters Requests, Invites and other speech acts without explicitly refusing them. Consider Example (4):

Example (4)

Harry: Shall we eat out?	SPEECH ACT: INVITE
	INTERACTIONAL MOVE: INITIATE
Nancy: Right now, things are a bit crazy.	SPEECH ACT: TELL
	INTERACTIONAL MOVE: COUNTER
How about a week later?	SPEECH ACT: SUGGEST
	MOVE: RE-INITIATE

While Nancy here ‘refuses’ the invitation, she realises a Suggest as a polite alternative. It can, therefore, be said that ‘refusal’ is often something that is not final and which immediately leads to an interactional ‘negotiation.’ But let us assume that Nancy wishes to refuse Harry’s Invite. Even in such a case, it is less likely that she would utter a blunt Contra move leading to the termination of the interaction – it is more realistic that she would provide speech act sequences representing a Counter move, implying that Harry would still need to say something in response. To illustrate this point, let us slightly revise Example (4) and consider Example (5):

Example (5)

Harry: Shall we eat out?	SPEECH ACT: INVITE
	INTERACTIONAL MOVE: INITIATE
Nancy: Sorry,	SPEECH ACT: APOLOGISE
	INTERACTIONAL MOVE: COUNTER
but I have visit with my doctor.	SPEECH ACT: JUSTIFY
Harry: Oh, poor darling.	SPEECH ACT: SYMPATHISE
	INTERACTIONAL MOVE: RE-INITIATE
What happened?	SPEECH ACT: REQUEST (FOR INFORMATION)

The information provided by Nancy would likely trigger some form of reaction from Harry, and as such, it would function as an excellent tool to build rapport despite that Harry's Invite gets refused. L2 learners could gain important information from presenting refusal in such an interactional way by considering how speech acts relate to one another: they could be explained that providing an effective Excuse is important because it decreases the impact of a refusal. As part of discussing this issue, a fundamental second language educational subject would be exactly how a successful excuse is to be realised in the learner's target language.

In our L2 pragmatic research, we have devoted particular attention to the phenomenon of irritation on the part of learners of a second language. We have, therefore, often approached L2 learning as an intercultural experience. For example, if many L2 learners of English experience puzzlement and irritation regarding the ways in which L1 speakers realise the speech act Excuse in the context of refusal, we compare the realisation patterns of the speech act Excuse in the learner's L1 and L2, in order to look at the heart of learner irritations.

5. Conclusion

In this academic note, we have outlined the basics of an L2 pragmatic project which we have conducted over the past few years. Readers with further interest in our work are advised to consult one of the following sources: House and Kádár (2021, 2023, 2024) or House et al. (2023).

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