Writing Strategies in English and Chinese Email Invitations: a Cross-cultural Speech Act Study

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Abstract

The present study explored writing strategies of two groups of Chinese and English-speaking participants in order to compare their realization patterns when composing invitations by email. There were 12 dependent variables in the study which related to certain structural, semantic, and pragmatic features of the participants’ emails and writing strategies. The main aim of the study was to compare frequencies of these writing strategies to determine whether there were any significant differences between the two groups of participants when performing this particular speech act by email, and whether speakers/writers from different native language backgrounds would show variation in their email wirings. The analysis involved designing coding systems to categorize and analyze specific items within each of 12 dependent variables in order to compare frequency counts to determine whether any significant difference existed between the two groups realization patterns when performing this particular speech act. The study employed Chi square analysis with categorical data and t-test analysis with continuous data. Overall, the results of the study showed that there were significant differences between frequencies in 11 of the 12 writing strategies, and generally the two groups showed different preferences for linguistic and paramatigic elements in their realization patterns of this particular speech act. This is generally consistent with previous research that has concluded that differences exist in speech act realization patterns and pragmatic choices of groups from different sociocultural and L1 backgrounds.

Key Words: Computer-mediated communication (CMC), writing strategies, speech acts, cross-cultural linguistic variation

1. Speech Acts and Emails

The relatively recent emergence and continually growing popularity of email and other forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) has prompted a nascent, yet rapidly emerging body of research into linguistic study of technologically mediated discourse, particularly in terms of speech acts that are carried out in such media (Lampert, Dale, & Paris, 2006).

1.1 Email Etiquette

Considerations of appropriate etiquette and acceptable format and content are important considerations when dealing with email as a tool for communication. The Microsoft Office
website asks, "Don't you wish that every person who received a new e-mail account had to agree to follow certain rules to use it? There are certain professional standards expected for e-mail use" (http://office.microsoft.com). There are numerous online sources for appropriate email etiquette (e.g. 101emailiquietettips.com. and emailreplies.com) which stress the need for awareness of conventions and considerations of politeness and formality. Watts (2003) outlined certain conventions and considerations of appropriate email structure and content, including: (1). Full address (salutation and greeting). E.g. Dear Mrs. Smith; (2) Appropriate politeness expressions. E.g. please, thank you; (3) Suitable closings. E.g. best wishes, kind regards (4) Use of modal verbs. E.g. may I ask you, would you consider.

Despite awareness of such conventions, email etiquette and considerations of formality are often foregone for brevity and more informal communicative forms. Studies of the characteristics of email language in a variety of sender-recipient contexts and situations have revealed a wide range of linguistic and stylistic features and have generally shown that email structure and stylistic content lies on a continuum from more informal, like spoken language, to more formal, like writing (Baron, 2002, 2003; Crystal, 2001; Davis & Brewer, 1997; Herring, 1996, 2002). Other research into the linguistic patterns of email has concluded a general cross-cultural tendency towards informality, directness and brevity when non-native speakers of English (hereafter, NNS) compose emails in English (Baron 2002; Lan 2000).

2. Language Variation between Chinese and English

One consideration of potential variation in email communication is that of rhetorical style and information structure, particularly when dealing with English and Chinese writing. In western countries there is a general preference for the main point to be stated early in the paragraph and then deductively developed subsequently through the paragraph in a cohesive and coherent manner. On the other hand certain oriental cultures tend to write from general examples and supporting information to a specific topic or focus and from general principles to facts, inductively where the main topic or focus comes at the end (Kaplan, 1966). The distinction between deductive and inductive writing styles certainly is relevant to a study of email speech act realization and there is a need for greater awareness of the similarities and differences between writing in contrasting languages, as perceptions of deductivity and directness could influence the successful transmission of a particular message. Not everyone, however, agrees with this perspective, and Kaplan’s ideas have been challenged on a number of levels. Mohan and Lo (1985), criticized Kaplan’s assumptions of the indirectness of Chinese compositions. They showed evidence from two other books on contemporary Chinese writing which generally promoted clarity and directness in style, and discouraged writers form employing an overtly indirect approach to topic development.

Another salient example of inter L1 variation between Chinese and English writing strategies is in varying forms of address. Forms of address reflect culturally bound rules for appropriate and acceptable communication. Since forms of address can indicate social relations between interlocutors (Brown & Gilman, 1990) they can inevitably reflect interpersonal relationship in a specific culture or a certain language context. Oatey (1987), mentioned the need “to consider how addressing is conveyed in English and Chinese, and to what extent there are differences between the two cultures in this respect” (p. 22).

Other areas of variation between Chinese and English are related to directness. According to Zhang (1995), interviews with Chinese subjects showed that indirectness is more closely related to information sequencing than illocutionary transparency. Kirkpatrick (1991) concluded
that English discourse tends to arrange arguments from request to reasons for request. The opposite is true of Chinese who tend to develop a proposition from reasons for request to the request in a 'because-therefore' structure. Kirkpatrick explained that the main reason contributing to a 'because-therefore' sequence is to reduce the imposition caused by the request. This is related to rhetorical style and semantic structure (Faerch and Kasper 1989, Wang 2010, Hong 1999). Song (1994) observed that, “Chinese speakers...consistently display a preference for direct request forms...with impositives showing an extremely high percentage of usage” (p. 493). Directness is a pragmatic choice made due to considerations of efficiency and clarity, which can involve directness in terms of the actual message or in terms of general semantic formula and rhetorical style, both of which could affect perceptions politeness. In additional to rhetorical, syntactic, and structural considerations, there is also potential for variation between native speakers of English (NSE) and native speakers of Chinese (NSC) in terms of pragmatic strategic choices and SAR patterns, as shown in previous research. Chen (1993), Liao and Bresnahan (1996), Song and Liu (2002). Generally, it is assumed that Chinese discourse tends to be arranged in a more inductive way, with small talk and other adjuncts proceeding the main illocutionary head act of a speech act. Also it has been evident that Chinese tends to be more direct in the nature of the head act, when compared with English (Kasper 1995, Zhang, 1995). One possible reason for this could be that English has a more highly developed system of tenses and modality, which allow for greater internal modification and mitigation of potential face threats, whereas the Chinese modal system is not as inclined towards internal modification. Such modification and mitigation is related to deictical, temporal, and psychological distance. Internal modifications allow for more options regarding these mitigating devices. Since Chinese is arguably less-oriented towards internal mitigation than English, there is a need for greater external modification, which is generally achieved through small talk and preparatory acts in a more inductive way than in English.

3. Research Gap

Previous research on invitations as one kind of specific speech act has shown cross-cultural variation in a number of areas Eslami (2005), Al-Khatib (2006), Félix-Brasdefer (2003), Chen, Li, and Rau (2013), however the number of studies is quite limited. Despite the growing corpora of research into cross-cultural speech act realizations and variation, there is an evident lack of studies regarding invitations, particularly in CMC contexts, which are especially relevant in an increasingly technologically oriented world. The present study was therefore designed to help fill the current gap in the area of speech act studies on invitations, particularly in the context of a comparison of English and Mandarin realization behavior patterns, as well as to assess the influences of the social variables gender and status on the participants’ email writing patterns. It is hoped that the results of the study can contribute to the general corpora of speech act realization behavior and contribute to the recently emerging field of CMC pragmatics.

4. Methodology

The main aim of the present study was to identify, categorize, and compare the participants’ speech act realization patterns in terms of 12 writing strategies in email invitations. The 12 writing strategies represent the dependent variables in the study. The analysis involved inter-L1 group comparisons to determine whether there were any significant differences between the participants’ realization patterns. Following initial categorization of the participants’ email content, subsequent comparison of frequency counts of the dependent variables was done with
appropriate SPSS analysis. Dependent variables 1-9 are categorical data and variables 10-12 are continuous. The categorical data was analyzed by Chi Square and the continuous data was analyzed by t-test. All tests assumed a $p < 0.05$ confidence interval/alpha level of significance.

4.1 Research Question
The present study explored the following research question: Are there significant differences between the overall frequencies of writing strategies of the two L1 groups of participants when writing invitations by email?

4.2 General Hypothesis
Significant difference will exist between the two L1 groups in frequencies of strategy use when writing invitations by email.

4.3 Participants
The participants were personally known to me either socially or professionally and were recruited by email. Some helped to recruit some other participants that I did not personally know. They were grouped according to their L1 and their gender. Each L1 group had 50 males and 50 females to ensure that gender was not a confounding variable in the analysis of the data. The participants were all between ages 35-45 and had a professional background in the field of education with at least a bachelor’s degree. These parameters were established to ensure that age and occupational background were not confounding variables in the analysis of the data, and to create a relatively homogeneous grouping method.

4.4 Data Collection Instrument and Description
The present study used discourse completion task (DCT)-style prompts and asked participants to write email to six different people to invite them to a party. Each DCT scenario in the study varied according to the social variables of the recipients’ gender (female or male) and relative status (higher, equal, or lower). This was to ensure parallel socio-cultural contexts for the participants in which to write.

The data were identified, categorized, and counted according to specific linguistic and pragmatic features. An initial coding scheme was developed to classify specific examples of these features in both languages in order to conduct thorough and comprehensive comparisons between the two L1 groups. The coding scheme was organic in the sense that it was modified to accommodate examples not already included in the initial classifications. For example, ‘Welcome’ (which was not in the original coding scheme) was used quite frequently as a head act, especially in Chinese. Also, after consultation with expert native-speaker inter-raters from both L1 certain modal verbs were rearranged to represent varying levels of relative directness. Such adjustments are natural when dealing with large amounts of language data, as participants’ output does not always conform to specific items in the pre-determined classification coding system.

4.5 Dependent Variables
The present study explored 12 dependent variables which relate to specific linguistic and pragmatic strategies that the participants employed when composing email invitations to the various recipients in the DCT prompts. The dependent variables in the present study are: 1.Salutations; 2.Forms of Address; 3.Closings; 4.Preparatory Acts; 5.Head Acts (HA); 6.(HA) Directness; 7.HA Syntactical Category; 8.Supporting Moves (SM); 9.Involvement-oriented SM;
SPSS Chi-square tests were conducted for nine variables that used categorical data, and t-tests were conducted with three variables that used continuous data. Results of the analyses for each dependent variable are presented below:

**4.5.1 Salutations:** A 2 x 4 chi-square test was performed and found significant difference between the two L1 groups, \( X^2 (3, N = 1200) = 246.94, p < .001 \).

**4.5.2 Forms of Address:** A 2 x 4 chi-square test was performed and found significant difference between the two L1 groups, \( X^2 (3, N = 1200) = 274.56, p < .001 \).

**4.5.3 Closings:** A 2 x 5 chi-square test was performed and found significant difference between the L1 groups, \( X^2 (4, N = 1200) = 39.27, p < .001 \).

**4.5.4 Preparatory Acts:** A 2 x 3 chi-square test was performed and found significant difference between the L1 groups, \( X^2 (2, N = 1200) = 64.62, p < .001 \).

**4.5.5 Head Acts:** A 2 x 18 chi-square test was performed and found significant difference between the L1 groups, \( X^2 (17, N = 1200) = 501.54, p < .001 \).

**4.5.6 Relative Directness of Head Acts:** A 2 x 6 chi-square test was performed and found significant difference between the L1 groups, \( X^2 (5, N = 1200) = 269.71, p < .001 \).

**4.5.7 Syntactical Category of Head Acts:** A 2 x 2 chi-square test was performed and found no significant difference between the L1 groups, \( X^2 (1, N = 1200) = 0.02, p = .883 \).

**4.5.8. Supporting Moves:** A 2 x 11 chi-square test was performed and found significant difference between the L1 groups, \( X^2 (10, N = 4800) = 497.32, p < .001 \).

**4.5.9 Rhetorical Style of Semantic Formula:** A 2 x 5 chi-square test was performed and found significant difference between the L1 groups, \( X^2 (4, N = 1200) = 143.81, p < .001 \).

**4.5.10. Involvement-oriented Supporting Moves:** There was significant difference between the NSE group (Mean = 0.98, SD = 0.68) and the NSC group (M = 1.11, SD = 0.66); t(1198) = -3.14, \( p = .002 \).

**4.5.11. Independency-oriented Supporting Moves:** There was significant difference between the NSE group (M = 1.04, SD = 0.75) and the NSC group (M = 0.75, SD = 0.65); t(1176) = 7.12, \( p < .001 \).

**4.5.12 Word Count:** There was significant difference between the NSE group (Mean = 59.95, SD = 10.22) and the NSC group (M = 55.26, SD = 10.98); t(1192) = 7.65, \( p < .001 \).

5. Summaries of the Data Analysis Results
5.6 Relative Directness of Head Act
Significant difference was found between the two groups. The Chinese group was generally relatively more direct in terms of the directness scale of the IFID in the head acts.

5.7 Syntactical Category of Head Acts
No significant difference was found between the two groups. Both groups overwhelmingly favored speaker-based declaratives and performatives over hearer-based interrogatives and suggestives. Both groups preferred a similar syntactical approach to the particular speech act, despite showing different preferences related to directness.

5.8 Supporting Moves
Significant difference was found between the two groups. The English group preferred to use descriptions of event, details of event, request for confirmation, enthusiasm, and expectation. The Chinese group preferred to use description of event, enthusiasm, queries on R's availability, details of event, and expectation. Despite similar preferences for some supporting moves, there are evident differences between the two groups’ frequencies of the particular items. Both groups tended to use description of event, details of event, enthusiasm and expectation. However the English group used request for confirmation more and the Chinese group used queries on R's availability more.

5.9 Rhetorical Style
Significant difference was found between the two groups. It is evident that the English group showed a general preference for more deductive rhetorical styles; while the Chinese group exhibited a preference for more inductive styles.

5.10 Involvement-oriented Supporting Moves
Significant difference was found between the two groups. The Chinese group used more involvement supporting moves than the English group. This supports the hypothesis that native Chinese speakers are more oriented towards collectivism and involvement strategies over individualism and autonomy.

5.11 Independency-oriented Supporting Moves
Significant difference was found between the two groups. The English group used more independency supporting moves than the Chinese group. This supports the hypothesis that native English-speaking cultures are more oriented towards independence and autonomy strategies over involvement and collectivism.

5.12 Word Count
Significant difference was found between the two groups. The English group wrote more words on average than the Chinese group. This is perhaps related to the preference for semantic formula, in which the English group used formulae with more component parts than did the Chinese group.

6. General Findings
Overall there was clear variation in the speech act realization patterns both between the L1 groups. Statistically significant differences were found in eleven of the twelve dependent variables. This is evidence of cross cultural variance in SAR behavior of the participants in the context of the present study. Whether or not these findings are applicable to other contexts raises opportunities for further research in these areas. It would be interesting to see whether the findings and conclusions regarding the dependent variables in the present study are similar in other contexts with other speech acts and perhaps other forms of CMC.

References:


