An Exploratory analysis of the English Excuses in Refusal Speech Acts of Korean EFL Learners

Bohyon Chung[1] and Jongbok Lee[2]

[1]Dept. of English Language and Literature, Hanbat National University,

[2]Dept. of English Education, Mokwon University

bchung@hanbat.ac.kr, jblee@mokwon.ac.kr

Abstract

The paper reports on an attributional analysis of the English excuses in the refusal speech acts by Korean EFL learners. The refusal speech acts are generally found to be accompanied by giving excuses. It is also the case when the refusals in English are produced by Korean EFL learners (Chung et al., 2013). On the basis of the previous findings, the current study aims to analyze the excuses for causal properties (locus and controllability). The participants included 36 Korean undergraduate students who have TOEIC scores over 700. The data were collected by the responses to 3 items of written Discourse Completion Task, which were made to three addressees depending on relative powers (i.e. higher, equal, and lower status). Excuses from the responses were initially categorized based on Weiner et al. (1987)'s study. Excuse patterns for different addressee of social statuses based on findings from an attributional analysis are discussed.

Keywords

Attributional analysis, Excuses for refusals, Refusal speech acts

Introduction

Giving excuse[1] is categorized as an indirect refusal according to the classification of refusal semantic strategy (Beebe et al., 1990). Considered as an indirect way of refusal, it tends to be employed to function as a mitigating device for refusals on account of their "face-threatening (Brown & Levinson, 1987)" nature. Excuses in the refusal speech acts are commonly produced in response to be polite and to protect the positive face of the recipient.

In the current study, excuses from Korean EFL learners will be examined to understand their specific features appeared in Korean community. It is hypothesized that there are different underlying causal dimensions in the excuses based on an attributional analysis when responding to a higher, an equal, and a lower status addressee.

1 Research method

1.1 Participants

The data were collected during two semesters from 2013 to 2014 at two different universities. The data were eliminated from the samples when all responses were too short to examine or did not indicate the TOEIC score of the participants. Accordingly, the data sets from a total number of 36 were analyzed. The TOEIC scores ranged from 700 to 980. According to a report on TOEIC test results from YBM sisa (n.d.), the age between 21-25 scored 676.08 in average on April 30, 2016. Comparing to the average score from the report, all participants in this study can be fairly viewed that they are in high-intermediate level of English proficiency

1.2 Instruments

A discourse completion test (DCT) questionnaire was administered to collect the refusal speech acts. The questionnaire includes three refusal provoking situations in the form of written role-play. Social power of addressee is the conditioning factor among the situations, as Brown and Levinson (1987) pointed out the social power of addressee does give an impact on politeness. The three items of questionnaire thereby would be expected to yield different

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[1] In this article, the terms excuse, explanation, reason are used synonymously.

tendencies for giving excuses depending on the social powers.

1.3 Data analysis

A content analysis was done to indicate the content categories that Korean EFL learners are likely to employ in the refusals. In addition, an attributional analysis was to characterize the excuses in relation to causal properties proposed by Weiner et al. (1987). Three underlying properties of causes are 1) locus (internal-external), 2) controllability (controllable-uncontrollable), and 3) intention (intentional-unintentional). Two raters coded each excuse in terms of three causal properties. If any discrepancies are found in the analysis for causal properties, they were reviewed and discussed by two raters until total agreement is reached.

2 Results and discussions

The findings in the current study do support initial hypothesis that attributional properties are manipulated by a social factor. Different properties of causalities in the excuses of refusal speech acts for three distinguished social variables: higher, equal, and lower social status of addresser.

When Korean EFL learners were asked to refuse toward a colleague (status equal) or to a student (lower social status), excuses were likely to provide detailed reason ascribing External – Uncontrollable – Unintentional factor, thereby considered as formulating an appropriate excuse (Weiner et al., 1987). Meanwhile, an unexpected result was found in the excuses made to an addresser with a higher social position. The excuses toward higher status addressee were not clear enough to be categorized by attributional analysis. Despite Korean EFL learners provided the 'vague' excuses, they tend to attribute themselves (internal locus) citing their own busy schedule, or their lack of ability for refusing an offer. This finding confirms Korean hierarchical cultural context in that Korean EFL learners are likely to provide ambiguous excuses to a higher status interlocutor whereas they would feel more ease at to equal or lower status addresser resulting in more specified excuses. It may be of interest to the pragmatic instruction area that this vague or not strong enough type of excuses have been illustrated to be problematic (Beebe et al., 1990).

3 Limitations

There are a number of limitations that must be considered. First, the present study only involves one social factor, the social status of addressee, thus more various social variables should be taken into a consideration in the future study. Secondly, due to the small sample size, it can decrease the generalizability of the findings to other Korean EFL learners. Thirdly, using the DCT questionnaire may have produced gaps with the real speech act productions, thus it is required to apply appropriate method in the future study.

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