

Code-switching as an Indirect Refusal Strategy in Business Workplace Discourse

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Abstract: This paper explores the social function of code-switching as an indirect refusal strategy in business workplace discourse. Workplace discourse often deals with various strategies of making requests, expressing refusal to the requests, negotiating over decisions and exercising power through language. The social function of code-switching plays an important role in bilingual workplace discourse and has an effect on the negotiation between interlocutors. By analyzing an excerpt from a Chinese movie, *Go Lala Go*, code-switching is found to be employed when one of the interlocutors shifts to a new topic, adjusts social distance, attempts to construct a particular sentence structure in one language, or assigns obligations and rights, in order to achieve certain communicative goals. Ultimately, this paper argues that the use of code-switching during negotiation reveals an asymmetrical power relation in the workplace.

Keywords: workplace communication, business discourse, code-switching, refusal strategy, power relation

1. Introduction

This paper explores bilingual refusal in business workplace discourse by drawing on recent studies of workplace discourse analysis, indirect refusal strategies, as well as the social function of code-switching in business setting. Workplace discourse often deals with various strategies of making requests, expressing refusal to the requests, negotiating over decisions and exercising power through language. Beebe et al [1] established taxonomy of refusal strategies, including direct and indirect ones, that can be applied to analyzing workplace discourse. When it comes to a bilingual setting, where more than one language is used in the workplace, code-switching comes into view and interplays with status, power, and relationship in a particular context. An excerpt from a Chinese movie, *Go Lala Go*, is selected to demonstrate bilingual refusal during professional discourse in a transnational corporation in Beijing. By analyzing data from this movie, I aim to first discuss several indirect refusal strategies by adopting the framework of Beebe, et al [1], and analyze the social function of code-switching as an additional strategy of refusal in workplace discourse. Ultimately, I argue that the bilingual refusal strategies adopted in the data reveals an asymmetric power relation between a female subordinate and a male expatriate in the business workplace.

2. Literature Review

2.1. "Indirect refusal strategies" in the workplace

Workplace discourse often deals with various strategies of making requests, expressing refusal to the requests, negotiating over decisions and exercising power through language. The notion of "refusal", according to Kline and Ford [2, 3], refers to "an attempt to bring about behavioural change" by persuading the other interlocutor to withdraw his/her request, and the core component of this notion is "a denial or an expression of unwillingness" to grant a request [4].

Previous empirical studies have explored how refusal is constructed in the workplace and developed a taxonomy of refusal strategies [1], in which five "indirect refusal strategies" are identified, namely "statement of regret", "excuse/reason/explanation", "statement of alternative", "acceptance that functions as a refusal", and "avoidance". Specifically, the two strategies "excuse/reason/explanation" and "statement of alternative" are featured in the selected data and therefore need to be further explained here. As the name implies, "excuse/reason/explanation" is to bring up a specific issue -- which may or may not be true -- that stops the person from complying with the request. It often takes place in a situation where the involved person chooses to prioritize

something of greater urgency (e.g. my sister got into a car accident), or encounters a time clash (e.g. I have already made an appointment with my dentist). Additionally, “statement of alternative” is when a person constructs a refusal indirectly by suggesting an alternative solution, such as postponement or change of venue.

2.2. Code-switching: another indirect refusal strategy

The study of bilingualism in the workplace has demonstrated interest in the role of code-switching in workplace discourse. However, there are numerous possibilities for the immediate context of bilingualism, and we need to attain a brief overview of the language situation before we can go on to talk about the role of code-switching in a chosen context.

In this paper, I will focus on the simultaneous use of English and Mandarin Chinese in business settings in Mainland China. Under the influence of globalization, English has become a ‘lingua franca’ in international business, and is used by bilingual Chinese employees and their western expatriates in transnational corporations in China [5]. English has enjoyed a prestigious status in Chinese business setting, and being able to speak English often signifies the possession of knowledge, status, and power.

The presence of bilingualism in the workplace gives rise to another sociolinguistic phenomenon: code-switching. Code-switching is typically defined as “switching between two different languages as well as between two different styles or varieties of one language” [6]. According to Muysken [7], there are two major patterns of code-switching, alternation and insertion. The pattern featured in this paper is “alternation”, which refers to a switch from one language to another that involves “both grammar and lexicon”, with no embedding of lexicons from a language into the syntactic structure of another language. Alternation often takes place “between utterance in a turn or between turns” [7]. The role of code-switching in workplace can be analyzed into transactional function and social function. Transactional function is used to ensure that information is communicated in an accurate and unambiguous way, whereas the social function of code-switching relates to the construction of identity, relationship, and status in a particular context [8]. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the social function of code-switching, and explore how it serves as an indirect refusal strategy and reveals the asymmetric power relation in the workplace.

According to Myers-Scotton and Ury [9], the social function of code-switching is an attempt to “redefine the interaction as appropriate to a different social arena”, with corresponding change to social distance. Previous research on the social function of code-switching labels it as a “conversational strategy”, which interplays with the negotiating aspects of the speech situation, including topics, the participants identities and relationship [10]. Additionally, attempts have been made to explain code-switching as to “generate the conversational implicatures” with regard to the rights and obligations between the interlocutors [11]. The acts of demonstrating rights and assigning obligations during an interaction can be achieved by switching between two languages in workplace discourse.

In particular, the practice of initiating and maintaining the

switch enables the construction of power relation between interlocutors. By initiating or maintaining a switch, the speaker may be “converging” through accommodating to his/her interlocutor’s language choice, or he/she may be emphasizing on “divergence” and trying to increase the social distance with the other interlocutor [12]. The function of maintaining the switch as to converge with the interlocutor and to reflect subordination is significant in understanding bilingual speakers’ intention of switching codes, while initiating a switch can be considered an act of divergence and power exercise. Given the characteristics of alternation, it is therefore noteworthy that code-switching as an indirect refusal strategy differs from those mentioned by Beebe et al [1] in the sense that it spreads cross several lines and cannot be simply analyzed within one utterance.

2.3. Negotiation and construction of power relation at work

The strategies in which refusal is constructed, regardless of the specific language employed, can reveal an asymmetric power relation between two interlocutors. Using a post-structuralist approach, Schnurr [13] defines power as a dynamic concept that is negotiated and constructed in an interaction. The dynamic nature of power lies in the fact that any attempt of one interlocutor to exercise power needs to be “ratified and accepted” by the other interlocutor [14], and therefore the act of exercising power may not be successful if the other interlocutor insists on imposing or rejecting a request. Through the alternation of two languages, indirect refusal strategies reveals how power relation is exercised in business workplace, and from the analysis of code-switching we may evaluate whether or not an act of exercising power is successful.

3. Data Analysis & Discussion

The video clip is selected from a Chinese movie *Go Lala Go*, in which the main character Lala learns to balance between her relationship and career in a business workplace. Featured in a transnational corporation and a multicultural company in Beijing, Lala overcomes a series of obstacles in the workplace and eventually finds her path from an HR trainee to HR Manager.

The selected conversation takes place in the office of HR Director, Lester, who asks his assistant Rose when she will submit the decoration project for his consideration. Rose, having long been unsatisfied about not getting a promotion, does not answer Lester’s question but suggests that they should “talk”. Lester immediately senses her dissatisfaction and asks Rose if this is about her promotion. Surprisingly, Rose tells Lester that she needs to take a leave for immediate medical attendance. Lester first shows concern about Rose’s condition, but later negotiates with her saying that the new decoration project is a great opportunity for Rose to get the promotion that she has longed for.

Extract from *Go Lala Go!* (21:22 - 22:11)

Link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2-cx_dpIU8

Participants:

R = Rose (Mei-gui), Assistant HR & Admin Manager (subordinate);
L = Lester, HR Director (expatriate)

Turn	
1	L: 裝修 這 件 事, 何 好 德 催 得 很 緊 (.) Zhuang-xiu zhe jian shi He Hao-De cui de hen jing (.) Decoration this CL thing He Hao-De hurrying very harsh (.) Howard is hurrying us on the new decoration project for our company (.)
2	裝修 方 案 和 報 價, 搬 家 時 間 和 流 程 (.) Zhuang-xiu fang-an he bao-jia, ban-jia shi-jian he liu-cheng (.) Decoration plan and quoted price, moving house time and schedule (.) Decoration plan, quoted price, house-moving schedule and procedure,
	這些 東 西 (.) 你 什 麼 時 候 能 給 我 呀? (1.5s) zhe-xie dong-xi (.) ni shen-me shi-hou neng gei wo ya? (1.5s) These things (.) you what time can give me PRL? (1.5s) When will you hand in these documents to me? (1.5s)
2	R: Lester. ((leaning forward))
3	L: Yes?
4	R: We should talk. (2.0s)
5	L: • hhh < 是 為 升 職 的 事 對 嗎? > • hhh < shi wei sheng-zhi de shi dui ma? > (1.5s) • hhh < BE for promotion POSS thing correct PRL? > (1.5s) • hhh < This is about your promotion, right? > (1.5s)
6	R: 其 實 我 最 近 身 體 不 太 好 (.) 要 動 個 小 手 術。 qi-shi wo zui-jin shen-ti bu tai hao (.) yao dong ge xiao shou-shu. Actually I recently body NEG very good, (.) need act a minor operation. As a matter of fact, I have not been feeling very well recently (.) and I need to have a minor operation.
7	L: > 什 麼? (1.2s) 嚴 重 嗎? < (.) ((leaning forward)) > Shen-me? (1.2s) Yan-zhong ma? < (.) ((leaning forward)) > What? (1.2s) Serious PRL? < (.) ((leaning forward)) > WHAT? (1.2s) Is it something serious? < (.) ((leaning forward))
8	R: 不 嚴 重 (.) ((staring into his eyes)) • • • Bu yan-zhong (.) ((staring into his eyes)) • • • NEG serious (.) ((staring into his eyes)) • • • No it's not serious (.) ((staring into his eyes)) • • •
9	L: > Do you need help? <
10	R: No (.) ((Rose holding the stare)) • • •
11	L: • hh 那 一 定 要 現 在 做 嗎? (1.5s) ((leaning back)) • hh Na yi-ding yao xian-zai zuo ma? (1.5s) ((leaning back)) • hh Then have-to should right now do PRL? (1.5s) ((leaning back)) • hh Then does the operation have to be done so immediately? (1.5s) ((leaning back))
12	R: 醫 生 說 越 快 越 好 啊 (2.4s) Yi-sheng shuo yue kuai yue hao a (2.4s) Doctor said faster better PRL (2.4s) The doctor said as soon as possible. (2.4s)
13	L: 玫 瑰 (.) 公 司 現 在 正 需 要 你 (.) ((Rose looking away)) Mei-gui (.) gong-si xian-zai zheng xu-yao ni (.) ((Rose looking away)) Mei-gui (.) company right now really need you (.) ((Rose looking away)) Rose (.) Our company really needs you at the moment (.) ((Rose looking away)) 我也為了你的升職, 一直在尋找一個機會 (1.0s) Wo ye wei-le ni de sheng-zhi, yi-zhi zai xun-zhao yi-ge ji-hui (1.0s) I also for you POSS promotion always PROG looking for one CL opportunity (1.0s) I have also been looking for an opportunity to get you a promotion (1.0s) 現在這個機會終於來了 (2.1s) ((Rose looking at him)) Xian-zai zhe-ge ji-hui zhong-yu lai le (2.1s) (Rose looking at him)) Now this CL opportunity finally come PAST (2.1s) ((Rose looking at him)) And finally here it comes. (2.1s) ((Rose looking at him)) It's a unique opportunity, Rose (.) Don't miss it.

Figure 1: Data Transcription

3.1. Two indirect refusal strategies according to established taxonomy

The interaction between a female subordinate and a male expatriate centers around two requests: Lester requesting Rose to handle the decoration project, and Rose requesting to take a leave. The conversation involves at least two indirect refusal strategies, "excuse/reason/explanation" and "statement of alternative", according to the framework of Beebe, et al [1].

In Line 6, Rose tells Lester that she needs to take a leave for "a minor operation", which turns out to be a lie according to

her own confession later in the film. This excuse of "needing immediate medical attention" is initiated by Rose as an attempt to remind Lester of her importance in the company and that her absence in this project will bring him trouble. By coming up with such an excuse, she conceals her unwillingness to grant Lester's request by indicating a temporary lack of availability, which in turn helps her avoid a direct confrontation with her expatriate.

Another indirect refusal strategy, "statement of alternative", can be identified in Line 11: Having learned from Rose that her condition is not serious and she does not need help, Lester asks "then does the operation have to be done so immediately", suggesting that Rose can, and probably should, put off the operation until the decoration project is finished. By bringing up this alternative to postpone the operation, Lester expresses his doubt on Rose's reaction, and implicitly rejects Rose's refusal to his initial request.

3.2. Code-switching as another indirect refusal strategy

In addition to the indirect refusal strategies described by Beebe et al [1], indirect refusal in this interaction has also been achieved through the use of code-switching, which spreads across several utterances or turns. Alternation between English and Chinese is found in the selected data. Specifically, Turn 2, Turn 5, Turn 9, and Turn 11 feature switching between turns, while Turn 13 is an example of switching between utterances within a turn. Paragraphs that follow will be devoted to analyzing each switch with regards to its function as an indirect refusal strategy during workplace negotiation.

In Turn 2, Rose chooses to address Lester in English and says that "we should talk", in contrast with Lester's initial choice of language, Mandarin Chinese, in Turn 1. Her decision to switch code interplays with a switch of topic in this conversation and the interlocutors' workplace relationship [10]. The request that Lester makes about handling the decoration project fails to catch Rose's interest, given that her mind is preoccupied by an unsatisfaction about not receiving a promotion. However, the topic of promotion that Rose wants to talk about is considered quite sensitive in the workplace, and directly shifting to a different topic in Chinese might be deemed as "interrupting", which can lead to a much more intimidating situation for her as a subordinate. By initiating a switch to English, Rose indirectly refuses to continue the discussion about decoration project, and attempts to shift Lester's attention from one topic to another. Drifting away from Lester's initial request and code choice, this switch also serves to prepare for bringing up Rose's own request. Here, code-switching achieves special communicative effect because the language choice switches in accordance with the topic as an attempt to terminate previous discussion and move on to a different topic.

However, in Turn 5 Lester immediately switches back to Mandarin Chinese when he makes an inference about Rose's real intention, as in "this is about your promotion, right?" While Rose tries to conceal her real intention, Lester makes an educated guess and directly points out her intention in Chinese. His act of switching back to his initial choice of language can be analyzed as an attempt to diverge from Rose and emphasize their social distance [12]. The fact that Lester chooses to maintain his initial language choice, rather than

adopt Rose's choice, has an effect on the speaker's perception of how well a request is received and how the negotiation is going. By switching back to Mandarin Chinese, Lester shows his awareness of Rose's underlying intention and points out his postulation before Rose can make her own request. This demonstration of knowledge and postulation of Rose's intention in Mandarin Chinese establishes Lester's superior position during a negotiation. His decision to construct this switch as a question rather than a statement mitigates the tension and also invites further negotiation of Rose's upcoming request, towards which he has already showed awareness and unwillingness even before the request is uttered.

It is noteworthy that while Lester previously conforms to Rose's language choice in Turn 3, he begins initiating switches since Turn 5 until the end of this conversation; in contrast, after Turn 5, Rose consistently maintains Lester's language choice (Turn 6, 8, 10, 12) as an act of convergence. This change of "who is the switcher" has its significance in understanding the overall refusal scenario, as we shall see in the following discussions.

In Turn 9, Lester switches from Chinese to English, and asks Rose "Do you need help?" This switch of language choice involves the construction of status and power relation in a business workplace discourse [8], prior to the construction of another indirect refusal. By switching to English, a more prestigious language in the workplace, Lester presents himself as the person who holds the power to grant help to his subordinates. He establishes his status as the one who offers help, while Rose is the one who receives help, which clearly demonstrates an asymmetric power relation between them. Rose produces minimal responses in Turn 8 and 10 as Lester probes into her condition, and she consistently conforms to her expatriate's language choice, answering Lester's questions in either English or Chinese accordingly. These three turns of code-switching signifies Rose's subordination in the negotiation of her request, and her failure to indirectly express her own will through language choice greatly impacts the outcome of this negotiation.

Coming to Turn 11, Lester once again switches to Mandarin Chinese, and asks Rose "then does the operation have to be done so immediately?" In addition to being a "statement of alternative", Lester constructs his refusal as a rhetorical question in Chinese, whose structure implies that he expects the answer to be "no", and that Rose should not insist on her request any further. This switch of language choice also indicates that Lester tries to diverge from Rose, and therefore expresses Lester's unwillingness to comply with her request. The significance of this switch lies in use of rhetorical question in Chinese, and it involves not only the sentence structure but also the tone and facial expression employed when producing the utterance, which might not be as strongly manifested when translated into English.

Finally, in Turn 13, after a relatively long pause (2.4s), Lester stresses that the company really needs Rose right now, drawing her attention to her responsibility and obligation as an employee of the company. He continues in Mandarin that he has been looking for an opportunity to give Rose a promotion, and in the last utterance, he switches to English stating that "it's a unique opportunity", a repetition of what

has been said in Chinese. By re-stating his point in English, Lester emphasizes the different rights and obligations between himself as an expatriate who can offer an opportunity, and Rose as his subordinate who is obliged to comply to the company's needs [11]; he moderately rejects Rose's request to take a leave and insists on his initial request for Rose to handle the decoration project.

Analysis of the above turns can be taken as evidence to support that code-switching is an additional indirect refusal strategy in business workplace discourse. Code-switching is employed when one of the interlocutors shifts to a new topic, adjusts social distance, attempts to construct a particular sentence structure in one language, or assigns obligations and rights, in order to achieve certain communicative goals. Ultimately, the use of code-switching during negotiation, along with other indirect refusal strategies, reveals an asymmetrical power relation in the workplace. Lester exercises his power as the expatriate of Rose by initiating code switches and insisting on his request as well as language choice, while Rose shows her subordination in this power relation as she consistently complies with Lester's language choice.

However, any attempt to exercise power must be "ratified and accepted" by the other interlocutor [14], and for Lester, his act of establishing power is not accepted by Rose, as we can learn from her minimal response and facial expression during the conversation. As a matter of fact, later in the movie, Rose still takes the leave in spite of Lester's objection, and does not return until the decoration project is completed.

4. Conclusion

Workplace discourse is one of the major research focuses in pragmatics and sociolinguistics, because the subject not only reflects how language is used by speakers of different status in different workplaces, but also impacts how effective the communication is in a workplace. This paper has explored how indirect refusal is constructed between a female subordinate and a male expatriate in a business workplace in Beijing through demonstrating the social function of code-switching. Code-switching is identified as an indirect refusal strategy employed by both parties to implicitly reject a request, which fills a gap in established literature about bilingualism in the workplace.

The selected data showcases two indirect refusal strategies, "excuse/reason/explanation" and "statement of alternative", according to the framework of Beebe et al [1]. However, by drawing on previous studies on code-switching, including speech accommodation theory [12], construction of identity and status [8], and Right and Obligation theory [9], I argue that code-switching is an additional indirect refusal strategy in business discourse, and may concur with the indirect refusal strategies mentioned by Beebe et al [1] (e.g. Turn 11). Implicit refusal is achieved through the social function of code-switching, mainly through manipulating social distance between interlocutors, constructing particular syntactic structures, and assigning rights and obligations. Ultimately, I argue that the use of code-switching, along with other indirect refusal strategies, reveals an asymmetrical power relation in the workplace. The initiating and maintaining of switch

during workplace discourse helps the interlocutors establish their status in contrast with each other, and therefore exercise their power to achieve their goals. The act of exercising power, however, may not be ratified and accepted by the other interlocutor, even though the subordinate consistently comply with the expatriate's language choice.

An attempt has been made so far to explain the function of code-switching as an indirect refusal strategy during workplace power negotiation. Nevertheless, this study suffers from several limitations. First of all, data selection may be problematic given that the data comes from a movie rather than natural interaction. Conversations in a movie can be written and edited for purposes outside communicative goals, and the use of both English and Chinese in a movie may not be due to the necessity of negotiating, but simply to demonstrate "internationalisation" of a transnational company in China, therefore it cannot be generalized to reflect the actual use of code-switching in Chinese business workplace. It remains uncertain and unreported whether or not Chinese employees in a transnational company in Mainland China actually employ this pattern of code-switching when they speak to each other during negotiation. Secondly, the analysis of data only focuses on the use of code-switching, and does not take into account other variables, such as gender, age, and education background of the interlocutors, all of which may also influence the actual pattern and function of code-switching in workplace discourse. Further empirical research in a bilingual setting is needed to help us understand how code-switching functions as an indirect refusal strategy during business workplace negotiation.

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