Original Research

Mitigation tools and politeness strategies in invitation refusals: American and Russian communicative cultures

by Angela V. Litvinova and Tatiana V. Larina

Angela V. Litvinova Peoples' Friendship University of Russia, Russia litvinova-av@rudn.ru
Tatiana V. Larina Peoples' Friendship University of Russia, Russia larina-tv@rudn.ru
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The performance of speech acts varies widely across cultures due to differences in values, communicative norms and traditions as well as politeness strategies. This can cause problems in communication and lead to sociopragmatic failures. This paper aims to discover potential linguistic and sociocultural differences in refusal to invitations performed by Americans and Russians in interpersonal interaction. It explores the variations in the performance of refusal in terms of form (direct vs. indirect), length, face-saving moves/semantic formulas and politeness strategies in the contexts differed in social and power distance. The data were obtained through a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) with 120 participants (50 Americans and 70 Russians) and analysed drawing on Cross-Cultural Pragmatics, Speech Act Theory, Theory of Politeness and Cultural Studies with the implementation of contrastive qualitative and quantitative analysis. The findings revealed some differences in the role of social factors in the realisation of refusals, while the most salient factor appears to be that of cultural context. Despite some obvious similarities in the performance of refusal in its form, mitigation moves and politeness strategies, American refusal demonstrated a tendency to be more indirect and verbose, conventionally accompanied by a positive emotive adjunct aimed at enhancing the positive face of interlocutors. The findings showed that Americans use Positive and Negative politeness strategies with more regularity and thus do more facework aimed at mitigating the possible negative effect of this dispreferred act. The Russians, by contrast, used politeness strategies with less regularity, in some cases resorted to directness and were more focused on the clarity of their response to invitation rather than considerations of face. The findings are consistent with communicative values and politeness in the two cultures. They can contribute to the systematisation of culture-specific features of interpersonal interaction in American and Russian contexts and the description of communicative ethno-styles.

KEYWORDS: *speech act, refusal, mitigation, politeness strategies, communicative ethno-style, American communicative culture, Russian communicative culture*

1. INTRODUCTION

Though in general speakers of different languages perform the same acts during interaction, the way they perform them varies widely across societies (see Alemi et al., 2021; Bilá & Ivanova, 2020; Kotorova, 2017; Trosborg, 2010; Wierzbicka, 1985, 2003). As Kecskes (2014) rightly states, 'it is important to emphasise the difference between *what we do* and *how we do it*.

'Since refusals are typically formulated by leveraging indirect strategies, their conversational instrumentation obviously calls for an advanced pragmatic competence (Chen, 1995; Martínez-Flor et al., 2003). To refuse appropriately and in a socially and culturally acceptable manner, lingua-cultural, sociopragmatic and sociocultural competences are also required'

What we do may have more universal features than *how we do*' (Kecskes, 2014, p. 5). This sociocultural variation creates problems in intercultural communication, causes misunderstandings and leads to socio-pragmatic failures (Thomas, 1983). This is especially true for face-threatening acts, where inappropriate performance or interpretation can be perceived as impoliteness or even rudeness and negatively affect interpersonal relationships.

The speech act (SA) of refusal is face-threatening by nature. Refusals are dispreferred and undesired responses to request, invitation, offer and suggestion (Gass & Houck, 1999). Therefore, they are considered as face-threatening acts, which can damage the interlocutors' positive or/and negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). To mitigate the negative effect of the refusal and soften it, speakers use various strategies and linguistic devices. Since refusals are typically formulated by leveraging indirect strategies, their conversational instrumentation obviously calls for an advanced pragmatic competence (Chen, 1995; Martínez-Flor et al., 2003). To refuse appropriately and in a socially and culturally acceptable manner, lingua-cultural, sociopragmatic and sociocultural competences are also required (Chang & Ren, 2020; Dubrovskaya & Yuskaeva, 2022; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Malyuga et al., 2018; Yelenevskaya & Protassova, 2021).

Similar to other speech acts, refusal varies across cultures due to differences in such categories as face, threat, imposition and im/politeness, which has been shown in numerous studies (see Al-Kahtani, 2005; Bella, 2011; Chang, 2009; Chang & Ren, 2020; Félix-Brasdefer, 2006; Gass & Houck, 1999; Iliadi & Larina, 2017; Kwon, 2004; Malyuga & McCarthy, 2021; Nelson et al., 2002; Stevens, 1993; Popova, 2018). Thus, for non-native speakers this speech act can be particularly challenging. Failing to formulate a discernable yet polite refusal, non-native speakers may end up inflicting damage to the flow of the conversation and even offending their conversational partners (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987, p. 133). Hence, the study of cross-linguistic differences in the speech act of refusal is of theoretical and practical relevance.

As some studies show (see Richmond, 2009), members of Anglo-Saxon cultures tend to avoid a straightforward 'no', which often causes misunderstanding among their Russian interlocutors who tend to express a clearer, unambiguous refusal. In this study we aim to test this hypothesis by exploring the refusals to invitations in everyday interaction from representatives of American and Russian cultures. We aim to answer the following research questions.

1. How do representatives of American and Russian culture mitigate their refusal to an invitation?

2. Are there any culture-specific differences in the performance of refusal?

3. How do social and cultural characteristics of the context effect the performance of refusal?

To address the research questions, the study first briefly discusses related work on the SA of refusal, its nature and variations in its performance across cultures. In section 3, we will introduce the dataset in question and outline our methodological approach to its analysis. Then in section 4, we report on our comparative analysis of the performance of refusal to invitation by American and Russian respondents, followed by the discussion of the results obtained. Finally, the results of the work are summarised in the conclusion.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The literature on refusals is quite extensive and diffuse, as Bella (2011) states, ranging from cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics to education and psychology. Most of the relevant studies focus on refusal strategies, politeness, face and facework (see Al-Eyrani, 2007; Chang, 2009; Johnson et al., 2004; Turnbull & Saxton, 1997; Sattar et al., 2011; Félix-Brasdefer, 2006), and the learning of refusals by second language learners (see Bella, 2014; Eslami, 2010; Sadler & Eröz, 2002). The broadest definition of refusal interprets it as a SA by which the speaker withdraws from participating in an action initiated/suggested by their conversational partner (Chen et al., 1998, p. 121). The initiating act of request, invitation or suggestion is thus being denied via the SA of refusal that functions as a follow-up to the proposal (Gass & Houck, 1999, p. 28). Refusal is viewed as an antipode to confirmation and acceptance

'Thus, refusal is a dispreferred act which threatens the positive and negative face of both interlocutors – the one who initiates an act and the one who does not accept it. Bearing an inherently face-threatening implication, refusals tend to be performed indirectly and include various means of mitigation. In fact, they may involve a long-negotiated sequence of face-saving moves which are also viewed as strategies'

(Searle & Vanderveken, 1985, p. 195). However, in contrast to acceptance, refusal is a face threatening act by nature, which has been emphasised by many scholars, though there are some inconsistencies in the question of whose face this act threatens. Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan (2011) note that, since positive response to such speech acts as request, invitation, offer, or suggestion is usually expected and preferred, saying 'no' can mean *'disapproval of the interlocutor's intentions and consequently, a threat to the interlocutor's face'* (Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2011, p. 56). Chen (1995) states that refusal is face-threatening to both interlocutors and points out that *'refusals are considered to be a face threatening act (FTA) in that either the speaker's or listener's positive or negative face is risked when a refusal is called for or carried out'* (Chen, 1995, p. 6). Salazar-Campillo et al. (2009) claim that *'refusals threaten the addressee's negative face, that is, the desire that his/her future choice of actions or words be uninhibited'* (Salazar-Campillo et al., 2009, p. 140). Johnson et al. (2004) are more specific and argue that in refusal to request face needs of interlocutors may vary. When requests are refused, threats to the negative face needs of the requester are more prevalent than threats to the negative face of the refuser, and there are differences in type of threat present to the requester's positive face and the refuser's face needs.

As refusal presents threat to the positive and negative face of interlocutors, both positive and/or negative politeness strategies are engaged in its performance. Their combination mitigates its negative effect and minimises the mutual loss of face. Positive politeness is oriented toward the positive face of the recipient, the positive self-image that they claim for themselves, it *'anoints the face of the recipient by indicating that in some respects, the speaker wants the recipient's wants'* (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 70) and thus minimises the potential face threat of an act. By using positive politeness strategies (e.g., attend to the addressee, their interests, wants, needs; exaggerate interest, approval; express sympathy; give reasons, etc.), a speaker can minimise the face-threatening aspects of an act of refusal by assuring the addressee that they like them, and want their wants. Negative politeness strategies are also inherent in refusal, e.g., be conventionally indirect, apologise, be pessimistic (*I don't think I can*).

Thus, refusal is a dispreferred act which threatens the positive and negative face of both interlocutors – the one who initiates an act and the one who does not accept it. Bearing an inherently face-threatening implication, refusals tend to be performed indirectly and include various means of mitigation. In fact, they may involve a long-negotiated sequence of face-saving moves which are also viewed as strategies. There have been many attempts to classify the realisation of refusals (see Beebe et al., 1990; Rubin, 1983; Salazar-Campillo et al., 2009; Turnbull & Saxton, 1997; Ueda, 1972). Ueda (1972) defined 16 ways of saying 'no' in Japanese aimed at avoiding a flat 'no', such as silence, vague 'no', delaying answers, counter question, lateral responses, conditional 'no', criticising the question itself, etc. Later, Rubin (1983) listed 9 ways of refusal: be silent, hesitate, show a lack of enthusiasm, offer an alternative, put the blame on a third party or something over which you have no control; distract the addressee; say what is offered is inappropriate, etc. These classifications served as the basis for Beebe et al.'s (1990) taxonomy. The authors studied how Japanese learners of English refused requests, invitations, offers and suggestions. They included in their classification semantic formulas (expressions used to perform a refusal) and adjuncts, expressions which accompany a refusal but by themselves do not perform it (e.g., gratitude). They also distinguished between direct and indirect semantic formulas. Direct formulas include performative statements (*I refuse*) and non-performative statements (*No* or *I can't*). By using the means of indirect performance of refusal (regret, excuse, explanation, alternative, promise of future acceptance, etc.), the speaker mitigates this face-threatening act. Adjuncts to refusal that served the same purpose include statement of positive opinion/feeling, statement of empathy, pause fillers and gratitude/appreciation. This taxonomy has been further used to explore refusals in numerous studies (see Félix-Brasdefer, 2003, 2006; Kwon, 2004; Sadler & Eröz, 2002; Turnbull & Saxton, 1997).

Salazar-Campillo et al. (2009) presented a classification of refusals which also relied on Beebe et al.'s (1990) taxonomy but was further modified to incorporate the discursive perspective (Salazar-Campillo et al., 2009, p. 144). They also divided the semantic formulas into direct and indirect and considered a category of adjuncts to refusal, i.e., expressions utilised as part of a refusal, yet incapable of performing a denial independently (Salazar-Campillo et al., 2009, p. 141). Their findings grouped direct strategies into (1) straightforward, whereby the performative verb *refuse* or a flat 'no' are being used, and (2) negation of proposition (e.g., *I can't, I don't think so*). According to the authors, indirect strategies can be grouped into the following: (1) plain-spoken (*It seems I can't*); (2) stating the reason for refusal (*I can't. I have a doctor's appointment*); (3) apologetic, incorporating the expression of regret for refusal (*Sorry, I'm so sorry, I can't*); (4) suggesting an option/alternative (*I would join you if you choose another restaurant*), or a postponement (*I can't go now, but I could go tomorrow*); (5) criticism (*Under the current economic circumstances, you should not be asking for a rise right now*); (6) statement of principle/philosophy (*I can't. It goes against my beliefs!*); and (7) non-verbal (silence, etc.) and verbal (hedging, topic switch, making a joke) evasion (*Well, I'll see if I can*) (Salazar-Campillo et al., 2009, p. 145).

Adjuncts include in this taxonomy five subtypes: (1) positive opinion (*That's a good idea, but…*); (2) willingness, (*I'd love to go, but…*); (3) gratitude (*Thank you, but …*); (4) agreement (*Yes, but…; Ok, but…*); and (5) solidarity or empathy (*I'm sure you'll understand*) (Salazar-Campillo et al., 2009, p. 146).

The authors of this taxonomy point out that *'there are no clear-cut boundaries between strategies and that in some cases contextual variables will determine whether a given refusal strategy exemplifies a specific subtype'* (Salazar-Campillo et al., 2009, p. 146). Moreover, they emphasise that contextual variables determine linguistic behaviour, and should thus be considered in interpreting refusal behaviour. Besides such contextual variables as social distance, power and degree of imposition, cultural context should be also taken into consideration as it impacts the choice of strategies and determines the appropriateness of a refusal.

Despite some differences in taxonomies of refusal discussed above they all show that refusal is a highly complex speech act. It is rarely performed by one utterance, but it is mostly a set of two, three or more utterances which express gratitude, apology, regret, give

positive evaluation, offer an alternative, etc. However, the literature on refusal highlights some terminological inconsistencies. As was shown most authors use the term *semantic formulas* referring to gratitude, apology, regret etc. and at the same time name them *refusal strategies*. In our study we will be using the term *move*, defined by scholars as *'a text segment made up of a bundle of linguistic features (lexical meaning, propositional meanings, illocutionary forces, etc.) which give the segment a uniform orientation and signal the content of discourse in it'* (Nwogu, 1997, p. 122); or *'semantic and functional units of texts that have specific communicative purposes'* (Kanoksilapatham, 2007, p. 24). Though their semantics may differ, they function in our context as mitigators of the refusal and thus perform the same communicative strategy. In other words, we will consider refusal as a complex speech act which may consist of face-saving verbal gestures (face-saving moves) for its performance.

Numerous studies on refusal have been conducted in the framework of cross-cultural pragmatics and intercultural pragmatics (see Bella, 2011; Deveci & Midraj, 2021; Chang, 2009; Chen et al., 1998; Gass & Houck, 1999; Iliadi & Larina, 2017; Kwon, 2004; Liao & Bresnahan, 1996; Nelson et al., 2002; Stevens, 1993). They have shown that due to differences in values concerning the concept of face and understanding of politeness, the performance of refusal varies across languages and cultures. Beebe et al. (1990) compared refusals between Japanese native speakers and English native speakers and found that Americans employed an indirect form of refusals while Japanese employed indirect strategies when refusing a person of higher status, and direct when refusing a person of lower status. This is not surprising, considering the well-known hierarchical nature of Japanese society.

Analysing refusals cross-culturally, scholars highlight differences in the level of directness vs indirectness, preferences in refusal strategies and politeness strategies used to soften their face-threatening effect, as well as their conventionality (see Bella, 2011; Félix-Brasdefer, 2003, 2006; Ghazanfari et al., 2012). Wierzbicka (2003) presents a rich variety of differences in the performance of refusal in American English, Hebrew, and Japanese. She cites Blum-Kulka (1982), who noted that *'it is not common in English to express refusal by saying 'no' as one does in Hebrew'* (Blum-Kulka 1982, p. 30-31), and continues *'in English, when someone indicates that they want something from us we are free to say 'no' but not to say just 'no'… Bluntness in*

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saying 'no' is viewed positively in Israeli culture but not in Anglo-American culture' (Wierzbicka, 2003, p. 92). Referring to Japanese culture, she points out that *'the norm seems to be to avoid saying 'no' altogether (in particular, to refuse an offer or a request, to express disagreement and so on)'* (Wierzbicka, 2003, p. 93). To explain this norm, she cites Nakane (1970) who notes that *'one would prefer to be silent than utter such words as 'no' or 'I disagree'. The avoidance of such open and bald negative expressions is rooted in the fear that it might disrupt the harmony and order of the group'* (Nakane, 1970, p. 35). Using Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM), Wierzbicka (2003) represents these norms in the form of cultural scripts for refusal in each culture:

Israeli culture: I say, no. I think I don't have to say anything more about it.

Anglo-American culture: I say, no. I don't want you to feel something bad because of this. I will say something more about it because of this.

Japanese culture: I can't say, no. I will say something else because of this (Wierzbicka, 2003, p. 92-93).

Thus, such statements as 'No is far rarer than Yes, and direct refusal is avoided' (Leech, 2014, p. 177), seem to be a bit overgeneralised and relative and need a specification of the cultural context. As Eslami (2010) notes, *'the negotiation of a refusal may entail frequent attempts at directness or indirectness and various degrees of politeness that are appropriate to the situation'* (Eslami, 2010, p. 218).

In this paper, we explore refusal to invitation performed by Americans and Russians in interpersonal interaction and aim to discover potential linguistic and sociocultural differences in its realisation.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Research data were gathered via a discourse completion task (DCT), which contained four situations. We suggested that the respondents refuse an invitation in the situations with linear relations as well as those which differed in vertical (Power Distance – PD) and/or horizontal distance (Social Distance – SD). The respondents were supposed to turn down: (1) a friend's invitation to her birthday party (linear relations with a short social distance, PD-SD-); (2) a neighbour's invitation to her housewarming party (linear relations with some social distance, PD-SD+); (3) a director's invitation to her anniversary party (relations with both social distance and power distance, namely bottom-up relations PD↑); (4) a trainee's invitation to a party after her internship (top-down relations with PD↓). The DCT was completed by 70 Russian and 50 American respondents and provided us with 480 performances of the speech act of refusal (200 American and 280 Russian).

In our analysis we had a few objectives. Our first objective was to discover the most typical length of refusal in the two cultural contexts in the situations discussed. Analysing this, we assume that the longer the refusal is, the more polite it is, as the speaker makes special efforts to mitigate the refusal and save their face and that of the addressee. We then focused on the form of refusal (direct vs indirect). In the first category, we included utterances with flat 'no' and explicit negation of the invitation which mostly expressed inability to come *(I can't come that day)*. In the category of indirect refusal, we included utterances which did not contain an explicit negation. We did not follow the traditional distinction between 'expressions which perform refusal' or 'semantic formulas' and 'adjuncts to refusal' (see Beebe et al., 1990; Salazar-Campillo et al., 2009), as sometimes it was rather difficult to see boundaries between them. We analysed them together as components of the SA of refusal and viewed them as face-saving moves. In this study, we limited ourselves to the most conventional face-saving moves for both cultures, leaving some optional ones out of our analysis. Thus, we focused on Reason, Apology, Gratitude, Positive Evaluation/Feeling, Regret, which appeared to be most conventional as well as Well-Wishing and Alternative, though these were used less frequently. Since in English *I'm sorry* can express apology or regret we had difficulty in distinguishing between these two categories. For the purpose of our comparative analysis, we have included in the category of regret the utterances with *unfortunately, I wish I could, It's a pity* which are close to the Russian *k sozhaleniyu, zhal'*.

We explored the frequency of these moves and their combination, trying to identify the most conventional patterns of refusal in the contexts under the

study. The results of our quantitative analysis are presented in tables, where percentage data are indicated. Since more than one move was used to perform refusal, their sum does not add up to 100%.

We conducted sociopragmatic analysis of the data drawing on cross-cultural pragmatics, speech act theory, theory of politeness and cultural studies and aimed (1) to explore how representatives of American and Russian culture mitigate their refusal to invitation, (2) to reveal the impact of social characteristics of the context on the performance of refusal, and (3) to identify culture-specific differences in the performance of refusal.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND MAIN RESULTS
4.1. The length of the refusal
Contrastive analysis of the number of moves showed that neither Russian nor American informants

limited themselves to a brief one-move response when turning down an invitation. In all the situations discussed, they mostly used two and even three moves. However, some differences were revealed (see Table 1).

In situations 1 (refusal to a friend) and 3 (refusal to a director) Americans used 2 and 3 moves almost equally (46% in situation 1 and 42% and 44% in situation 3), while Russians gave preference to a shorter refusal with two moves (58.5% in situation 1 and 52.8% in situation 3). In situation 2 (refusal to a neighbour) and situation 4 (refusal to a trainee) both Americans and Russians gave preference to a refusal with two moves (74% and 62.8% consequently in situation 2 and 60% and 64.2% in situation 4). The longest refusal, with four moves, was observed in the American context, mostly in situation 3, in the refusal to a director (14%), and in the Russian context in situation 2, in the refusal to a neighbour (7.1%).

Table 1
Number of moves

NUMBER OF MOVES	SITUATION 1 (PD-SD-)		SITUATION 2 (PD-SD+)		SITUATION 3 (PD↑+SD+)		SITUATION 4 (PD↓+SD+)	
	AM %	RU %	AM %	RU %	AM %	RU %	AM %	RU %
1	8	4.2	8	5.7	0	7.1	14	5.7
2	46	58.5	74	62.8	42	52.8	60	64.2
3	46	31.4	12	24.2	44	38.5	26	25.7
4	0	5.7	6	7.1	14	1.4	0	4.2

4.2. Mitigation strategies and their combination
4.2.1 Refusal to a friend (situation 1)
Turning down a friend's invitation, Russian and American respondents used both direct and indirect refusals with a salient preference for indirect ones (see Table 2). However, Russians used direct refusal twice as often as Americans (34.3% to 15.1%). In the Russian context, flat 'no' was not found among American responses and inability to come was observed in both cultural contexts. Direct refusal was always followed by some mitigating expressions, and never consisted of a single utterance.

(1) *I am not sure if I can, my son has a baseball game on Saturday.*

(2) *Нет, я не смогу. Я занята. (No, I can't. I am busy.)*

In case of a 1-move refusal, this was constituted by a reason for not accepting an invitation.

(3) *I have a really important meeting on Saturday.*

(4) *Я уже что-то запланировала на этот день. (I have already made some plans for that day.)*

As far as mitigation tools are concerned, the dominant move in the American material was the reason for refusal (70%), while Russians gave preference to apology (60%), though they also explained the reason for refusal quite frequently (55.7%). Another significant difference concerned a quite frequent expression of positive evaluation/feeling by American respondents (*That would be great/I'd love to/That's very nice/That sounds lovely*) (44%) which was hardly noticed in our Russian material (1.5%).

Table 2
Components of refusal in situation 1 (PD-SD-)

COMPONENTS OF REFUSAL	AMERICAN RESPONDENTS %	RUSSIAN RESPONDENTS %
Direct refusal	**15.1**	**34.3**
Flat refusal (No)	0	14.2
Inability to come	36	65.7
Indirect refusal	**84.9**	**65.7**
Reason	70	55.7
Positive evaluation/feeling	44	1.4
Apology	34	60
Gratitude	22	10
Well-wishing	16	0
Regret	8	10
Alternative	0	14.2

Most conventional models of the refusal to a friend consisted of 2 and 3 moves in both cultures, with some preference to a 2-move refusal among Russians (see Table 1). In the American context the most frequent combinations were Gratitude + Reason (5), as well as by positive evaluation/feeling in 3-move refusals (6):

(5) *Thank you for the invitation, but my friends from Europe are coming over this weekend.*

(6) *Thanks for the invite. I'd love to but I am leaving on Friday.*

The most frequent patterns of Russian refusals were presented by the combinations of Apology + Reason (7) alongside Statement of inability to come (8):

(7) *Извини, пожалуйста, но у меня уже планы. (I am so sorry, but I have other plans.)*

(8) *Прости, но я не могу. У меня рабочий день. (Sorry, but I can't. I work that day.)*

4.2.2. Refusal to a neighbour (situation 2)

Refusals to a neighbour gave us quite similar results. Again, in both contexts refusals were mostly indirect and the number of direct responses was higher among Russians (27.2% compared to 17% for Americans). However, in contrast to the previous situation, we found 10% of flat 'no' among American refusals *(No, unfortunately I cannot)* which was almost two times less than in the Russian material (see Table 3).

Among indirect refusals, reason and apology were still the most conventional moves in both contexts. The difference concerned a positive evaluation /emotion, which was quite common in the refusals of Americans (32%) and amounted to only a few cases in the Russian material (2.8%). At the same time, the Russians accompanied their refusal with an offer of alternative (15.7%) and regret (18.5%), which were not found in the refusals of the Americans.

Most common refusal models in situation 2 (refusal to a neighbour) consisted of 2 moves in both cultures. In the American context the most frequent combination was Apology + Reason, while Russians gave preference to Flat refusal + Reason:

(9) Sorry, I have some duties to do.

(10) Нет, слишком поздно. (No, it's too late.)

As a third move, a positive evaluation was added to apology and reason in American refusals, and Russians suggested an alternative showing their desire to continue relations.

(11) *That would be great, but I am going to be out of town, I'm sorry.*

(12) *Извините, я занята. Может поужинаем в другой день? (Sorry, I am busy. Can we have dinner another day?)*

Gratitude as another mitigation move was used almost equally by American (24%) and Russian (20%) respondents:

(13) *Thank you but I am not sure that I am free that day.*

(14) *Спасибо, но я не могу. У меня другие планы на вечер. (Thank you, but I can't. I have other plans for evening.)*

4.2.3. Refusal to the director (situation 3)

In the refusal to the director indirect refusals continued to prevail in both cultural contexts, with some predominance among the Americans (see Table 4). In this situation, characterised by some power distance (bottom-up relations), the most frequent mitigation moves appeared to be reason and gratitude, while apology moved to a lower position. However, regret increased its ranking (*Such a pity I cannot make it / I wish I could, but I have other plans / Mne tak zhal' no I ne smogu).*

Table 3
Components of refusal in situation 2 (PD- SD+)

COMPONENTS OF REFUSAL	AMERICAN RESPONDENTS %	RUSSIAN RESPONDENTS %
Direct refusal	**17**	**27.2**
Flat refusal (No)	10	18.5
Inability to come	26	45.7
Indirect refusal	**83**	**72.3**
Reason	70	72.8
Apology	40	37.5
Positive evaluation/feeling	32	2.8
Gratitude	24	20
Well-wishing	10	2.8
Regret	0	18.5
Alternative	0	15.7

Table 4
Components of refusal in situation 3 (PD+↑ SD+)

COMPONENTS OF REFUSAL	AMERICAN RESPONDENTS %	RUSSIAN RESPONDENTS %
Direct refusal	**20.5**	**32.4**
Flat refusal (No)	4	11.4
Inability to come	38	57.1
Indirect refusal	**79.5**	**67.6**
Reason	54	52.8
Gratitude	38	30
Apology	24	18.5
Well-wishing	18	5.7
Positive evaluation/feeling	14	10
Regret	14	21.4
Alternative	0	1.4

The most conventional models of the refusal to the director consisted of 2 and 3 moves in both cultures, with some preference for a 2-move refusal by Russians (see Table 1).

The most frequent refusal patterns by Americans were Gratitude + Reason, while Russians preferred to accompany gratitude with a clear statement of inability to come:

(15) *Thank you for the invite, but I already have other plans.*

(16) *Спасибо, но я не смогу в этот день. (Thank you for the invitation but I can't come that day.)*

In a 3-move refusal, Americans also expressed inability to come quite frequently, and representatives of both cultures expressed regret:

(17) *I am sorry; but I can't come as I am too busy this weekend.*

(18) *Спасибо за приглашение. Но, к сожалению, меня не будет в городе в эти выходные. (Thank you for the invitation but, unfortunately, I will be out of town this weekend.)*

In this situation 14% of American refusals consisted of 4 moves, and no instances of a 1-move refusal were observed. They mostly contained Reason + Regret+ Inability to come + Well-wishing:

(19) *. Such a pity I cannot come as I have a really important meeting on Saturday. Enjoy!*

In Russian data such long refusals were hardly observed (1.4%), however 7.1% of Russian respondents limited responses to a 1-move refusal giving reason.

(20) *У меня у ребенка день рождения. (My child's birthday is on that day.)*

4.2.4. Refusal to a trainee (situation 4)

The final situation, characterised by some power distance and asymmetry of relations (top-down), showed a greater difference in direct refusals between Russians and Americans (9.4% to 25.9%). Russian respondents expressed their inability to accept an invitation significantly more often than Americans did (44.2% to 12%). Nevertheless, indirect refusals prevailed in both contexts with reason (74%) and apology (52%) being the most conventional mitigation moves by Americans, and reason (44.2%) and alternative (45.7%) occupying almost the same position in the Russian material. Apology was also used by Russians, though less frequently (34.2%), which was to some extent compensated by gratitude (15%) and regret (5.7%), which were not observed in the American data.

(21) *Большое спасибо. Простите, мне очень жаль, но у моей бабушки день рождения в субботу. (Thank you very much. Forgive me, I am so sorry, but my granny has her birthday this Saturday.)*

Table 5
Components of refusal in situation 4 (PD+↓SD+)

COMPONENTS OF REFUSAL	AMERICAN RESPONDENTS %	RUSSIAN RESPONDENTS %
Direct refusal	**9.4**	**25.9**
Flat refusal (No)	8	14.2
Inability to come	12	44.2
Indirect refusal	**90.6**	**74.1**
Reason	74	44.2
Apology	52	34.2
Alternative	46	45.7
Positive evaluation/feeling	14	12
Well-wishing	8	4.2
Gratitude	0	15
Regret	0	5.7

In this situation, refusal patterns consisted mostly of 2 moves in both American (60%) and Russian contexts (64.2%). Americans preferred Apology + Reason (25), while Russians most frequently accompanied apology with a clear statement of inability to come (21), though other combinations of moves were not uncommon.

(22) *I have some urgent stuff to do right now, sorry*.

(23) *Извини, но я не могу в этот день. (I am sorry, but I can't come that day)*.

Patterns consisting of 3 moves were less frequent in this situation (26% in the American material and 25.7% in Russian). Besides the moves mentioned above, they would also contain an alternative (24-25), as well as positive evaluation of the invitation, which was frequently used by Americans (24):

(24) *I'd be happy to, but I am really busy. How about a cup of coffee tomorrow?*

(25) *Прости, в этот раз не могу. Давай на следующей неделе. (I am sorry I can't today. Let's meet next week.)*

Interestingly, when limiting themselves to a brief one-move refusal, the Americans preferred to explain their reasons, while the Russians offered an alternative:

(26) *I have got too many reports to finish today.*

(27) *Может, в другой день? (Maybe another day?)*

5. DISCUSSION

Despite the common judgement that Russians feel quite free to say *No* (Richmond, 2009), the findings showed that in the refusal to an invitation both American and Russian respondents gave preference to indirect refusals and used various mitigation tools.

Nevertheless, flat 'no' was observed in our Russian material more often (25.8%) than in American (2.3%). Most of the American informants (97.7%) turned down an invitation without saying *No*. This suggests that they do more face-work than Russians, who to some extent do seem to feel free to say flat *No*, which correlates to previous studies (see Iliadi & Larina, 2017). However, as our findings showed, this is not a dominant strategy in the Russian data (Figure 1).

Concerning the length of refusals, the findings showed that in both cultures the preference was given to 2 and 3-move refusals, while 1-move and 4-move refusals were on the periphery. Flat 'no' always went with some mitigation tools (or face-saving moves) such as apology, gratitude, positive evaluation of an invitation, alternative and others in both cultures. In one-move refusal neither Americans nor Russians limited their answers to a flat 'no'. They mostly used reasons instead:

(28) *I'm not in town on that day.*

(29) *Я уже договорилась о встрече в это воскресенье. (I've already made an appointment for this Saturday.)*

We could not find any particular differences in the length of refusal in the situations discussed, except for the situations which differed in Power Distance (3 and 4) in the American material. The refusals to the director appeared to be longer than the refusals to the trainee. In the bottom-up context, none of the American respondents used a 1-move refusal while 14 % performed their refusal with 4 moves. In top-down interaction we found the opposite: there were 14% of 1-move refusals, the
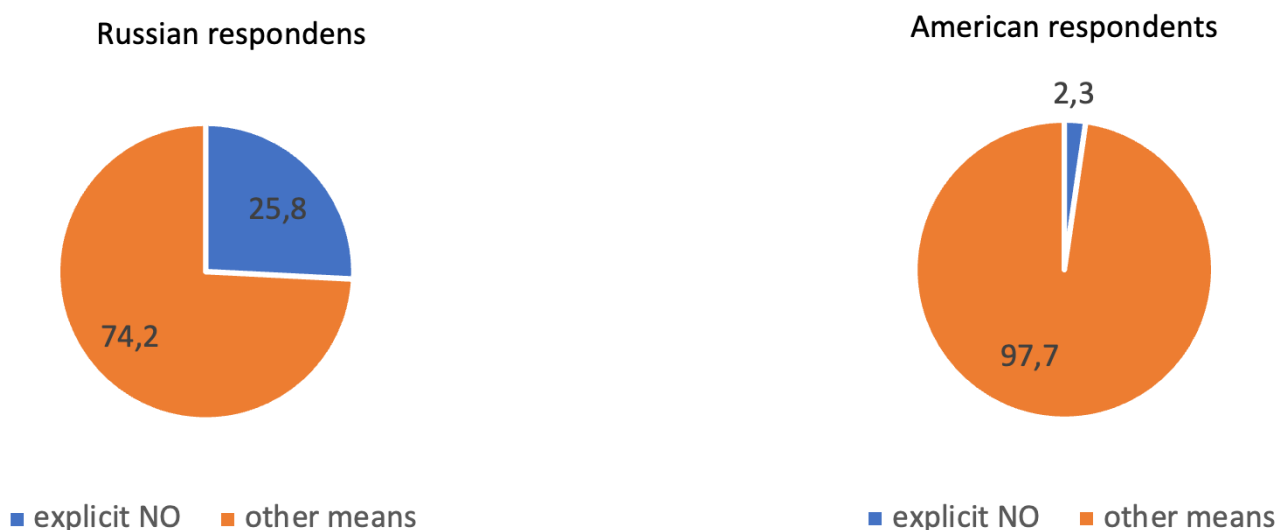

Figure 1. The use of flat 'no' to refuse an invitation by Russian and American respondents

predominance of refusals with two moves over three moves and the absence of refusals with 4 moves. These findings unexpectedly suggest the role of Power Distance in the length of refusal in the American context, and some sensitivity to status. However, more detailed research is needed to draw definitive conclusions.

As far as mitigation tools are concerned, there are both similarities and differences. Both American and Russian respondents most frequently resorted to Reason and Apology. Giving reasons for not accepting the invitation appeared to be the predominant move in both cultural contexts, which is unsurprising. Brown and Levinson (1987), in fact, consider 'give overwhelming reasons' as a way to communicate regret to perform an FTA, along with 'admit the impingement', 'indicate reluctance' and 'beg forgiveness', which they view as components of the negative politeness strategy 'apologies' (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 187-189). Though the examples they give mostly refer to the refusal of a request, the same might also be applied to refusal to an invitation. Stating the reason for rejection, the speaker assures the addressee that the refusal is due to some external factors which are beyond them rather than their unwillingness to accept the invitation. Thus, they attempt to save theirs and the inviter's positive face.

Another common strategy is gratitude *(Thank you. Thank you so much / Spasibo. Bolshoe spasibo)*. However, in our American material positive evaluation/ feeling *(That would be great / I'd love to)* turned out to be more frequent than gratitude. This was observed in all situations but most frequently in the linear context, i.e., refusal to a friend (44%) and neighbour (32%).

(30) *That sounds great, thank you but I really have to finish my report.*

(31) *I would be happy to, but I am super busy this weekend. Sorry.*

Such enthusiastic expressions of positive attitude to an invitation are positive politeness markers used to realise the strategy 'exaggerate (interest, approval, sympathy with the recipient)' (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 104). They can be called 'positive emotive adjuncts to refusal', aimed at enhancing the positive face of interlocutors and making the other person feel good, which correlates to Wierzbicka's (1999, p. 254) idea that in Anglo culture *'one should try to make the other person feel something good'*. In the Russian context they were hardly used in these situations, with some increase in more formal contexts. It was observed that

Russians, by contrast, tend to accompany refusal with regret, which was expressed more often in situations where there is some distance between the interlocutors, either horizontal as in the refusal to a new neighbour (14.7%) or vertical as in the refusal to the director (15.7%).

(32) *Мне очень жаль, но я не смогу. (I am so sorry, but I can't.)*

(33) *Спасибо за приглашение, но я уезжаю на выходные. Так жаль, что пропущу твой праздник! (Thank you for the invitation, but I am leaving this weekend. Such a pity I miss your party.)*

Thus, Russian refusals appear to be more focused on expressing the negative feelings of the refuser and their regrets, rather than evoking the positive feelings of the inviter by exaggerating their positive attitude to the invitation. These findings might be explained with reference to the Russians' general dislike for exaggeration and the value of sincerity (see Larina, 2015; Wierzbicka, 2002). It is interesting to note some correspondence with findings of studies on the style of rejection in blind peer review (Larina & Ponton, 2020, 2022), where English-language reviewers conventionally used positive framing for their negative verdicts while Russian reviewers were more focused on their own emotions and were mostly content rather than face-oriented.

Another interesting finding concerns 'alternative', which was used by American respondents as a mitigation move only in the refusal to a person with lower power distance (46%). Though the Russian respondents in this situation offered an alternative with almost the same frequency (45.7%), it was also observed in the refusal to a friend (14.2%) and neighbour (15.7%), with only a few instances in the refusal to the director (1.4%). These findings might suggest that by offering an alternative, Russian speakers not only perform a strategy of mitigation of their refusal but place a special emphasis on showing their desire for further contacts, the maintenance of which is coherent with their cultural background (Larina et al., 2017).

To summarise the discussions above, we can state that that there are many similarities in the performance of refusal to invitation by Americans and Russians. Representatives of both communicative cultures prefer indirect refusal to direct, they do not limit themselves to a short one-move refusal but use a number of similar mitigation face-saving moves and politeness strategies, both positive and negative, aimed at mitigating the

negative effect of their refusal. However, some differences/variations have been observed in the preference of the moves as well as their combination and the length of the refusal. The findings show that Americans, on the whole, do more face-work when compared to Russians, they use politeness strategies more conventionally and tend to perform refusal in a more verbose and indirect way. In some contexts, Russians appear to be more direct and explicit, which correlates with their communicative values and the dominant features of their communicative style, which seems to be more direct and content rather than form-oriented (Larina, 2015).

6. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to identify culture-specific features of refusal to invitation performed by American and Russian speakers. It explored the variations in the performance of refusal in contexts with different social and power distance between interlocutors. The findings revealed some differences in the role of the social factors in the realisation of refusals. However, the impact of cultural contexts appeared to be more salient. Despite the obvious similarities in the performance of refusal in terms of form (direct vs indirect), the semantics of acts and mitigation strategies used by the studied communicative cultures, Americans demonstrated a tendency to be more indirect and verbose. They did more 'supportive facework' (Watts, 2003, p.

132-133) and aimed to mitigate the possible negative effects of refusal, making regular use of negative and positive politeness strategies. The Russians, by contrast, used politeness strategies with less regularity, in some cases resorted to directness, and were more focused on the clarity of their responses to invitations than the inviter's feelings. These findings are consistent with what is known about communication values and politeness in the two cultures.

The limitations of the current study, which was conducted on a rather limited data set must be acknowledged, as well as the fact that data elicited with a DCT can hardly be seen as representing a reliable picture of actual communication. As Félix-Brasdefer (2003) rightly points out, oral interaction may allow for lengthy negotiations which, in the end, turn a refusal into an acceptance. Nevertheless, our analysis has made it possible to identify a number of differences that can contribute to the systematisation of culture specific features of interaction in American and Russian contexts and the description of communicative ethno-styles. They can also be used in second language teaching to favour the development of students' pragmatic, discursive and socio-cultural competence.

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ANGELA V. LITVINOVA
Peoples' Friendship University of Russia, Russia litvinova-av@rudn.ru

TATIANA V. LARINA
Peoples' Friendship University of Russia, Russia larina-tv@rudn.ru