

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social Distance and Politeness in the Speech Act of Refusal: A Double Voicing Perspective

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ABSTRACT - Politeness plays an important role in cushioning the impact of refusal and ensuring smooth communication. “Double voicing” emerges as a helpful strategy in this regard to maintain social harmony, allowing interlocutors to consider the other person’s perspective. This process is further influenced by social distance. How language learners navigate the production of refusals is worth exploring from a double voicing perspective because it can shed light on how politeness is negotiated by them. This study examines the role of double voicing in refusals among Chinese students majoring in English as a foreign language. Data were elicited from 39 students via role plays, with social distance being categorised as close, medium and distant. The responses were screen-recorded, transcribed, and examined via discourse analysis methods consistent with Schiffrin’s Interactional Sociolinguistics. Findings indicate that double voicing can be classified into 12 types that are all mediated by social distance: hedging of a positive relation type; explanation, apology, gratitude, compliment, buffer, mixed double voicing of a ‘V’ type; comfort, self-modesty, empathy, self-commitment, and authority of an inverted ‘V’ type. All these patterns are functions of politeness, which can be utilised as a sophisticated strategy to consolidate relationships.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Double voicing is a discourse theory proposed by the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, originally intended for the study of drama and fiction. Bakhtin (1984) later discovered that it could also be applied to daily conversations. Distinguishing single-voiced and double-voiced discourses, Bakhtin states that a speaker may employ single voicing to express one, unmediated utterance or double voicing to combine their thoughts and intentions with those of another speaker. The two voices do not mutually contradict but supplement each other. Single voicing refers to ‘direct, unmediated discourse directed exclusively toward its referential object, an expression of the speaker’s ultimate semantic authority’ (1984, p. 105). For example, the utterance by a judge, “You may consult with an attorney to discuss your appeal options”, acts as a single voicing in the legal context, conveying the legal authority of the judge unambiguously. It conveys the truth and objectivity of a proposition, free from any opposing views. This means there is a direct correspondence between a speaker’s words and their physical location in time and space in single voicing. Its primary purposes are to identify, describe, communicate, and represent referential objects of speech. In contrast, double voicing is ‘directed both toward the referential object of speech, as in ordinary discourse, and toward someone else’s speech. According to Bakhtin (1984, p. 189), ‘in one discourse, two semantic intentions appear [in] two voices’. Double voicing can be utilised to defend oneself against threats, silence someone else, or even give someone a voice. It means interlocutors have a heightened awareness of or responsiveness to the other person’s concerns and goals. This sort of responsiveness can go beyond conventional conversational engagement and frequently includes a unique ‘double’ dimension (Baxter, 2014). For example, when a stewardess expresses regret for her unfriendly attitude to a passenger and admits the mistake she has made to her superior, double voicing is used. In this case, the stewardess’s statement ‘Sorry I lost my temper, but I wanted you to see that...’ contains two voices:

1. Apology to the superior (mitigating face-threat): The stewardess acknowledges her mistake, which aligns with the superior’s perspective and helps maintain politeness.
2. Justification (self-reflection and self-defence): The second part (but I wanted you to see that...) serves as a self-representation strategy, subtly justifying her actions while still appearing deferential.

This fits Bakhtin’s concept of double voicing, where an utterance conveys both the speaker’s perspective and another person’s anticipated reaction. In this case, the stewardess both acknowledges the superior’s authority and partially justifies her behaviour. Double voicing can be found in numerous discursive forms in everyday interaction and popular culture. Double voicing, in its interface with social distance, is clearly at play in the refusal speech act and can be used by interlocutors to protect people’s face (Baxter, 2014).

Native Chinese students majoring in English must exchange ideas in English with peers and academics from diverse backgrounds (Zand-Moghadam & Adeg, 2020). This sort of interaction needs a higher level of pragmatic competence. Students should formulate speech acts to convey ‘specific intentions’ in a polite manner based on socio-cultural knowledge, such as social distance in real-time communication (Abed, 2011). Refusal is known to be a complex speech act (Farenkia, 2023). It is a response to an interlocutor’s requests, offers, invitations or suggestions. In their response, a person’s social identity is always negotiated through various measures

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to maintain social cohesion (Félix-Brasdefer, 2010). These strategies, in turn, may enhance or constrain the ways in which they interact with others (Bella, 2011). Double voicing, through which refusers employ tact and diplomacy, is not only the interlocutors' natural reaction to interactive speech but also another label for reflexive conversation (Baxter, 2014). It is a way for the relationship between the refuser and refusee to be negotiated and sustained (Baxter, 2014). When refusees ask favours of refusers, refusers usually have no choice but to consider the possibility of refusal by being direct or indirect and employing strategies with various degrees of politeness that are appropriate to the given situation (Farenkia, 2023). They also need to attend to the refusee's face to prevent it from being threatened (Brown & Levinson, 1978). This strategy allows the speaker to navigate social interaction effectively and maintain positive relationships. It is sometimes used unconsciously, such as in the production of refusals as a strategy to achieve particular outcomes and effects (Baxter, 2014). However, some students, even those proficient in grammar and vocabulary, do not have a sense of appropriate social distance to refuse politely and appropriately (Chang & Ren, 2020). Despite extensive research on politeness strategies, limited studies have examined the interaction between double voicing and social distance in L2 refusals (Baxter, 2014). To this end, this study aims to undertake a detailed classification of double voicing and obtain more nuanced insights into the relationship between double voicing and social distance in the production of the refusal speech act to shed light on how refusers use double voicing to achieve their refusing goals in a polite manner.

To achieve this, the study is guided by these questions:

1. What double voicing types are employed when learners of English make refusals?
2. How are the double voicing types and social distance related?

1.1 Double voicing and Politeness

Research has shown that refusals are nuanced and complicated in terms of face. They can be intricate, leading to Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) and communication breakdown (Abed, 2011). Politeness is needed to save the refusees' faces, acting as a social glue and helping people foster strong social relations. To refuse effectively and appropriately, learners need to be well-equipped with both linguistic skills and the ability to read social cues (Ellis, 2008). Achieving this competence allows learners to fine-tune refusals politely to tone down the negative impact and promote positive interaction, employing strategies to protect their interlocutor's face as well as their own from potential FTAs (Ren & Woodfield, 2016). Recently, scholars have tended to focus on the interplay of refusals and politeness from multi-dimensional perspectives. For example, Farenkia (2023) examined French refusals to requests to find out how factors like social relationships, formality, and cultural norms shape the refusal strategies and navigate politeness in communication. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of cross-cultural pragmatics and postcolonial pragmatics, the analysis of data revealed the significant impact of sociocultural factors on language use, even within a single linguistic system such as French. This means politeness theory has laid a solid and significant foundation for refusal exploration from different dimensions. As a pragmatics theory, the politeness concept borrows the idea of "face" from Goffman (1971). "Face" represents a person's social image with two key components: positive face (desire for approval and belonging) and negative face (desire for autonomy and freedom). Face, as a valuable social asset, can be threatened and damaged through social interaction, and politeness acts as a means to minimise the face threat. This theory provides a framework for this study to make sense of why refusals are made the way they are, situating itself at the centre of this double voicing inquiry. The various efforts in politeness they make to soften the impact of refusals can be further understood from a double voicing angle. While there may be some overlap between politeness and double voicing, speakers who adhere to principles of politeness are not necessarily engaged in double voicing (Baxter, 2014). Politeness is integral to social harmony and can often be non-linguistic, whereas double voicing is not necessarily about harmony and is inherent in speech. The fundamental tenet of double voicing consists in language being 'dialogic', which means every statement actively responds to the other speaker's utterance and is based on the addressee's potential response (Baxter, 2014). Additionally, many linguistic devices or cues help interlocutors to judge how polite or impolite a speaker is, given the context. Hence, this is where politeness and double voicing intersect.

1.2 Studies on Double Voicing

Double voicing was previously employed in literary studies to demonstrate the interaction between writers and readers from a discursive perspective. For example, Bakhtin (1984) used the novels of Dostoevsky to investigate double voicing in drama and fiction. Bakhtin (1984) also pointed out that double voicing can be applied to 'the ordinary speech of our everyday life' (p. 194). Blommaert and Rampton (2011), for example, set out to study heteroglossia in double-voiced discourse by looking at stylisation and claimed that an appropriate voicing could create richer and more complex meanings in social practices. They challenged the idea of a single voice and worked on the variety of double voicing called "linguistic repertoire," which referred to various styles, genres and registers for interlocutors with life experiences to draw upon. With a "double voicing" strategy, interlocutors may sometimes speak with full commitment to a style, but other times may talk humorously (Priego-Valverde, 2009). This rich repertoire allows interlocutors to navigate social situations by aligning themselves with different situations. Nevertheless, the studies on double voicing, especially from a pragmatic standpoint, are limited to discourse analysis through conversation between students in a classroom and found that their identities and relationships were constantly negotiated and managed, rarely considering social variables such as social distance, gender and so on (Goodwin, 2003).

The clearest study of double voicing in pragmatics so far is by Baxter (2014), who investigated it from a conversation analysis (CA) perspective. Mapping out five types of double voicing, Baxter examined the functions of gender stereotypes by women-only and men-only groups of students who intended to win a task in a competition and discovered that double voicing was influenced by gender. The female group mainly resorted to double voicing rather than single voicing to refrain from direct conflicts, negotiate compromises, and maintain good rapport, although this was not useful to help them win the task. In contrast, double-voiced discourse was not a significant characteristic of the male group, which turned out to be very 'context-dependent, versatile, multipurpose, frequently intertwined, and

subject-dependent' (Baxter, 2014, p. 106). The study provided insights into a person's discursive strategies, which may be constrained by gender and power.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

Building upon these theoretical foundations, this section outlines the methodology of the study involving participants, instruments, and research procedures. To answer the two research questions, this study employed a mixed methods approach research design with role-plays for data collection. Analysis was done qualitatively, first identifying various types of double voicing in refusals textually in accordance with Schiffrin's 1994 Interactional Sociolinguistics. A subsequent quantitative analysis focused on calculating the frequency of specific double voicing strategies used in three specific situations by Excel.

2.1 Participants

The refusals analysed here were produced by 39 Chinese-first language English majors (34 females and five males) aged between 19 to 21 years old. All participants started to learn English approximately from the age of nine. Selected from the English department of a university in a city in northern China, they passed the country's Test for English Majors with Band 4 (TEM-4). Thus, they were able to read, comprehend and participate in role-plays in English without difficulty. They all signed consent forms and agreed to participate in the role play and were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time. The students' personal information was held in strict confidentiality throughout the research.

2.2 Research Instrument

To mitigate the limitations inherent in naturalistic data collection, role plays were used to elicit the data. Although the data obtained from role play requires several negotiated rounds and transcription of every response, this approach is effective and used by many scholars (Martínez Flor & Usó Juan, 2011). It aligns with previous research by Félix-Brasdefer (2010) in its attempt to avoid the disadvantages of naturally occurring language production and has the following advantages. Firstly, role plays enable the researcher to capture complete conversational interactions by manipulating specific variables, such as gender and social distance. Secondly, role-plays allow the researcher to get in and facilitate when the conversation does not flow smoothly. Thirdly, they offer a window into participants' awareness of the appropriateness of language use in refusing. Finally, role plays permit the researcher to elicit specific speech acts based on the contexts and roles they design. The situations were set in an English-learning context in China. They consisted of three refusals to make, each of which was designed with a different degree of social distance. Social distance is a personal sense of separation from another individual or group of people (Buchan et al, 2006). Refusers in the three situations (annotated as Situation 1, Situation 2 and Situation 3) were asked to refuse their interlocutors with whom they have a social distance level that ranged from 'close' to 'distant'. D1 refers to close social distance, D2 indicates medium social distance, and D3 means far social distance. The participants took on a role representing the refuser while the first researcher played the roles of friend, cleaning lady and employer respectively in these three situations.

Table 1

Three situations in role play with different degrees of social distance

	Situation	Social Distance
Situation 1	The first researcher assumes a dinner hostess role. She enquires whether her friend, played by the participant, wants another slice of cake. The friend refuses.	D1
Situation 2	A long-serving cleaning lady, played by the first researcher, breaks a porcelain vase belonging to her house owner, played by the participant. The cleaning lady offers to pay for compensation. The house owner refuses.	D2
Situation 3	The first researcher takes on the role of an employer, and the participant assumes the role of a subordinate. The employer offers the subordinate a pay raise and a promotion on the condition that the subordinate relocates to a faraway branch. The subordinate refuses.	D3

2.3 Research Procedure

A more detailed account of the research procedure is given in the following section. Firstly, the three role-plays were conducted via a popular Chinese software application called Tencent (see <https://meeting.tencent.com>). It has features such as text and video chat, file and screen sharing and others similar to Zoom or Google Meet and was thus suitable for the role plays which were carried out online. The role plays were recorded using an application called EV (www.ieway.cn/evcapture). As the study did not consider facial expressions and other gestures, no visual recording was made. The participants took part in the roleplays from their homes while the first researcher took part in the other roles in a quiet, empty room. The recording was made on a laptop. When the participants logged in and entered the Tencent meeting, they were given some time to read and familiarise themselves with the situation, but no additional time was given for preparation. Finally, a corpus of 4,254 transcribed words of refusal responses from approximately 200 hours of interaction was amassed from the three situations using Jefferson's (2004) conversation analysis notation (see Appendix).

What follows is a description of the analysis in two aspects. For qualitative analysis, it was in accordance with Interactional Sociolinguistics (Schiffrin, 1994) principles. The first researcher repeatedly read the transcripts based on micro-analysis, linguistic strategy analysis, and contextualisation cues to focus on the opening sequence, mid-point sequence, and closing sequences (Baxter, 2014). The opening sequence identified which linguistic strategies were adopted in performing refusals. The mid-point sequence analysis ensured whether linguistic indices of double voicing (i.e. some recurring patterns or structures) were used in refusals to indicate politeness. The closing sequence ascertained how the students resolved the task. By examining the language used at each stage, along with the contexts, the researchers were able to comprehend whether and how the participants employed features of double voicing to refuse. There were four specific steps in the following (Baxter, 2014): (1) micro-analysis by induction (short extracts or ‘chunks’ from a larger transcript); (2) linguistic strategy analysis (answering ‘What does one word, phrase or expression do or achieve in the conversation?’); (3) ‘contextualization cue search (answering ‘What does each linguistic feature at the micro-linguistic level signify at contextual and pragmatic levels?’) ; (4) reasonable interpretation (making sense of what is observed along the lines of ‘it would seem that...’ which suggests that the interpretation arises from a logical process, one that integrates linguistic elements with contextual factors and allows an alternative explanation if further evidence is available). Then, the double voicing strategies identified were manually coded and categorised. The choice of Interactional Sociolinguistics principles is attributed to its ability to provide a very detailed examination of spoken interactions and its widespread use by scholars. This analysis considers the context in which the conversation takes place and includes unspoken assumptions or cultural knowledge that researchers might have.

For quantitative analysis, the frequencies of the double voicing types were calculated based on the formula below:

$$\frac{\text{The number of specific double voicing strategy used in a situation}}{\text{Total number of that specific double voicing strategy used in all three situations}} * 100\%$$

To illustrate, if participants used the “hedging” double voicing strategy four times in a close distance situation (situation 1), ten times in a medium distance situation (situation 2), and eight times in a far distance situation (situation 3), this meant a total of 22 instances of “hedging” were used across all three situations. Then the frequency of “hedging” in each situation could be calculated as follows: 4/22 (18.2%) for situation 1, 10/22 (45.5%) for situation 2, and 8/22 (36.4%) for situation 3. Finally, the relationship between double voicing in refusals and social distance was extrapolated. The trend was explored by comparing how often a specific double voicing strategy was used in close distance (situation 1), medium distance (situation 2), and far distance (situation 3). If students used the double voicing strategy least in close distance (situation 1), and most often in far distance (situation 3), it suggests they used double voicing more as distance increased, which would be a positive relationship. Alternatively, an inverted “V” pattern might emerge where they used it more frequently for medium distance (situation 2) than both close distance (situation 1) and far distance (situation 3). On the other hand, a “V” pattern might surface if they used fewer double voicing strategies for medium distance (situation 2) than both close distance (situation 1) and far distance (situation 3). To ensure consistency of analysis, the first researcher conducted the analysis twice with a one-week gap in between. The inter-coder of the two-time analysis showed a high level of agreement with no discrepancies, and thus reliable.

3.0 RESULTS

Building upon the findings of Baxter (2014), who identified five double voicing types (authority, anticipatory, corrective, mitigating, and dialogic), the study only identified, fine-tuned, and extended the first four types. The data in the study does not contain Baxter’s (2014) ‘dialogic double voicing’ involving debating ideas in refusal as if the speaker is both addresser and addressee. The results in the study provide a nuanced understanding of double voicing roles in refusal production by quantitative and qualitative data. The next section presents the results in two sections.

3.1 Types of Double Voicing Used by Learners in Refusing

Table 2 shows that Chinese learners of English used twelve types of double voicing to make refusals. These types appear to enable speakers to moderate the refusing tones, navigate the social distance and ward off the threats (Baxter, 2014). In Table 2, although the definitions are mostly sourced from elsewhere, the categories themselves are based directly on the data

Table 2

Types of double voicing

Double Voicing Type	Purpose
Hedging	to show uncertainty about the truth of an assertion to ‘withhold commitment and open dialogue’ (Yang & Li, 2022).
Explanation	to provide a reason or reasons for something (Félix-Brasdefer, 2010).
Apology	to show regret for an offence or failure (Zhang et al., 2025).
Gratitude	to show appreciation or gratitude for a past act (Leemann et al., 2024).
Compliment	to ‘explicitly or implicitly attribute credit to someone for some valuable “good” (e.g. possession, characteristic, skill, etc.)’ (Korobov, 2024).

Double Voicing Type	Purpose
Buffer	to leave room for thought or provide more choice in the future (Leeson, 2008).
Mixed	to combine more than one of the above six strategies at the same time.
Comfort	to alleviate or lessen the emotional distress experienced by others (Zhang & Parvaresh, 2022).
Self-commitment	to make a voluntary and conscious decision and adhere to specific goals, values, or behaviours for cooperation based upon mutual trust to achieve a common advantage (Johnson et al., 1996).
Empathy	to 'experience another's emotions and perceptions' (Macagno et al., 2022).
Authority	to enforce the impact and display personal power, especially if this was threatened (Baxter, 2014).
Self-modesty	to 'underestimate self-worth despite available evidence' (Driver, 2001, p.21).

3.2 Relationship between Double Voicing Types and Social Distance

The relationship between double voicing types and social distance can be represented in three patterns: (i) positive relation type (double voicing frequency increases with social distance, i.e. Type 1 in Table 2. (ii) a 'V' type (double voicing frequency initially declines and then goes up, forming a 'V' shape, i.e. Types 2–7 in Table 2. (iii) an inverted 'V' type (double voicing peaks when social distance is medium-level and then declines as it gets farther, forming an inverted 'V', i.e. Types 8–12 in Table 2). For a clear illustration of data, the following 23 extracts were organised sequentially to describe the relationship of these three double voicing types to social distance in detail.

3.2.1 Positive Relation: Hedging

A hedging is 'a particle, word or phrase that modifies the degree of membership of a predicate or noun phrase in a set' (Brown & Levinson, 1978, p. 145). It also signals double voicing use (Baxter, 2014).

Figure 1

Frequency of positive relation type (all percentages rounded to the nearest tenth)

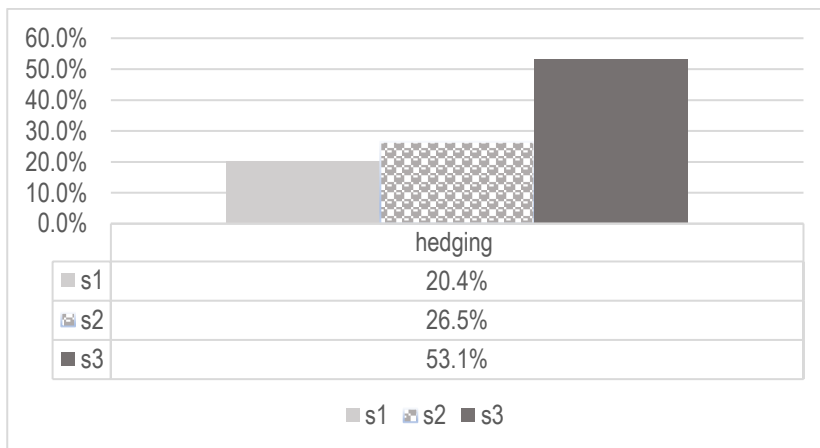


Figure 1 illustrates the frequency distribution of hedging strategy across three social distance levels. As social distance gets farther, the hedging use increases (20.4% to 53.1%). This indicates that the use of hedging is positively related to social distance. For example, in Extract 1 (S1: P4) (note: S1, S2, S3 in the following transcripts stand for the three situations respectively; P1 stands for the first participant, P2 stands for the second participant and so on; for transcription symbols see appendix), double voicing is indicated by 'maybe' which tones down the intention of accepting more cake so that the force of the refuser's utterance is mitigated in line 2.

Extract 1 (S1: P4)

- 1 Thank you, but umm for now so:: umm::
- 2 I (.) **maybe** I can't eat (.)er the cake (.) more

In Extract 2 (S3: P9), 'I am afraid' in line 2 is used to tone down the strength of the refusal to disarm 'routine interactional threats' (Brown & Levinson, 1978, p. 146). It is an instance of Brown and Levinson's 'negative politeness' as it avoids imposition, but it can also be seen as double voicing, which is intended by the speaker to show consideration of the refusee's feelings and display deference at the same time.

Extract 2 (S3: P9)

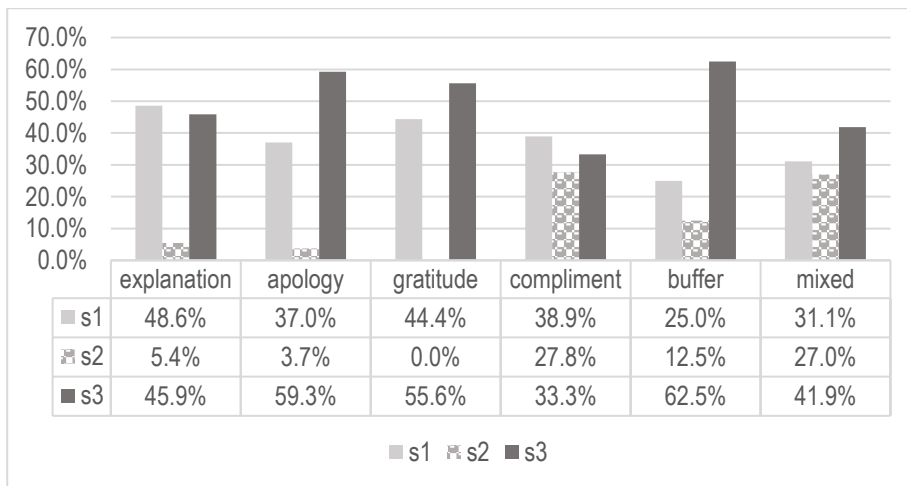
- 1 Er thank you for your [consideration consideration]
- 2 =I so appreciate it but I'm afraid::l (.) had to (.)
- 3 umm consider (.)another thing
- 4 =[so so] sorry I can't (.) accept your er invitation

3.2.2 'V' Type

Figure 2 shows the frequency distribution of all 'V' types, including explanation, apology, gratitude, complement, buffer and mixed double voicing across three social distance levels. It reveals that these types of double voicing are used frequently in S1, where the social distance between refusers and refusees is close. In S2, where the refusers' and refusees' social distance is medium, double voicing occurrences decrease radically. In S3, where it is most distant between them, these double voicing occurrences increase again. Overall, the relation between these types and social distance presents a positive 'V' type.

Figure 2

Frequency of Positive 'V' type (all percentages rounded to the nearest tenth)



a) *Explanation*

The deferential use of explanation is one manner of displaying reluctance, and the various reasons offered by the refuser come under this category, implying that the speaker would not want to impose on the refusee. By doing so, the refuser causes the refusee to resort to a 'redressive action' to 'give face' to the refusee (Brown & Levison, 1978, p. 69).

Extract 3 (S1: P22)

- 1 [Er er] (3) [thank you thank you] for your invitation
- 2 =and [I am a little and I am a little I am (asking a question about signal)]
- 3 =And I am full er I have, I don't like some cakes and er (3) er
- 4 I have er [I am I am] (4) losing my weight
- 5 =Thank you for your invitation

In Extract 3 (S1: P22), to avoid threatening the friend's positive face via disagreement, the refuser includes the use of double voicing as an explanation in the form of 'and...and...' to temper down the refusal so that the intimacy between the two friends is preserved. The sequencing of statements conjoined with 'and' in the explanation, which are part of positive politeness, also speaks to shared values (Brown & Levinson, 1978).

Extract 4 (S2: P10)

- 1 Ok, I am real [not (.)not] in the mood now
- 2 =and (.)you don't(.) need to pay for it

In Extract 4 (S2: P10), the refuser explains why she does not want to accept the payment by referring to her emotional state

Extract 5 (S3: P9)

- 1 Wow, it's really er a good idea that I can earn much more salary
- 2 =but I think I don't need much more salary now, I mean
- 3 Er, it's really you know it's a little far from the railway↑
- 4 =I think it's a little inconvenient for me to travel around
- 5 =and maybe if er it will [take me it will take me]
- 6 [more time, much more time]
- 7 compare the time I were using here

- 8 so :: it can pro-provide me with much more salary↑
- 9 =but I don't need much more salary again and (...)
- 10 So, I am sorry, it's really nice, but I am so sorry

In Extract 5 (S3: P9), from lines 2–8, an instance of double voicing in the form of an explanation can be seen. 'A little' in line 4 is used to minimise the size of a face threat (Brown & Levinson, 1978). By using the attenuator 'a little', the speaker creates a 'covert means of resisting power' for cooperation (Baxter, 2014, p. 19) without jeopardising the relationship between the boss and staff.

b) *Apology*

Baxter (2014) makes the point that apology as double voicing is useful in repairing the relationship between interlocutors.

Extract 6 (S1: P25)

- 1 Oh, **sorry** er recently I have (.) er er
- 2 [I I] plan to lose weight
- 3 =so er [I I] don't want to take another piece of cake

In Extract 6 (S1: P25), 'sorry' in line 1 acts as double voicing intended to avoid incurring sanctions and disarm the complaint response in advance. Politeness can often be indicated through such conversational formulas (Chang & Ren, 2020). Apology as a politeness marker has 'tentative and defensive' features (Baxter, 2014), and it shows a certain degree of deference to the refusee by way of negative politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1978).

Extract 7 (S3: P22)

- 1 er [**sorry sorry**] sir er you know
- 2 I am the only girl in my home
- 3 =and I don't wanna go to a er [a far a far] place
- 4 and I need to er (.) [I prefer prefer]
- 5 living in living close er to [my my]
- 6 family and (.)although it's the high salary and promotion er
- 7 I (...) want to er [company accompany] my parents
- 8 [thank you for your thank you for your]::
- 9 thank you

In another example in Extract 7 (S3: P22), 'sorry' in line 1 in the above extract appears to be a 'self-repair to limit the damage to the relationship' (Baxter, 2014, p. 6) so that the face-threatening acts are redressed.

c) *Gratitude*

Gratitude is quite common in daily life as it is often shown in appreciation of acts of kindness.

Extract 8 (S1: P29)

- 1 **Thank you**
- 2 =but I am already full
- 3 I [can't eat I can't] eat any more

Various discourse markers for gratitude aim for politeness (Terkourafi, 2011). This is exemplified by the above Extract 8 (S1: P29). Double voicing in the form of 'thank you' can prompt the refusee to see things from the refuser's point of view so that the needs and agendas of both refuser and refusee are counterpoised (Baxter, 2014).

Extract 9 (S3: P12)

- 1 Er(.) I very **appreciate** that, but (.) er (.)
- 2 I think::the position now I get [is er is er] is better for me
- 3 =because I think my ability is not enough for that your(.) position
- 4 =but thank you, I really appreciate that (4)
- 5 I think I may be good at this position, ok

In Extract 9, 'appreciate' in line 1 as a politeness marker is a mitigating device to soften the face threat arising from the refusal. Here, the refuser uses positive politeness similar to that of 'thanks' to downplay the embarrassment of disaffiliation while acknowledging the good intention behind the offer.

d) *Compliment*

Compliment serves to build a relationship between interlocutors based on courtesy.

Extract 10 (S2: P38)

- 1 ok er you don't er, you don't need to do it that
- 2 [I think you are not er (3)]I think **you are careful** to do everything
- 3 =So you don't do that

In Extract 10 (S2: P38), in line 2, the refuser seems to shift from a position of authority, i.e. hostess, to that of a more easy-going friend by saying 'you are careful' to navigate the unequal relationship between the speakers. It works to soften or mitigate the face threat arising from her position of power and to lessen the cleaning lady's anxiety by displaying her 'human side'.

Extract 11 (S1: P39)

- 1 Well it's **it looks very great**, but::I am sorry, recently ↑ you know
- 2 [I I] am losing weight, I become
- 3 fatter and fatter
- 4 =so I just I want to eat it, but I just I can't I am sorry

In line 1 in Extract 11 (S1: P39), 'looks very great' is an instance of double voicing in that it attempts to build solidarity by relieving the pressure off the refusee.

Extract 12 (S3: P14)

- 1 Oh [**that sounds (.)that sounds] wonderful**,
- 2 But: my hometown is here
- 3 =and my mother and father do not want me to leave here
- 4 so er(.) I can't, I don't want to go there to work

In Extract 12, 'that sounds (.) that sounds wonderful' does not really aim to concede to the refusee but signals the refuser's 'self-reflexive ability to enter the world of the refusee as a way of building solidarity' (Baxter, 2014, p. 2). This is also a show of politeness through which the refusee can understand that the refuser does not want to relocate, not out of fear of difficulty, but due to an unavoidable family situation.

e) *Buffer*

To buffer is to beat around the bush or evade a conclusive answer by offering some kind of compromise to the refusee to preserve harmony.

Extract 13 (S1: P37)

- 1 thank you, but er(2)
- 2 [I I] am I don't want to eat it, but I can **take it home**
- 3 =and I will eat it at home

The 'buffer' can be seen in line 2 in Extract 13 (S1: P37), where taking the cake home is another choice the refuser provides. This is double voicing in that it moves the conversation into a buffer zone in a friendly manner so that the refusee is not offended.

Extract 14 (S2: P7)

- 1 Umm, actually, you don't have to do that
- 2 You know(.) it does have (...) maybe you have
- 3 =you will you can **do a good job later**
- 4 =and it doesn't matter, so calm down, it doesn't matter
- 5 =you don't pay for that

In line 3 in Extract 14 (S2: P7), 'do a good job later' is a double-voiced act of encouragement and assurance, befitting the speaker's role as employer, yet maintaining solidarity with the cleaning lady via approval.

Extract 15 (S3: P34)

- 1 so er (.) [I am afraid I am afraid] [I can't I can't](6)
- 2 (2)I can't er accomplish this work
- 3 er so er I can er (2) recommend
- 4 **another person** for you, so what do you think of it↑

In Extract 15 (S3: P34), in lines 3–4, the refuser aims to seek approval from the refusee by recommending 'another person' as a 'pseudo-agreement' for positive politeness maintenance (Brown & Levinson, 1978, p. 115). It offers an escape route for the refuser, thereby indicating that she has the refusee's face wants in mind.

f) *Mixed Double Voicing*

Mixed double voicing refers to different forms of double voicing being used simultaneously by a speaker.

Extract 16 (S3: P1)

- 1 Umm, it does **sound like a pretty good idea**↑
- 2 =and I do, umm, I will think about my career job
- 3 [for umm for] another place
- 4 =but I am just not(.) very ready for completely um new environment↑
- 5 =**maybe** I will think about it later ↑, and I might **reply to you in one week**↑

6 is it all right↑

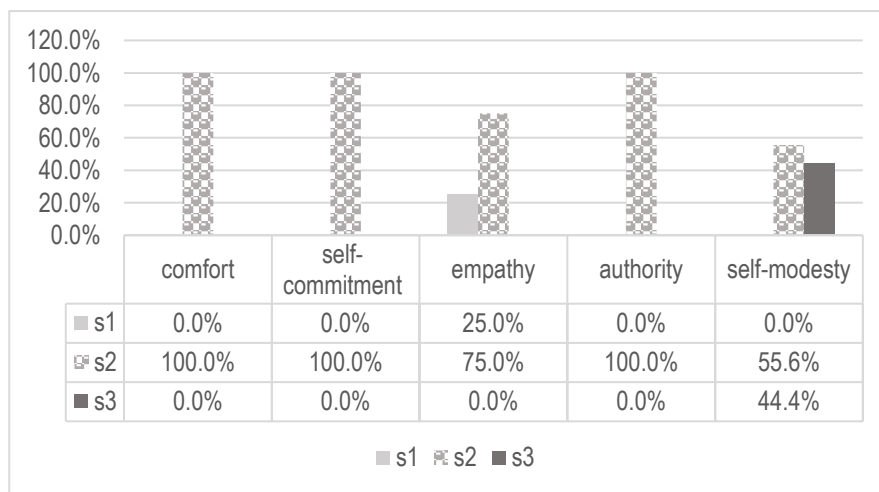
In Extract 16 (S3: P1), the refuser tactfully embeds four double voicing strategies: a **compliment** (“*It does sound like pretty a good idea*”), an **explanation** (“*I am just not very ready...*”), a **hedge** (“*maybe I will think...*”), and a **buffer** (“*I might reply to you in one week*”). This combination allows the speaker to step out of a threatening situation to reduce the imposition while maintaining politeness and relational harmony with the employer. Firstly, she evaluates the proposal presented by the boss and uses ‘I will think’, which means she undergoes self-reflection to tone down the refusal. Then she prepares the refusee for the long and intricate refusal. Finally, she offers a buffer to avoid depriving the boss of her authority. The pragmatic force of a speech act contributes to effecting change in behaviour (Zhu & Ren, 2022). The refuser’s various reasons to refuse are conveyed through numerous strategies so that her own agenda can be served and the harmony between the two can be maintained.

3.2.3 Inverted ‘V’ Type

Figure 3 displays the frequency distribution of all inverted ‘V’ types, including comfort, self-commitment, empathy, authority, and self-modesty across three social distance levels. What is interesting in Figure 3 is that the frequency peaks where the social distance between refusers and refusees is medium (D2). Note that the frequency is 0.0% when no such double voicing patterns are used. Thus, the relationship between these types and social distance follows an inverted ‘V’ path.

Figure 3

Frequency in inverted ‘V’ type (all percentages rounded to the nearest tenth)



a) Comfort

Comfort seeks to provide guidance or instruction, assistance, encouragement or suggestions for the benefit of listeners. This can also be explained through Leech’s (2016) generosity maxim, which minimises benefit to self and maximises cost to self for the sake of politeness.

Extract 17 (S2: P9)

- 1 oh [no no no]
- 2 =you don’t have
- 3 =you don’t have to pay for it,
- 4 Er, it’s just er (.) a little (.) vase↑
- 5 and I can afford it

In Extract 17 (S2: P9), the refuser attempts to minimise the refusee’s guilt after the vase is broken. It is also an instance of double voicing, which the refuser purposely utilises. Choosing to bear the cost of a new vase is clearly maximising the cost to her own self for politeness purposes.

b) Self-commitment

Self-commitment is a form of double voicing that marks the refuser’s intention to do something to remedy the situation without asking for compensation or help despite the refusee’s error.

Extract 18 (S2: P23)

- 1 er [I I] think you
- 2 [don’t you don’t] need to [pay for the er pay for] the vase
- 3 [because there is because there is(.)] er sometimes
- 4 often there is a mistake in your
- 5 er [in your cleaning in your cleaning in your cleaning]
- 6 so [I (.) will (4) I will put the vase (.) er

- 7 **at a [safe safer] place**
8 so you don't need to pay for it

In Extract 18 (S2: P23), instead of complying with the request to accept a payment for the broken vase, the refuser looks beyond her own needs and engages with the interests and concerns of the refusee. In lines 6–7, 'will put the vase at a safer place' is viewed as an instance of double voicing. Here, the refuser is positioning herself as the person in charge of a new vase to minimise threats to the refusee's positive face.

c) *Empathy*

This type of double voicing marks a speaker's understanding of the other party's situation, which can be seen in a close social distance. It can be exemplified in Extract 19 (S1: P34) in which the speaker indicates knowledge of what the hostess wants.

Extract 19 (S1: P34)

- 1 so **you know** [I I] want to er eat more
2 =but er I am not hungry now

It can also be seen in a medium-distance relationship, as in Extract 20 (S2: P1). The threat to the refusee's face is negotiated with this double voicing, which finally paves the way for the refusal.

Extract 20 (S2: P1)

- 1 Oh, no, please, that is not very necessary
2 I understand this situation and that is uum completely understandable
3 =but that is not what you have to pay for it
4 =That is fine, that is ok
5 Just **forget about it**.

d) *Authority*

Authority boosts dominance and demonstrates power to ward off threats (Baxter, 2014). Fairclough (2009, p. 514) suggests it is common for all people to change their own way of acting and behaving, aspects of the environment within which and upon which they act, the actions and behaviour of other people, and so forth'. This pertains to authority, and it can be used to make a bigger impression and show personal power.

Extract 21 (S2: P16)

- 1 er it doesn't matter (.) er (.) er
2 [you can you can] **be careful** when you do something ↑
3 so it doesn't matter
4 you can you don't mind it

Politeness is one important reason for modifying the blatant imposition of one's wishes on others (Brown & Levinson, 1978). In Extract 21(S2: P16), although she starts with 'it doesn't matter' in line 1, the refuser draws on the mitigating double voicing 'You can be careful' in line 2 to show her authority and heighten the impact. Together with 'it doesn't matter' preceding and succeeding it, the authority double voicing conveys politeness to a subordinate by showing that she cares about fostering a positive working relationship, building rapport, and upholding collegiality.

e) *Self-modesty*

For the Chinese, modesty is a moral necessity for an ideal personality (Ren & Guo, 2020), and therefore, they hesitate to show off their good points in order not to offend others.

Extract 22 (S2: P39)

- 1 You don't have to be sorry
2 =I mean this vase is **not very expensive** ↑
3 =so it is fine, and I think normally ↑ you are a serious cleaning lady
4 [maybe something wrong, maybe something accidental] happens to you ↑
5 =er you are not very focused on your cleaning? So that's fine

In Extract 22 (S2: P39), the comment in line 2, 'not very expensive', marks a kind of self-modesty to defend herself against the perceived face threat coming from the refusee's offer to pay. The vase may actually be expensive, but the comment acts as double voicing intended to somewhat put the refusee at ease.

Extract 23 (S3: P17)

- 1 Oh, sorry, I'm afraid I have to let you down er
2 =because I think it's a little far from me
3 and I think er my ability is [er not er not]
4 I think I **can't handle** this job
5 =and I think you can er find another person to do this job.

Politeness considerations 'weigh more heavily upwards' (Holmes & Stubbe, 2015, p. 44). In line 4 in Extract 23 (S3: P17), 'can't handle this job' as a kind of self-modesty double voicing downgrades her capabilities, and it is aimed at satisfying the refusee's face wants.

4.0 DISCUSSION

Prior work has documented double voicing roles in refusals. However, it has not focused on the specific categorisation of double voicing. This study further details the voicing roles in refusals using a mixed-method approach. Overall, the research identified twelve types of double voicing strategies in the study (explanation, apology, hedging, gratitude, compliment, buffer, mixed double voicing, comfort, self-modesty, empathy, self-commitment and authority). The study's findings provide support for Baxter's social linguistic theory in double voicing research. Of the twelve types, authority double voicing aligns with the first type (authority) identified by Baxter (2014), while the remaining eleven double voicing strategies are categorised as subsets of Baxter's second (anticipatory), third (corrective) and fourth (mitigating) double voicing. 'Authority' in both studies is aimed at displaying personal power. 'Explanation' is presented as a subcategory of anticipatory, because speakers could anticipate the potential tension in advance, which paves the way for managing conflicts in interlocutors caused by refusals. 'Apology' is presented as a subcategory of corrective, because it is used to repair relations ruined by refusals and thus serves as a corrective device to maintain relational equilibrium. Meanwhile, 'hedging, gratitude, compliment, buffer, mixed double voicing, comfort, self-modesty, empathy', and 'self-commitment' align with the mitigating double voicing strategies by Baxter (2014) because they all have the functions of softening the tone and lessening the social distance and thus enabling communication to occur without jeopardizing the face of the refusees. The study indicates that the results gained from social distance and politeness may address the issues in daily communication by combining social and pragmatic factors.

By invoking social distance, the participants used double voicing in different frequencies in different situations. They tended to increase the use of hedging as social distance increased in the study, which means social distance played an important role in determining how a refusal was phrased. Like those in Lee (2013), the participants in this study felt more comfortable and relaxed without having to employ more strategies in a close-distance social situation. For S1 (close distance), the most frequently used type of explanation (48.6%) can be attributed to the higher intimacy between interlocutors, which is in line with previous studies (Baxter, 2014). However, a little higher use of gratitude (44.4%) runs counter to the finding by Allami and Naeimi (2011), who highlighted that gratitude was not used as frequently. Compliment (38.9%) was another double voicing strategy the participants preferred to adopt in S1, which converges with the finding of Zhu and Ren (2022). For S2 (medium distance), the use of comfort (100%), self-commitment (100%), empathy (75.0%), authority (100.0%) and self-modesty (55.6%) dominated at the medium social distance level, which suggests that a distance that is neither close nor distant might pose the greatest threat for refusees. For S3 (far distance), the participants were likely to buffer (62.5%) and apologise (59.3%) to avoid putting refusees in embarrassing situations, a finding similar to Brown and Levinson (1978), whose finding shows interlocutors in extreme social distance also took these rapport-inspiring strategies for solidarity. The participants also showed partiality for gratitude (55.6%) to invest more emotion in the interaction in S3, a finding consistent with that of Izadi and Zilaie (2015). Besides, the participants were found to display a high use of mixed double voicing (41.9%), suggesting a heavier pragmatic burden, as they had to use these various strategies to minimise threats when they were not that close to the refusees.

For politeness, the results generally showed that the participants selected different double voicing types as strategies based on what was necessary to maintain politeness. This is in line with the results of Mohammad (2022), who claimed that refusal was perceived as impolite unless contextual factors such as the other person's social factors and other similar elements were considered. As strategies, these double voicing instances in the study can protect the face of the refusees. This is compatible with the results of Baxter (2014) as all the double voicing strategies identified in this study were utilised to ward off face threats. A new type of double voicing, buffer, was discovered as an evasion strategy to mitigate potential effects on the refusee, such as embarrassment. The findings are also consistent with those of Adrian and Fajri (2023), where hedging meant the refuser was not willing to give a frank response for the purposes of softening the threat and saving face. Meanwhile, the apology type in this study shows resemblance to Allami and Boustani (2017)'s politeness, which was geared towards avoiding dissatisfaction from the interlocutors. It is intended to maintain interpersonal harmony and prevent the refusees from distancing themselves from the refusees.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The study sought to explore the roles of double voicing in refusal speech acts and their relation to politeness. It also examined how these strategies interacted with social distance. The results of the present study provide more detailed support to Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1978) through the identification of the twelve double voicing types, which were found to ensure politeness by face saving and minimising threats. Also, it provides compelling evidence to look at speakers' intentions through the lens of double voicing angle by including social distance as an interplay and thus expanding the sociolinguistic theory. This approach has enriched a nuanced understanding of refusal strategies and provides valuable insights for intercultural communication. There are two key limitations. Firstly, the participants were restricted to Chinese English learners without considering gender influence, possibly limiting the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of English learners. Secondly, the study design did not control for participant age and gender, potentially introducing uncontrolled variables that could influence the results. These limitations should be addressed in future research.

Although this study is subject to limitations. There are some implications for future work. Theoretically, no theory is perfect; the seminal theory of politeness also needs to be improved, considering more factors, such as social status, views, value changes, technological advances and so on. More research is needed to delve into speech acts with malleable strategies to deal with, such as refusals, including various elements to advance a better understanding of human interaction in diverse settings. Meanwhile, not only verbal cues, but also non-verbal cues should also be explored further. Pedagogically, teachers should encourage students to talk in

English to improve their fluency and accuracy, given the fact that some learners might lack awareness of proper strategies in speech act production and tend to use lexical avoidance or simplification. One recommendation is that learners should be taught to be sensitive to different strategies, such as double voicing types, by considering different levels of social distance to ensure smooth and effective communication. Perhaps at a more advanced level, they can learn how to make changes on the fly and adjust their language by adopting subtle yet effective double voicing strategies to navigate complex refusal situations while remaining polite. This allows students to gain a deeper understanding of both their own cultural assumptions and the complexities of the target culture. Scientifically, future studies can build upon human-computer conversation to investigate speech act production as the AI technology advances.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

He Zhai (Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Resources; Visualisation; Writing-original draft)

Ridwan Wahid (Conceptualisation; Supervision; Validation; Writing-review & editing)

Woo Wai Sheng (Supervision; Validation; Writing-review & editing)

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APPENDIX

Transcription Conventions Based on Conversation Analysis (Jefferson, 2004)

(.) micro-pause

(1) pause of a specified number of seconds

[overlap] square brackets indicate the onset and offset of overlapping talk

= no gap of silence between utterances

↑ rising intonation

:: the prolongation or stretching of the sound just preceding them. The more colons, the longer the stretching.

(...) indecipherable

_emphasis