

***I'm afraid that I should say I can't:
negotiating refusals in L2 Business English emails***

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Bringing together –

learner corpus analysis

intercultural pragmatics/politeness

speech acts and emails

The data

- Test of English for non-academic purposes
- ‘Email’ writing task
- Adult test takers, East Asian

- Refusals relatively rare – 1160 emails, 102 examples
 - *I can* (725) vs. *I can’t* (73)
 - *I will* (304) vs. *I won’t* (4)

The double nature of pragmatics

Sociopragmatics

(social norms)

Pragmalinguistics

(linguistic norms)

The double nature of pragmatics

Sociopragmatics

Pragmalinguistics

Outline

- Syntactic and lexical properties
- Some particular examples
- Comparison to L1
- The big picture

Are they repentant?

- Explicit apologies found in 50% of cases
- No apology in 45 examples
- Mostly variation on sorry:
sorry, sorry that, sorry about, sorry to

I am sorry that I cannot go to the office on Monday.

I'm sorry I can't do that.

I am very sorry but I can't.

Is it rude not to apologize?

Lack of apology tends to be paired with explanation:

- *I don't have any authorities to change work schedule*
- *I can't help you on Monday since I have to attend an important seminar.*

Can they? Will they?

- Almost 1/4 have no modal (but have *sorry*)
- Over 2/3 have *can't* (and don't apologize)
- *Won't* (*won't be able to*) is very rare – despite intuition that it is more polite

Two patterns so far

Sorry + main verb

- *I'm sorry to tell you that I have an appointment with my boss at the time.*
- More indirect

No apology + can't

- *I can't take place your office work, because I have to do a lot of things on Monday.*
- More direct

→ But could be combined – cf. *So, I am sorry not to accept your proposal.*

Really, terribly, very sorry

- Intensifiers and sentential adverbs
- Both quite rare
- A few cases of *unfortunately*, mostly no apology – alternative way of conveying regret
 - *Unfortunately I can't go there in the morning.*

A closer look

- I'm afraid that I should say I can't work instead of you on Monday, for I've already...

A closer look

- I'm afraid that I should say I can't work instead of you on Monday, for I've already...
- So I can't.

A closer look

- I'm afraid that I should say I can't work instead of you on Monday, for I've already...
- So I can't.
- Because I'm going on a business trip to Japan on Monday, I can't substitute for you.

A closer look

- I have to go business trip on Monday so I won't help you.

A closer look

- I have to go business trip on Monday so I won't help you.
- Regret that I won't be able to take your place next Monday.

A closer look

- I have to go business trip on Monday so I won't help you.
- Regret that I won't be able to take your place next Monday.
- But I'm sorry to inform you of my rejection about the substituting for you.

L1 Refusals

- Surprisingly hard to find!
- Some avoidance of negatives
- Give information and/or alternatives

L1 Refusals

- Surprisingly hard to find!
- Some avoidance of negatives
- Give information and/or alternatives
- Some patterns:
 - I can't do X until I understand Y.
 - Afraid I don't have clearance for that.
 - Unfortunately I am busy. Why don't we do Y instead?
 - I can't meet at that time. Can we meet at 3?
 - Unfortunately I have taken on all the teaching I can this term. I can't do any more.
 - Sorry I can't do this myself, but I'm just too busy.

So what does it all mean?

- The L2 refusals aren't excessively rude or polite
- And mostly well-formed

BUT

- It's good to give alternatives
- It's good to give some explanation
- Some expression of regret is good – many different ways to formulate it
- Positive verbs better than negative

Looking at the bigger picture

- Linguistic patterns are being taught, and learnt
- Low risk of misunderstanding or insulting – but possible perception of ‘incompleteness’
- Need for comparison with different populations

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