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An interactional approach to speech acts for applied linguistics

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Abstract: In this paper, we present an approach for applied linguists to undertake research on speech acts in an interactionally anchored way. We first critically revisit studies on speech acts, with a special focus on L2 pragmatics, arguing that there is a clear need to further interconnect speech acts and interaction by relying on a finite, replicable and interactional typology of speech acts. We then suggest a methodological procedure through which such a typology can be employed in applied linguistic inquiries. Finally, we describe a case study featuring irritations faced by Chinese learners of English when it comes to extracting oneself from an interaction while the other keeps on talking. Such irritations are analysed through the lens of the approach proposed in this study.

Keywords: Chinese; Closing phase; English; Extractor; interaction; irritation; speech acts

1 Introduction

In this paper, we present an approach for applied linguistic research to investigate speech acts in an interactionally anchored way. A key advantage of this approach is that it allows us to explore language learning problems which we would not be able to identify and explain through more traditional approaches to speech acts.

In applied linguistics, many scholars now certainly study speech acts in an interactional way, but to date little attempt has been made to apply a rigorous and finite interactional system of speech acts through a clearly defined procedure. For example, while with the surge of discursive pragmatics (Kasper 2006) and research on interactional competence (Young 2011) various L2 pragmacists have adopted an interactional view on speech acts, such research essentially focused on how speech acts get...
co-constructed in longer stretches of interaction. We are certainly in agreement with this body of research, and we believe that the interactional typology of speech acts we are proposing neatly complements such research due to two interrelated reasons. Firstly, our system was designed to capture speech acts on the level of utterance, and by so doing one is able to quantify and contrast one’s data. Secondly, such previous research has been interactional in a somewhat different way from what we are proposing here: while other scholars studied speech acts in interaction, they did not rely on an interactionally situated typology _per se_. Thus, the model we present is not at all in contradiction with such research but rather complements it.

Our model also helps us to revisit some traditional shortcomings in the field. Many scholars tended to invent new speech acts whenever it suited their line of argument, conflated illocutionary categories with interactional ones, or focused only on isolated speech acts.

As regards the case of inventing new speech acts, using _ad hoc_ categories such as ‘confessing’ and ‘reminding’ is unhelpful if our goal is to undertake replicable research based on speech acts with relevance to applied linguistics. If one wants to understand speech act-related irritations experienced by L2 learners, it is advisable to systematically investigate contrastive differences and similarities between the learners’ L1 and L2, without however falling into the trap of the strong contrastive hypothesis. Yet, it is only possible to contrastively examine pragmatic phenomena which are conventionalised to a comparable degree in both the learner’s L1 and L2 (cf. House and Kádár 2021a).

Regarding the case of conflating illocutionary and interactional categories, e.g. defining interactional categories such as ‘refusing’ and ‘agreeing’ as speech acts, this conflation compromises the rationale of the concept of speech act. Accordingly, Edmondson (1981), Edmondson and House (1981), and Edmondson et al. (2023) argue that a systematic use of speech acts in the study of interaction can be achieved if we rely on a finite number of speech act categories and various interactional moves through which speech acts are interconnected in interaction. For example, the speech act Request may be ‘refused’ in interaction through many different speech acts, such as Opine, Request(not-to-do-x), Suggest, Tell, and so on (see Figure 1). All such speech acts function as a response to a Request, i.e., they do not represent the speech act _of_ refusal, but rather they are speech acts _through which_ the interactional phenomenon of refusing can be realised.

Regarding zeroing in on one particular speech act in isolation, this isolationist view ignores the fact that speech acts cannot be separated from interaction, and they should always be analysed from the departure point of interaction in a bottom–up way.

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1 Like most applied linguists today, we distance ourselves from the strong contrastive hypothesis that linguacultural differences automatically trigger L2 difficulties (see Fries 1945; Lado 1957).
In this paper, we first provide a critical review of previous research involving speech acts based on the above-outlined issues. Following this, we present our approach through which speech acts can be studied in a more interactionally anchored way. Finally, we describe a case study featuring perceptions of Chinese learners of English regarding conventions of extracting oneself in the Closing phase of an interaction in English while the other keeps on talking. This case study illustrates how our methodological procedure can be applied in practice.

2 Review of selected literature

Regarding the invention of new speech acts whenever it suits the researcher’s agenda, this has been such a common issue that we cannot provide here an overview of such ‘speech acts’ in applied linguistics. We believe that the idea of inventing speech acts *ad libitum* appeared in the literature as early as Wierzbicka’s (1985) study, which triggered a wealth of ‘innovative’ speech act categories, such as that of ‘self-sacrifice’ (for a recent example see Allami and Eslamizadeh 2022). Proliferating speech acts *ad libitum* shuts the door on replicability: when it comes to ‘newly invented’ speech acts, there is unavoidably a strong variation across languages in terms of their conventionalised existence (see House and Kádár 2021a). This variation becomes particularly problematic in the study of the global classroom where students come from many different linguacultural backgrounds.

Regarding the conflation of illocutionary and interactional values of a communicative act, many applied linguists have taken for granted that ‘refusal’ is an illocutionary category (see e.g. Cohen 2005; Eslami 2010; Félix-Brasdefer 2008, and many others), some others have claimed the same about ‘agreeing’ (see e.g. Holtgraves 2007; LoCastro 2000; Maynard 1990), and still some others have argued similarly about ‘compliment response’ (see e.g. Culpeper and Pat 2021; Ishihara 2010; Sharifian 2008; Yu 2004; Zhang 2021). To illustrate the problemacy of such a conflation, let us refer here to the case of compliment response. Responding to a compliment is an interactional move and this move can be realised by different speech acts. Without systematising such responses as replicable speech acts, one unavoidably fails to capture linguacultural conventions of speech act realisation in the interactional move of responding to a compliment.

As regards zeroing in on preset speech act categories, such as Apology and Request, in applied linguistics this pre-determination of the object of analysis unavoidably led to a top–down take on speech acts (see e.g. Cunningham 2017; Kasper and Blum-Kulka 1993; Olshtain and Cohen 1990; Rose and Ono 1995; Vacas Matos and Cohen 2022; Woodfield 2012). While this approach allows one to examine speech act performance, it cannot capture more complex speech act-related problems, which only emerge when one views speech acts embedded in interaction in their whole complexity. For example, some scholars have studied the speech act Greet in isolation by focusing on different realisations of greeting (e.g. Shleykina 2016).
Such a focus distracts the researcher away from studying the speech act Greet in an interactionally embedded way. In our view, it is more fruitful to examine linguaculturally situated L1 and L2 conventions of speech act realisation in the larger Opening phase of an interaction where Greet tends to occur, instead of studying Greet in isolation (see House and Kádár 2022). Accordingly, we believe it is essential to consider whether the Opening phase of an interaction tends to be realised by Greet or another speech act in the L2 linguaculture, and how this compares with the pragmatic conventions of Opening in the L1 linguaculture. Such differences can in turn help us to better understand irritations expressed by L2 learners.

As the above critical observations have shown, there is a need for an interactional typology of speech acts in applied linguistic research.

3 Our approach

In the following, let us outline our approach which we believe can resolve the above-outlined issues. This approach, which is currently being developed into a comprehensive applied linguistic framework (see House and Kádár forthcoming), has its roots in an interactional typology of speech acts, which was originally proposed by Edmondson and House (1981) and published in a renewed and extended version in Edmondson et al. (2023). The following figure presents this typology of speech acts:

![Speech acts typology](image)

Figure 1: Our typology of speech acts.
This typology includes 25 speech acts, which were derived on the basis of an empirical bottom–up study of corpora. Speech acts in this typology are divided into the two major types of ‘Substantive’ and ‘Ritual’. The ‘Substantive’ group includes speech acts which are considered to be ‘meaningful’, while ‘Ritual’ speech acts tend to occur in specific parts in an interaction and are, therefore, highly predictable, and have a social meaning, such that the literal meaning of the utterance – if any – is almost incidental to the significance of the utterance for the interactants. As House and Kádár (2021b) argued, this typology represents the default function of speech acts, and any speech act can ‘migrate’ into other slots in the typology. For example, in certain contexts, a Substantive Attitudinal speech act can take on a Ritual function. When one examines speech acts embedded in certain phases of interaction rather than focusing on isolated speech acts, the above typology prompts one to consider which speech acts are frequented in a given interactional phase in the learner’s L1 and L2.

For example, our case study below features a particular type of Closing phase in which one interactant intends to leave the scene, i.e. extracts herself from the interaction, while the other keeps on talking. As we will show, English-speaking conventions of extracting oneself can be challenging for foreign learners of English because extracting oneself from an interaction may trigger significant face-threat to one’s interlocutor. We do, however, not set out from the hypothesis that it is always one particular speech act through which extracting is realised, even though the speech act Extractor in our typology seems to be an ideal candidate in this respect. Instead of zeroing in on Extractor straightaway, we first attempt to contrastively systematise all the speech acts through which Closing an interaction can be realised in English and the L1 of foreign language learners when it comes to a situation where extracting is needed.

Over recent years, in Edmondson et al. (2023), House et al. (2021), House and Kádár (2021a), and House and Kádár (2022) we proposed the following procedure through which the above typology can be put into operation in L2 research:

As Figure 2 shows, we use contrastive analysis to identify various L2 pragmatic issues, including speech act-related ones. In this contrastive segment of research, one may fruitfully rely on various types of corpora: for example, in our case study below
we use a corpus compiled through DCTs. This corpus-based study is complemented by what we call ‘ancillary research’. The goal of ancillary research is either to triangulate the data, or, as in our case study below, to identify a problem related to language learning and teaching. While the label ‘ancillary’ may suggest a subordinate role, no subordination is intended here. As Figure 2 shows, the ancillary part of the analysis may either precede or follow the corpus-based contrastive analysis, depending on the particular design of a study. The major bolded box in Figure 2 refers to the fact that L2 pragmatic research necessarily involves a cross-cultural pragmatic focus.

4 Case study

4.1 Initial observation and ancillary research

The problem investigated in this study was raised when the first author visited the second author in China. The second author is a foreign resident in China. He told the first author that, despite his fluency in Chinese, he found it difficult after having learnt the language for a lifetime to appropriately extract himself from an interaction while the other keeps on talking. In a subsequent discussion, the two authors hypothesised that this may well point to a linguacultural difference between Chinese and English which is worth examining further. Considering the important role of English as a global lingua franca, we decided to look at this problem from a reverse angle, i.e. investigate whether the conventions of extracting oneself in Closing in English can cause frustrations for Chinese learners of English.

We define the speech act Extractor – rather than extracting as a broader interactional phenomenon – as follows:

The Extractor is a strategic signal anticipating a Leave-Take: in using an Extractor a speaker wishes to legitimize or justify his imminent leave-taking by giving reasons for it, or by excusing his intention to leave, i.e. he “extracts” himself from the ongoing conversation. Extractors tend to appear when an encounter has not yet led to a natural point of closure. (Edmondson 1981: 194–195)

Since we distinguish the speech act Extractor from the interactional move of extracting in the Closing phase of an interaction, our definition of Extractor is radically minimal in the sense that it covers the very specific act of explicitly announcing the necessity of leaving. While announcing this necessity can take many different forms, such forms are interconnected by their common function and explicit formulation. For example, an Extractor can be realised in the form of “I must go now”. While one could argue that this is an implicit Apology, such an utterance is
nevertheless an Extractor in our system due to its pragmatic function and form, whereas in the interactional move of extracting several other speech acts may have a place, and among such speech acts a typical Apologise such as “I am sorry” may easily accompany the speech act Extractor or substitute for it.

It is also worth noting that what we describe as extracting has been referred to in CA as ‘pre-leave taking’. While we definitely agree with the importance of the CA approach, we take a different path by using a strictly speech act-related analysis and defining speech acts within broader interaction moves and phases. In our view, extracting is not simply a pre-leave taking move realised in the Closing phase, but also a cluster of different speech acts surrounding or substituting for an Extractor.

We started our investigation with an ancillary study, by interviewing 10 Chinese learners of English living in the UK. All the interviewees had spent at least two years in the UK at the time of the interviews. We asked them the following questions:

1. Do you find the way in which one ends a conversation in English while the other keeps on talking similar to, or different from, Chinese?
2. If yes, why? If not, why not? Please explain your response in some detail.

As regards the first question, 9 out of 10 interviewees responded that ending a conversation in English is rather different from Chinese. This response itself simply confirmed what we described as the experience of the second author. However, what surprised us is that in response to the second question the majority of these 9 respondents voiced strong feelings about conventions of extracting in English, arguing that the British tend to be ‘robotic’ and that they ‘coldly disregard’ the feelings of others. For example, the following is a typical response:

(1) The Brits do not seem to care much when they want to get out of a chat. Basically, they just say “I have to go now”. Maybe they add a simple “sorry”, but that doesn’t really mean a lot. So, I don’t think they actually consider the feelings of others. This would certainly not be the case in Chinese where we treat the other with respect and care, as we usually explain why we interrupt the other, and in general we are simply nicer to the other when we have to end a chat.

Many other respondents also reported irritations triggered by the perceived ‘abruptness’ of how their British interlocutors extracted themselves in the Closing phase. For example, our respondent quoted in example (2) experienced such abruptness when during a rather pleasant get-together a British friend suddenly announced that she had to leave, without ‘properly’ apologising:
When I was with my British friend chatting about something, she suddenly interrupted and announced that she had to leave now, telling me that she must be running to the restaurant where she worked as a waitress. While I perfectly understood her reason, she should have properly apologised or at least pretended to be sorry about ending our chat so abruptly.

On the basis of these interviews – which we duly anonymised – we concluded that extracting oneself in the Closing phase of an interaction in English can cause irritations even for advanced Chinese learners of English who had lived in an English-speaking environment for some time. We zeroed in on the use of extracting in dyadic dialogues, bearing in mind that extracting oneself can become much more complex in multiparty scenarios than in dyadic ones.

### 4.2 Contrastive research

In the second step of our research, we compiled a DCT corpus, involving two groups of 10 Chinese and 10 British students who have never been in the other country. The respondents were requested to complete tasks relating to extracting themselves in the Closing phase in their native tongues. We designed the DCTs by involving the standard sociolinguistic parameters Social Distance and Power \([+/−SD,+/−P]\). Our DCTs included the following tasks, distributed to both groups in their native tongues:

1. You are chatting with your best friend, and you suddenly remember that it’s your mother’s birthday. You really must leave right now, but your friend keeps on talking. What do you say in order to reach a closure of the talk? \([-P,−SD]\)

2. You are chatting with an acquaintance whom you don’t know very well, and you suddenly remember that you have a doctor’s appointment right now. You really must leave, but your acquaintance keeps on talking. What do you say in order to reach a closure of the talk? \([-P,+SD]\)

3. You are talking to your supervisor, and you suddenly remember that you have an appointment with another professor whom you don’t know very well right now. You really must leave, but your supervisor keeps on talking. What do you say in order to reach a closure of the talk? \([+P,−SD]\)

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2 In pragmatics, it was the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization (CCSARP) Project (Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) which first used the variables of \([+/−SD,+/−P]\) on a large scale. Later on, scholars such as Cohen (2008) and McConarchy (2019) introduced additional variables. Notwithstanding the importance of such additional variables, in this study we rely on the basic \([+/−P,+/−SD]\) variables because in our view they are best compatible with contrastive corpus analysis.
(4) You are talking to a professor whom you don’t know very well, and you suddenly remember you have an appointment with your supervisor right now. You are desperate to leave, but the professor keeps on talking. What do you say in order to reach a closure of the talk? [+P,+SD]

### 4.2.1 Analysis of the Chinese DCT data

Table 1 displays both the realisations of the speech act Extractor and various other speech acts in our Chinese DCTs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speech Act</th>
<th>[-P,−SD]</th>
<th>[-P,+SD]</th>
<th>[+P,−SD]</th>
<th>[+P,+SD]</th>
<th>Total number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extractor</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excuse/Justify</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apologise</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willing/offer of compensation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opine</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 1 shows, while Extractor is the most frequent speech act type in the extracting move, in Chinese it is possible to realise extracting without an Extractor (see below).

In the Chinese DCT corpus, the speech act Extractor is often indicated by honorifics. Due to space limitation, we cannot provide a detailed description of the pragmatic features of all such expressions in our corpus – readers with interest in this area are advised to consult He and Ren (2016). As our corpus shows, such honorifics tend to co-occur with non-honorific Extractor realisations, which make the honorific Extractor sound more tolerable in colloquial interaction.³ In our data two honorifics were found:

1. **Nin-xian-mang** 您先忙 (lit. ‘you (V pronoun) busy first’, meaning ‘please carry on first with the matter that keeps you busy’).

**Example:**

(3) 老师不好意思，我跟导师定的一会见面，得先走了，下次再来向您请教，您先忙。

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³ As Pan and Kadar (2011) argue, in colloquial Chinese (unlike, for instance, in Japanese) honorifics are often associated with written language, and in the realisation of various speech acts in spoken interaction they often have to be ‘softened’ by more colloquial expressions.
Professor, it is embarrassing, but I have an appointment and I must go now. I will respectfully ask for your teaching (honoriﬁc expression referring to consultation) on another occasion, please be busy ﬁrst.

Here the ﬁrst non-honoriﬁc Extractor (wo dei xian zou-le ‘I must go now’) is followed by the honoriﬁc Extractor nin-xian-mang.

2. Xian-gaoci-le 先告辞了 (lit. ‘I must ﬁrst announce my leave’, i.e. ‘I am afraid I need to go now’).

Example:

(4) 老师，对不起，我刚想起来今天和导师约了见面，有点儿来不及了，那就先告辞了！

Professor, my apologies, I just realised that I have a meeting with my supervisor, so I must run now, please let me ﬁrst announce my leave.

Here again a non-honoriﬁc Extractor (youdiar laibuji-le ‘I must run now’) is followed by the honoriﬁc Extractor xian-gaoci-le.

In our Chinese corpus, such honoriﬁc forms are only used in [+P] relationships and they are not meant to substitute for a realisation of the speech act Leave-Take. Table 2 shows the frequency of such honoriﬁc forms in the 10 DCTs:

Table 2: Frequency of Extractor-indicating honorifics in our Chinese DCT corpus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>[−P,−SD]</th>
<th>[−P,+SD]</th>
<th>[+P,−SD]</th>
<th>[+P,+SD]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nin-xian-mang 您先忙 (lit. ‘you (V pronoun) are busy ﬁrst’)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xian-gaoci-le 先告辞了 (lit. ‘I must ﬁrst announce my leave’)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Along with Extractor honoriﬁcs, other deferential address forms also appear in our Chinese DCT corpus. It is not surprising that our participants used deferential forms of address in [+P] situations: we asked our respondents to provide utterances in university settings involving a lecturer, and they unanimously used the deferential address form laoshi 老师 (‘teacher’, i.e. ‘Professor’) in the [+P] scenarios. However, various respondents also used deferential forms of address in [−P] settings, mainly including affective quasi-familial forms of address, illustrated by the following examples:

(5) 兄弟，我实在得走了，我妈今天过生日在等我，之后再聊哈。

Brother, I really must leave now. It’s my mom’s birthday today and she’s waiting for me, let’s catch up on another day.
(6) 亲爱的，我得走了，今天我妈过生日。
Darling, I have to go home. Today is my mother’s birthday.

Xiongdi 兄弟 (‘brother’) in example (5) is a deferential masculine address form, while qin’ai-de 亲爱的 (‘darling’) in example (6) is a feminine one. Such forms of address tend to be used in [-P,-SD] situations, and they tend to be followed by non-honorific Extractors. Table 3 summarises the frequency of deferential and quasi-familial forms of address in our Chinese DCT corpus:

Table 3: Frequency of deferential and quasi-familial forms of address in our Chinese DCT corpus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>[-P,−SD]</th>
<th>[-P,+SD]</th>
<th>[+P,−SD]</th>
<th>[+P,+SD]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deferential forms of address</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quasi-familial forms of address</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As our Chinese data also shows, extracting in Chinese can occasionally be realised without the speech act Extractor. Example (7) illustrates such a case – here Extractor is absent in a [+P,+SD] situation and is substituted by other speech acts:

(7)  老师，不好意思哈，您记得之前给我们做讲座的教授嘛，正好他一有时间给我们答疑，我想先过去一下，等结束了再回来找您，也把论文问题和您反馈一下。
I’m sorry, professor, do you remember the professor who gave us a lecture? He happens to have time to answer questions now and I’d like to go over to his place and come back to you when that meeting is over. I also plan to further discuss my thesis questions with you.

Here, our respondent realised an Apologise, a Request (for information) and an Excuse/Justify, followed by a Willing (offer of compensation).

Let us now discuss the finding that in our Chinese DCTs (see Table 1) other speech acts are also frequently realised in the Closing phase. Due to space limitation, we only discuss the three most frequent speech acts which occurred in our corpus along with Extractor: Excuse/Justify, Apologise and Willing (offer of compensation). As Table 1 above shows, it is particularly the [+P] scenario that triggers different speech acts in the Closing phase – this correlates with the fact that in [+P] scenarios the face-threat triggered by extracting is comparatively high.

Among the speech acts realised in the Closing phase, the speech act Excuse/Justify appears to be the most important one. The figures in Table 1 show that all our respondents realised Excuse/Justify in [+P] situations. This implies that in the Chinese linguaculture getting out of a meeting with a higher-ranking interactant
while the other is still talking is a very difficult action, which needs mitigatory justification.

Along with Excuse/Justify, another frequent speech act in our corpus is Apologise, already illustrated by the above example (7). The speech act Apologise appears to be all but ‘compulsory’ in [+SD] settings, as Table 3 shows. Example (8), representing a [+P,+SD] situation, illustrates a triple use of apology forms in extracting oneself during a Closing:

(8) 对不起，对不起，非常抱歉！医生约我，我可以先走吗？今天见到您非常开心，我希望以后可以继续与您相约。

I apologise, I apologise, I am extremely sorry. I have an appointment with my doctor, so may I take my leave? I was delighted to having an opportunity to see you, and I hope I will have the pleasure of continuing our discussion on another occasion.

Willing (offer of compensation) is also a frequent speech act type in our corpus – the following example (9) illustrates its use in a [+P,+SD] scenario:

(9) 老师不好意思，我跟导师定的一会见面，我得先走了，下次再来向您请教，您先忙。

Professor, it is embarrassing, I have a meeting with my supervisor so I must leave. I will come again to ask for your respected teaching, please be busy first.

The relative frequency of such Willing (offer of compensation) realisations surprised us because from a culture-outsider point of view the [+P] variable generally does not encourage the inferior party to offer a compensation.

Following this analysis of our Chinese DCT data, let us now move onto the analysis of the English DCT data.

4.2.2 Analysis of the English DCT data

Table 4 below includes the various speech act types realised in the Closing phase in our English DCT corpus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speech Act</th>
<th>[−P,−SD]</th>
<th>[−P,+SD]</th>
<th>[+P,−SD]</th>
<th>[+P,+SD]</th>
<th>Total number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extractor</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excuse/Justify</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apologise</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opine</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The speech act Extractor seems to be ubiquitous when it comes to extracting oneself in the Closing phase in our English data. Furthermore, an Extractor may appear on its own without any other speech acts surrounding it, as in the following utterance realised in the [−P,−SD] scenario:

(10) Whoops, I must be off now.

Here the respondent only realised a supportive move Alerter (“Whoops”) before the Extractor. Such Extractor realisations with no accompanying speech acts only emerge in [−P,−SD] scenarios. Yet, their occurrence shows that extracting oneself in the Closing phase can be realised in a minimal way in English.

Our English DCTs also show that the speech act Extractor tends to be realised by routine formulae (see Coulmas 1979). The following formulae are preferred in our English DCT corpus:

1. I must/have to/got to do x
2. I’d better do x

Examples (11) and (12) illustrate the use of these routine formulae:

(11) Sorry, Dr. Smith, I really must leave now. I have an appointment with my supervisor in a couple of minutes.

(12) Hey, David, I’d better hit the road now. It’s my mum’s birthday and I still have to buy her a present.

As these examples show, routine formulae are at the heart of the Extractor in English. The fact that the speech act Extractor is ubiquitous in English and tends to be realised in a formulaic way accords with what House (2006) found in her previous research: in the realisation of many speech acts, English speakers seem to rely more heavily on routine formulae than speakers of various other languages, like German and Chinese. Routine formulae indicating the speech act Extractor tend to be used in all role relationships. Table 5 shows the overwhelming frequency of these routine formulae in our English corpus of 10 DCTs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Routine formulae indicating Extractor</th>
<th>[−P,−SD]</th>
<th>[−P,+SD]</th>
<th>[+P,−SD]</th>
<th>[+P,+SD]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
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Let us now examine other speech acts in our English DCT corpus. As Table 5 shows, while Extractor is by far the most frequent speech act type when one realises extracting in the Closing phase of an interaction in English, the speech act Excuse/Justify frequently co-occurs with Extractor. The following examples illustrate the realisation of Excuse/Justify in a \([-\text{P},+\text{SD}]\) and a \([+\text{P},+\text{SD}]\) situation:

(13) Ugh, I must rush because I have to prepare for my mum’s birthday.

(14) Erm, Dr Smith, I have a meeting with my supervisor in a sec, so I’m afraid I must go now.

Another frequent speech act type in our corpus is Apologise, illustrated by the following example):

(15) I’m sorry for interrupting, but I have a meeting with my supervisor, I must take my leave now.

What frequently happens in our corpus of English DCTs is that an Apologise is made for interrupting the other rather than for the act of leaving the interlocutor.

In our English DCT corpus, Opine is also frequently used. The following examples show \([-\text{P},-\text{SD}]\) and \([-\text{P},-\text{SD}]\) uses of this speech act:

(16) Hey, I’d love to go on talking to you, but I must be off now because there is a family event.

(17) Gosh, I really profited from this conversation, and I am sorry for interrupting, but I have an appointment with Dr. Josephson, so I need to run now.

The speech act Thank is relatively infrequent in our corpus, only appearing in \([+\text{P}]\) constellations. The following example illustrates its use:

(18) I’m grateful for this consultation, it was really useful, but I must be off now.

4.2.3 Contrastive analysis

We first describe a similarity and then the contrastive pragmatic differences between English and Chinese conventions of extracting oneself in the Closing phase of an interaction:

4 Unlike other speech act categories in our typology, Opine needs a definition. This Informative speech act refers to the expression of a belief or opinion, i.e. it is different from stating what the speaker considers to be a fact – the latter speech act is called Tell (see Figure 1).
1. In both our corpora, Excuse/Justify is the most frequent speech act realised apart from Extractor itself. This contrastive similarity is not surprising because excusing and justifying oneself for the act of extracting suits the face-threatening nature involved in this situation very well, necessitating an explanation of some form.

2. In Chinese, but not in English, it is possible to extract oneself in the Closing phase of an interaction without realising the speech act Extractor. This absence of an Extractor in the Closing phase can typically be observed in our Chinese corpus in [+P] scenarios, where the lack of an Extractor mitigates the face-threat triggered by extracting oneself from an interaction while one’s superior keeps on talking. Such a non-realisation of the speech act Extractor appears to be not possible in English: the use of an Extractor is conventionalised to such an extent in English that speakers may realise Extractor without other accompanying speech acts. This ubiquity of Extractor correlates with the fact that this speech act is practically always realised by routine formulae. In Chinese, on the other hand, Extractor is not only non-compulsory, but is also often realised by various types of honorifics in both [+P] and [−P] relationships. This contrastive pragmatic difference indicates that extracting oneself while one’s interlocutor is still talking is more face-threatening and less routinised in Chinese than in English. This outcome should not be interpreted as a case of stronger indirectness and increased ‘politeness’ by speakers of Chinese – we are decidedly against such essentialist overgeneralisations (see also Leech 2007). Rather, we should simply interpret this linguacultural difference through the cold eye of the researcher, analysing in detail the exact differences between Chinese and English conventions of extracting oneself in the Closing phase of an interaction.

3. In Chinese, the realisation of an Extractor generally involves more frequent and diverse realisations of other speech acts than is the case in English. In our Chinese corpus, we found six different speech acts co-occurring with, or substituting for, Extractor: the most commonly used speech acts Apologise and Willing (offer of compensation) had a frequency rate of 72.5% and 62.5% respectively. In our English corpus, on the other hand, there are only four speech act types co-occurring with Extractor. In English, even the most frequent speech acts Apologise and Opine have a somewhat lower frequency rate: 50% and 42.5% respectively. This contrastive difference can be interpreted as follows: due to the easy availability of routine formulae resulting in a more strongly ritualised pragmatic convention of extracting oneself in English, much less interactional work needs to be done to realise extracting. As Kádár (2017) argues, the ritualisation of face-threatening speech acts implies less mitigation work because a ritualised
pragmatic convention operates with an underlying sense of moral order, i.e. the speaker needs to invest less mitigatory work, amounting to less ‘beating around the bush’. In Chinese, on the other hand, one can witness a scarcity of routine formulae in interactions where honorification is needed. We also found a lower frequency of Extractor-indicating honorifics in comparison with the high frequency of routine formulae in English. These pragmatic conventions imply that in Chinese more interactional work is needed in extracting oneself in the Closing phase because of the dearth of routine formulae characterising English (cf. House 2006 who found a comparable contrast between English and German).

These linguacultural differences highlight a sharp pragmatic contrast when we compare two poignant realisations of extracting oneself in the Closing phase in the [+P,+SD] scenario presented in our DCTs:

\[(19)\] 对不起，对不起，非常抱歉！医生约我，我可以先走吗？今天见到您非常开心，我希望以后可以继续与您相约。

I apologise, I apologise, I am so sorry. I have an appointment with my doctor. May I take my leave now? I am so happy that we could see each other today and I do hope that we can continue our meeting on another occasion.

In example (19), the Chinese respondent offered an intensified Apologise, including three expressions (duibuqi 对不起 realised twice and feichang-daoqian 非常抱歉), which unlike the English expression sorry are ‘speech act-anchored’, i.e. they practically always realise the speech act Apologise (see House and Kádár 2021a). The multiple Apologise realisations are followed by an Excuse/Justify, a Request for permission, as well as an Opine and a Willing (offer of compensation). As this example illustrates, in Chinese [+P,+SD] situations in particular one may witness the absence of an Extractor and the presence of a multitude of other speech acts. The following example highlights how very differently extracting oneself from an interaction tends to be realised in English from what we have seen in Chinese:

\[(20)\] Thank you for all your time. As I have an appointment with my GP I have to run now, but I will be in touch soon if I may.

Unlike in the comparable Chinese example (19), in the English example (20) the respondent realised a ‘proper’ Extractor (“I have to run now”), even though the Extractor is prefaced by the speech acts Thank and Excuse/Justify and is followed by a Willing (offer of compensation).
4.3 Discussion

Let us revisit the sense of irritation reported by Chinese learners of English living in the UK. These irritations might now be explained with reference to the pragmatic differences identified in our case study. As mentioned above, our Chinese interviewees mainly complained about the ‘abruptness’ and ‘robotic’ character of extracting oneself from an interaction in English, and also about the lack of ‘proper’ apologies offered by the person who extracts herself. ‘Abruptness’ may correlate with the comparatively lower frequency of other speech acts surrounding Extractor in English. The perceived ‘robotic’ character may relate to the general preference for routine formulae in English, which, as we could see, is very different from the preference for honorific forms by speakers of Chinese. Finally, while the speech act Apologise was found to be present in both our corpora, our analysis has shown that speakers of English often Apologise for interrupting rather than leaving the other. So, it may be likely that speakers of Chinese feel that there is a lack of ‘proper’ Apologise in instances of extracting in English because they perceive that the Apologise offered by the British interlocutors actually missed the point. Let us reiterate our warning that these differences not be interpreted through the lens of sweeping overgeneralisations, such as ‘British speakers of English are direct and coldly business-like’, ‘speakers of Chinese are polite and considerate’, and so on. Rather, one should systematically investigate cross-cultural pragmatic differences (and similarities) between linguistic realisation patterns of the phenomena studied. One should also carefully consider the potential implications such differences might have for learning and teaching a foreign language like English.

Cook (1999), Davies (2004), Kubota (2016), and many others have pointed out that foreign speakers of English should not be expected to imitate English ‘native speaker’ practices. Accordingly, we refrain from suggesting that speakers of Chinese who learn and use English should be ‘expected’ to follow Anglophone extracting conventions in the Closing phase of an interaction. This goes hand in hand with arguments made by scholars of English as lingua franca (see e.g. House in press). Yet, we believe that foreign learners of English would benefit from being informed about seemingly ‘simple’ – but in fact highly complex – interactional issues, and the same goes for foreign learners of other languages like Chinese. Such issues can be best understood if we apply an interactional approach to speech acts like the one presented in this paper. As far as we are aware, many textbooks of English tend to ‘write off’ realisations of the Closing of an interaction very early in their programmes. In our view, this is counterproductive because students are made to believe that they will be able to cope with the Closing of an interaction with no
difficulties, simply because they only need to learn how to realise the speech act Leave-Take in different interpersonal relationships and genres.

5 Conclusion

In this study, we have suggested an approach through which speech acts can be examined in an interactionally-anchored way in applied linguistic inquiries. By so doing, we have addressed various issues regarding the way in which speech acts have been studied in applied linguistics in general and L2 pragmatics in particular. The proposed approach builds on an interactional typology of speech acts, which allows one to capture what happens in interactional phases such as Closing, which may be surprisingly irritating and challenging for foreign language learners. Paradoxically, such phases of interaction are often presented in an overly simple fashion in English language programmes.

The proposed approach allows us to critically examine why and how certain speech acts trigger irritations and difficulties for L2 learners. Here we would also like to briefly revisit the problematic nature of relying on sweeping overgeneralisations in applied linguistics, often centering on the so-called ‘East-West divide’ (see e.g. Kobayashi 2011; Simpson 2008 among many others). As soon as we start to rely on such overgeneralisations, e.g. by talking about ‘East-West classroom culture conflicts’, we unavoidably follow a top–down logic where we set out to prove the validity of an assumption we hold at the very outset of our research. Such an approach seems to us to be essentially misguided, and we are certainly not alone with this view (see Leech’s 2007 seminal study). We therefore suggest that as part of considering speech acts in an interactional way as we suggested here, applied linguists should ideally also follow a strictly bottom–up view on problems of language learning and teaching, in the spirit of Karl Popper (see Edmondson and House 2011). According to Popper’s classic research paradigm, one should never set out to prove one’s assumption, but rather attempt to falsify it and then, if necessary, propose a revised assumption, and so on. The approach we have proposed is typically Popperian, in that in investigating learner irritations we have distanced ourselves from common a priori assumptions about Chinese and British cultural differences that might have been responsible for learner irritations. Rather, we have narrowed our focus to strictly language-anchored interactional issues through the lens of speech acts.

In our case study, we have considered instances of learner irritation arising at a particular point in time, in order to illustrate how one can operationalise the proposed framework. In future research, the study presented in this paper may be fruitfully combined with developmental and diachronic research.
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