

Re-invitation as Sequential Relational Repair in Post-Refusal Cross-Cultural Interactions

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The study treats post-refusal re-invitation in Chinese-English cross-cultural interaction as a form of sequential relational repair. It combines conversation analysis with interpersonal pragmatics. What the data suggest is that the friction has little to do with lexical misunderstanding. It seems to grow instead from asymmetric expectations about how sequences should close, and from conflicting assumptions about whether a refusal is enough to end an invitation sequence. Discourse-completion tasks and retrospective interviews show something worth noting. The same re-invitation move may be read as warmth by some participants and as intrusion by others, depending on social distance, formality, and how much intercultural exposure they have had. Localized mitigation, things like softening disclaimers and meta-commentary, appears to offer a practical resource. These moves may help repair the relationship before any conflict becomes visible.

Keywords: cross-cultural pragmatics, sequential relational repair, post-refusal re-invitation, conversation analysis, asymmetric sequence-closing expectations

Introduction

In everyday contact between Chinese and English speakers, friction can sometimes follow an explicit refusal. One speaker responds to a “no” with another invitation, hoping to keep the rapport alive. The other person may hear that repeated urging as pressure. This misalignment rarely turns into open argument. It tends to remain latent.

Cross-cultural studies of refusal mostly treat it as a self-contained speech act, dwelling on single-turn choices (Bresnahan, Cai, & Rivers, 1994; Li & Wongwaropakorn, 2024; Marbun & Damanik, 2025). Conflict-talk research documents repair moves, though usually after overt disagreement (Fu, Yu, & Yang, 2026). Conversation-analytic work details sequence organization, yet rests mostly on monolingual data and says little about cross-cultural closing norms (Schegloff, 2007; Nishizaka & Hayano, 2025). Interpersonal pragmatics offers tools for judging conduct, but relational work before visible conflict remains thinly documented (Balcar, 2025; Locher & Watts, 2005). Anthropologists warn against cultural essentialism, though without fine-grained conversational instruments (Ortner, 1995; McGranahan, 2016; Zhang, 2022; Thomas, 2024; Wu, 2025). One practice seems to have slipped through the gaps between these literatures, namely post-refusal re-invitation.

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The study leans primarily on sequence organization, with relational work serving as a supplementary lens. The analysis follows the interaction from the initial refusal, through the expansion prompted by a re-invitation, and then to the asymmetric expectations around closing. These expectations are evaluated differently depending on social distance, formality, and intercultural exposure. The discussion is organized around four dimensions, namely, sequential patterns (SP), asymmetric expectations (AE), relational evaluations (RE), and mitigation practices (MP).

Table 1

Interactional Outcomes in Post-refusal Re-invitation

Condition Combination	Outcome
SP alignment +AE convergence +RE congruence + effective MP	→Smooth Relational Maintenance
Ae divergence + RE incongruence + insufficient/mismatched MP	→Latent Pragmatic Misalignment

Conceptual-Empirical Dimensions of Post-Refusal Re-Invitation

Sequential Patterns: Expanded Adjacency Pairs and Sequence Closure

In conversation-analytic terms, a post-refusal re-invitation is not just another invitation. Its conditional relevance is anchored to the refusal just before it, which is a dispreferred second pair-part. The turn's position gives it a different function. It works within the trajectory opened by that refusal.

Two trajectories recur in the discourse-completion materials. The extracts below are anonymized role-play responses, formatted with simplified CA conventions. Extract 1 (Table 2) shows expansion through re-invitation. Extract 2 (Table 3) shows closure after a single refusal.

Table 2

Extract 1—Sequence-Expansion-via-Re-Invitation Pattern

Turn & Speaker	Utterance Content	Sequential Variable Label	Pragmatic Annotation Category
Speaker A (Turn 1)	"Would you join our weekend seminar on digital media ethics this Saturday morning?"	First Pair-Part (FPP)	Initial invitation
Speaker B (Turn 2)	"Thanks for the thought, but I have a pile of grading to clear this weekend. I won't be able to make it."	Dispreferred Second Pair-Part (SPP)	Explicit refusal
Speaker A (Turn 3)	"Oh, come on, we are only going over the introductory module for an hour, and coffee is on us!"	Sequence-Expanding Move	Post-refusal re-invitation
Speaker B (Turn 4)	"I really appreciate the gesture, but my workload is genuinely maxed out."	Boundary-Maintaining Move	Second-round refusal

Table 3

Extract 2—Sequence-Closure-After-Single-Refusal Pattern

Turn & Speaker	Utterance Content	Sequential Variable Label	Pragmatic Annotation Category
Speaker A (Turn 1)	"Are you free to drop by our lab meeting this Thursday afternoon to hear the visiting scholar?"	First Pair-Part (FPP)	Initial invitation
Speaker B (Turn 2)	"I appreciate the invite, but my teaching schedule runs back-to-back all afternoon. I cannot make it."	Dispreferred Second Pair-Part (SPP)	Explicit refusal
Speaker A (Turn 3)	"No worries at all. Let's catch up when things slow down for you."	Terminal Boundary	Sequence closing (no re-invitation produced)

Here the re-invitation extends the pair after an unambiguous refusal, and the sequence expands. Extract 2, by contrast, closes at the refusal, and no further urging follows. The re-invitation in Extract 1, turn 3, is

lexically close to the invitation in turn 1, yet the two turns do different work. The second answers a refusal, so its character comes from position rather than wording.

A post-refusal re-invitation is thus a move within an already-active expansion, not a repetition of an earlier invitation. Once a refusal is on record, expansion and closure are both locally available paths. What needs explaining is where the cross-cultural misalignment enters.

Asymmetric Sequence-closing Expectation as a Source of Latent Pragmatic Misalignment

Conditional relevance sets expectations about what should follow a turn, but fixes no endpoint. An explicit refusal may close an invitation sequence or leave it open for negotiation, and parties do not always agree on which holds. When they do disagree, an asymmetric closing expectation emerges. The friction tends to stay latent. It involves no misunderstanding of words, only a dispute over where the sequence is heading.

The sequence below comes from the retrospective interviews, reconstructed from a participant's account of a real Chinese-American academic exchange and anonymized.

Table 4

Extract 3 Intercultural Latent Misalignment Driven by Asymmetric Sequence-Closing Expectation

Turn & Speaker	Utterance Content	Sequential Variable Label	Pragmatic Annotation Category
Speaker A (Chinese Background)	"Would you care to join our faculty table for lunch after the morning session?"	First Pair-Part (FPP)	Initial invitation
Speaker B (American Background)	"Thanks so much for asking, but I promised to review some manuscript notes with a colleague over lunch. I can't join today."	Dispreferred Second Pair-Part (SPP)	Explicit refusal
Speaker A (Chinese Background)	"We can easily push our ordering back by fifteen minutes if you want to join us midway. It's no trouble at all."	Sequence-Expanding Move	Post-refusal re-invitation
Speaker B (American Background)	"(pause) I appreciate that, but my colleague and I are set to meet right at noon."	Frame-Rejection Move	Second refusal (minimal acknowledgment)

Turn 2 is a clear refusal in this situation as shown in Table 4. For Speaker A, it does not exhaust the invitation's conditional relevance. The sequence is still open for relational work, hence the re-invitation in turn 3. For Speaker B, the refusal has already done that work, and turn 3 lands as out of place. Neither party misreads anything literal. The trouble lies in conflicting assumptions about when the sequence may properly end.

A speech-act-centred approach cannot easily capture this. What strains the interaction is not how the "no" was worded but what business each party assumes remains open afterwards. The structural condition for latent friction sits here. Its visible face appears in how participants assess re-invitation moves, taken up next.

Table 5

Interactional Outcome Matrix Across Conditioning Factors

Social Distance / Power Dynamics	Initial Refusal Style	Re-invitation Timing & Form	Interlocutor Attribution	Resulting Relational Valence
High Solidarity / Low Power (Close Colleagues / Friends)	Mitigated with detailed accounts ("I have a family obligation...")	Prompt / Persistent ("Are you sure you can't step away for just a bit?")	Warmth and sincere investment in bonding	Positive (Reinforced Rapport)
Low Solidarity / Asymmetric Power (Junior Scholar / Senior Mentor)	Direct and unmitigated ("I am unable to attend.")	Immediate press ("Try to rearrange your notes; it matters for the team.")	Coercion and disregard for autonomy	Negative (Latent Strain / Avoidance)

Table 5 to be continued

Neutral Acquaintances (Cross-Departmental Peers)	Polite evasion (“My schedule is quite tied up this week.”)	Tentative / Softened (“Only if it opens up later, no pressure.”)	Awkward ambiguity, managed with polite disclaimers	Neutral (Transactional Maintenance)
High Solidarity Ingroup (Long-term Collaborators)	Ritualistic modesty refusal (“Oh, please don’t bother on my account.”)	Cyclical urging (“Nonsense, we saved a seat for you.”)	Expected hospitality ritual; mutual face-saving	Highly Positive (Group Cohesion)

Divergent Evaluative Outcomes: Re-invitation as Preventive Relational Work

Relational-work theory holds that utterances carry no fixed polite or impolite value. Social meaning emerges from participants’ situated judgements (Locher & Watts, 2005). Read this way, a post-refusal re-invitation is preventive relational work. It aims to defuse the relational harm a refusal may have done, not to secure acceptance of the offer. Anthropologists have argued that refusal-related interaction can build solidarity, though their accounts stay at the macro-social level (McGranahan, 2016).

The retrospective interviews bear this out. One and the same sequential move drew fundamentally different assessments, even from participants who grasped its content perfectly. Some read repeated urging after a refusal as considerate, which a sign the speaker valued the relationship itself. Others read the identical move as intrusion, a disregard of the preference just stated.

Table 6

Extract 4 Contrasting Participant Evaluative Accounts

Participant Profile	Evaluative Interview Excerpt	Interpretive Stance Label	Relational Attribution Category
Speaker A (Chinese Background, Senior Lecturer)	“When I tell a colleague I cannot attend a departmental get-together, and they urge me once more, I do not feel cornered. It tells me they genuinely want my company and care about keeping our ties warm.”	Considerate Gesture Stance	Preserving group cohesion and mutual warmth
Speaker B (American Background, Visiting Researcher)	“Once I have given a clear, polite ‘no thanks,’ bringing up the invitation again feels like they are testing my boundaries or ignoring my choice. It makes me uncomfortable, even if I know their heart is in the right place.”	Over-Persistent Intrusion Stance	Disregarding individual autonomy and stated preference

These evaluations are not pre-programmed cultural traits. Judgements shifted in the interviews, with social distance, formality, and accumulated cross-cultural contact. That finding supports cautions against cultural essentialism (Ortner, 1995) and speaks to a gap in interpersonal pragmatics, where preventive relational work is under-documented (Balcar, 2025). What divides participants is not wording but the evaluative weight given to sequence-expanding conduct.

Interactional Mitigation Practices for Sensed Sequential Misalignment

Such misalignment need not escalate. Participants pick up subtle cues of friction and respond with mitigation moves aimed at the relationship rather than the practical business of the exchange. Unlike repair in overt conflict, these responses address a mismatch of sequence expectations before disagreement becomes visible (Schegloff, 2007). The trajectories recur once tension is sensed, softening the urging, meta-commentary on norms, or abandoning the expansion.

Table 7

Extract 5 Anonymized Reconstructed Sequence

Turn & Speaker	Utterance Content	Sequential Variable Label	Pragmatic Annotation Category
Speaker A (Turn 1)	"Would you care to drop by our office tea this afternoon?"	First Pair-Part (FPP)	Initial invitation
Speaker B (Turn 2)	"Thank you for the invitation, but I have a tight editing deadline today and won't be able to step out."	Dispreferred Second Pair-Part (SPP)	Explicit refusal
Speaker A (Turn 3)	"Completely understand, your deadlines come first! I only mention it in case you need a quick stretch away from the screen, absolutely zero pressure."	Softened Sequence Expansion	Mitigated re-invitation (strips away coercive pressure)
Speaker B (Turn 4)	"That is very kind of you to say. I might poke my head in briefly if I wrap up my draft early!"	Positive Recipient Uptake	Successful preventive relational repair

After the refusal in turn 2, Speaker A re-invites but strips the coercive undertone away with an explicit disclaimer. The relational gesture survives; the pressure does not. Other participants in the corpus briefly flagged differences in interactional customs, or simply moved the talk elsewhere.

Practices of this sort point to an under-documented dimension of relational work. Conflict-talk research mostly analyses repair once disagreement has taken shape (Fu, Yu, & Yang, 2026). Participants act pre-emptively, on trouble originating in sequence norms rather than comprehension. Nothing is guaranteed, since success depends on uptake. Yet these moves are the main resources speakers have for friction of this kind.

Theoretical Dialogue and Practical Implications

Dialogue with Existing Pragmatic Scholarship

Set against refusal-focused pragmatics, the contrast is sharp. That scholarship has mapped how speakers formulate a "no" across gradients of power and distance (Marbun & Damanik, 2025), but says little about what happens afterwards. Shifting weight from isolated turns to expanded adjacency-pair dynamics shows that friction often lies not in how the refusal is phrased but in diverging expectations about closure.

The findings also speak to conflict-talk and conversation-analytic work. What these data highlight is preventive relational work before open conflict. Evaluative responses were not fixed by cultural background. Distance, formality, and personal intercultural experience kept shaping the judgements (Ortner, 1995).

Theoretical Contributions and Practical Takeaways

Two strands of pragmatic thinking are extended here. Applying position-dependent meaning in cross-cultural settings shows the asymmetric closing expectation to be an underexamined source of latent misalignment (Nishizaka & Hayano, 2025). Locher and Watts' relational-work framework also gains a new member: preventive sequential repair, a form of relational labour rarely documented in empirical work (Locher & Watts, 2005).

Implications for teaching are modest but tangible. Materials tend to offer lists of refusal and invitation formulas. What learners also need is awareness of sequence-level norms. Misunderstanding can arise with lexical meaning perfectly clear, because the parties assume different endpoints for the sequence.

Conclusion

This paper has examined post-refusal re-invitation in Chinese-English interaction through sequence organization and relational work. Moving past single-turn speech-act accounts, it traced how re-invitation operates within

expanded adjacency pairs, its function tied to sequential position rather than surface wording.

The latent friction, on this account, appears to come from asymmetric closing expectations rather than from misunderstood meanings. An identical move may be read as considerate relational work or as intrusion, moderated by distance, formality, and intercultural exposure. When participants sense trouble, they often turn to local mitigation in an effort to contain harm before conflict develops.

Cross-cultural trouble, in short, is not confined to word-level misreading. Normative expectations about sequence trajectories are an easily overlooked source of tension. They deserve closer attention in research and in pragmatic training alike.

Appendix: DCT Scenarios (Discourse-Completion-Task)

Manuscript Note: The discourse-completion-task (DCT) materials were designed to capture multi-turn institutional interactions between cross-cultural colleagues or academic peers. Participants were provided with situational contexts and asked to write out consecutive turns following an initial invitation and explicit refusal.

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