

# Speech Act Realization of Invitations: A Pragmatic Analysis across Different Degrees of Social Distance

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## Abstract

Invitation, as a fundamental speech act in social interaction, plays a crucial role in establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. This paper explores how relational closeness shapes the pragmatic realization of invitation speech act, drawing on frameworks such as Speech Act Theory, Face Theory, Politeness Principles and Hwang Kwang-kuo's Tripartite Framework of Renqing (Favor) and Mianzi (Face). A Discourse Completion Task (DCT) was applied to participant across three relational ties (instrumental, mixed, and expressive ties) to analyze variations in invitation speech act. Results indicate that speakers adapt their pragmatic choices based on relational closeness. In less close contexts, invitations tend to be indirect and inquiry-based, emphasizing politeness and justification. As closeness increases, invitations become more direct and emotionally expressive, reflecting shared familiarity and reduced face-threatening concerns. Auxiliary strategies also shift according to relational dynamics. These findings highlight the differences interplay between degrees of social distance and pragmatic strategies, offering insights into the contextual adaptability of invitation speech act in everyday communication.

## Keywords

Realization of invitation speech act, Speech Act Theory, Degree of social distance.

## 1. Introduction

The INVITATION, as one of the most common speech acts in our real life, plays a significant role in building and maintaining interpersonal relationship [1][2]. An invitation in linguistics is primarily analyzed as a speech act - a communicative action where the speaker proposes, encourages, or solicits participation in a social interaction. It functions as a directive illocutionary act (Searle, 1975) [19], where the speaker attempts to influence the listener's behavior (e.g., "Would you like to join us for dinner?") Therefore, the realization of invitation involves many social elements, from gender, social status, closeness to degree of formality [2]. However, the related study analyzing the speech act of invitation is relatively rare compared to other speech acts [17], though the research on the speech act theory has always been a hot topic in the field of pragmatics (this will be discussed in detail in the next section.).

Thus, to get further understanding of the act of invitation and provide practical and proper guidance to realize it appropriately, qualitative and quantitative research methods will be combined by means of DCT questionnaire based on the theoretical framework involving the Speech Act Theory [1], Face Theory (especially the Hwang's Three-Dimensional Theory of Favor and Face [7]), Cooperative Principle and Politeness Principle [4]. In this study, the main research question will be discussed would be:

Does the level of relational closeness influence the realization of invitation speech acts? If so, in what ways is this influence manifested?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Theoretical Framework

#### 2.1.1. Speech Act Theory

At the beginning of the 20th century, the focus of western research shifted from traditional philosophy to linguistics, forming an upsurge of linguistic philosophy research.

Austin (1962) [1] first proposed the Speech Act Theory in his book *How to Do Things with Words*. Austin put forward the main idea of "words are doing" and its meaning is when someone is speaking, he is also performing a certain act [2]. For him, words are in themselves actions and these speech acts can and should be systematically studied. He postulated the theory of speech acts, the aim of which is to explore how to do things with words. That is, language is not only used to inform or describe things, it is often used to "do things", to perform acts. He at first just classified speech acts into constative sentences and performative sentences. [3] The former refers to those sentences that describe, state, or report something and can be judged as true or false based on their correspondence with facts. They don't contain a performative verb that explicitly describes the intended speech act, e.g., I am sorry. The latter are those utterances that do not merely describe but enact an action when spoken, that is, describe the speech act itself, e.g., I apologize. Nevertheless, he himself found that the classification was not perfect, so he made an evolution of the theory. He then identified three classes of human activities with language, namely, locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. A locutionary act is the saying of something which is meaningful and can be understood. An illocutionary act is using a sentence to perform a function. And a perlocutionary act is the results that are produced by means of saying something. Unlike logic-based theories of meanings, Austin's speech act theory reveals the functions performed by utterances in communication, especially the illocutionary act, i.e. "the act performed in saying something" [4].

Influenced by Austin, his student, Searle developed the Theory [19]. He put forward that speech acts could be grouped into general categories based not on performative verbs but on the relationship between the words and the world. Searle (1969) broke Austin's classification of speech acts and divided speech acts into five categories according to appropriate conditions: assertives, directives, expressives, declaratives and commissives. Invitation is classified as directives. Assertives refers to the speaker's attitude towards something through statement and description and the speaker guarantees that the proposition expressed in the dialogue is true. Directives means that the speaker asks the listener to do something in varying degrees through suggestions, orders and other forms. It changes the objective reality through instructions so that the listener follows the speaker's words and the speaker hopes that the proposition of the discourse will make the listener take some actions. Commissives refer to the commitment made by the speaker to the future behavior which ensures that he will do something or take some actions by means of promise and guarantee. Expressives refer to a psychological state in which the speaker expresses his attitude and emotion towards things while expressing the content of the proposition. Declaratives refer to the change of the speaker's default situation, the content of the discourse and the world are contradictory. This type mainly includes appointment, dismissal and so on.

In 1975, Searle published indirect speech act and proposed indirect speech act and further developed speech act theory. In daily communication, people will consider politeness and other factors and use euphemism in communication. In indirect speech acts, discourse real meaning beyond the meaning of the discourse itself and the listener can understand the implicit meaning on the basis of the common knowledge between the speaker and the listener. Based on the conventional interpretation of discourse, Searle divided indirect speech acts into conventional indirect speech acts and non-conventional indirect speech acts. Conventional indirect speech act is the literal meaning of a sentence which can be recognized by inference through

convention and common sense. "Inferring the literal meaning according to convention and common sense, the speaker's intention can be recognized" refers to that the implication can be inferred through the syntactic form of the sentence according to daily habits. Compared with non-conventional indirect speech acts, conventional indirect speech acts are simple and easy to understand and master. The realization of communicative intention of such indirect speech acts must rely on the common background knowledge and some conversational principles of both sides of the conversation and be deduced and judged in combination with the context. The proposal of Searle's indirect speech act provides a unique method for the study of conversation and he makes up for the deficiency of his early theory.

### 2.1.2. Cooperative Principle

Cooperative Principle [8] is an vital aspect of carrying on interpersonal conversation, not to mention in invitation context. This principle will also be introduced briefly in this section.

In a conversation the participants will co-operate with each other when making their contributions and the others are cooperating to a maximum extent. It was proposed by Paul Grice in his book *Logic and Conversation*. For him, the Cooperation Principle (hereafter referred to as CP) is to make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. It included for maxims: quality, quantity, relevance and manner. Firstly, Maxim of Quality. Do not say what you believe to be false and do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. It required speakers to avoid deliberate falsehoods or unsupported claims. Secondly, Maxim of Quantity. Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange and do not make your contribution more informative than is required. It required speakers to provide enough information to fulfill communicative goals without unnecessary elaboration. Thirdly, Maxim of Relevance. Make your contribution relevant to the aims of the ongoing conversation. It is supposed to be connected with the topic. Fourthly, Maxim of Manner. Be clear, try to avoid obscurity, ambiguity, wordiness and disorderliness in the use of language. The speakers should say clearly and concisely. Nevertheless, the maxims of the CP are not always observed; rather, they are susceptible to violation and flouting.

### 2.1.3. Politeness Principle

Politeness Principle [4] (hereinafter referred to as PP) can be seen as a kind of further development of CP because it can be the supplement of it. Politeness can be defined as the strategies people use to be aware of another person's face, which face means the public self-image of a person. It refers to that emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone else to recognize. The choice of the strategy can reflect power dynamics (e.g., boss vs. Intern), cultural norms (e.g., indirectness in Japan vs. directness in the Netherlands), and context (formal email vs. chat with a friend).

According to Leech [16] (1983), communicators generally observe some rules of good behavior which he terms the PP. There are SIX MAXIMS of Leech's PP. Firstly, the Tact Maxim. Try to minimize cost to other and maximize benefit to other. Secondly, the Generosity Maxim. Try to minimize benefit to self and maximize cost to self. Thirdly, the Approbation Maxim. Try to minimize dispraise of other and maximize praise of other. Fourthly, the Modest Maxim. Try to minimize praise of self and maximize dispraise of self. Fifthly, the Agreement Maxim. Try to minimize disagreement between self and other and maximize agreement between self and other. Sixthly, the Sympathy Maxim. Try to minimize antipathy between self and other and maximize sympathy between self and other.

As Leech observes, when maxims of the CP and the PP come into conflict, the latter generally gains more consideration. While the CP regulates communicators under the assumption of cooperativeness, the PP has a higher regulative role in maintaining social equilibrium and the friendly relations on which the assumption of cooperativeness depends.

#### 2.1.4. Face Theory

Face Theory was mainly developed by Brown and Levinson (1987) [4]. They defined face as “something that is emotionally invested, and can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction” and they subdivided the notion of the face into positive face and negative face. Positive face refers to our need to be accepted and liked by others and our need to feel that our social group shares common goals. Negative face refers to our right to independence of action and our need not to be imposed on by others. Other theories on the face also have been put forward. [5] For example, Scollon (1995) work out a face system that includes three factors: power, distance, and the weight of the imposition. [6]

Face is also paid many attention in China as a vital tool to maintain harmonious relationships. Hwang Kwang-kuo's [7] Tripartite Framework of Renqing (Favor) and Mianzi (Face) is a widely used and effective standard of classification of the closeness of interpersonal relationship when it comes to renqing (favor) and mianzi (face) (Wu Tiejun, 2004) [20]. Hwang Kwang-kuo regarded interpersonal interaction as a kind of “game of power”, in which face is rational judgment. He divided interpersonal relationship into three levels of ties, that is, expressive ties, mixed ties and instrumental ties. The Expressive Ties can be considered as the most close relation existing among families, confidants or peer circles, which are also fall under the category of primary group. It typically constitutes a long-term and stable form of social connection. Such relationship fulfills individual's emotional needs for care, warmth, security, and belonging. These ties follow the principle of “from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs”. The second ties, Mixed Ties are the mid-level ties featuring that both parties in the interaction are acquainted and share a certain level of emotional connection, yet their bond lacks the depth found in primary groups where individuals can freely exhibit sincere behavior without reservation. Typically, such relations may encompass various role-based connections, including but not limited to relatives, neighbors, teachers and students, classmates, colleagues, and fellow townspeople. The third ties, Instrumental Ties, which are established primarily to achieve the goals desired by the individuals involved, refer to the least close relationship. [8] Examples include the interactions between shopkeepers and customers, or drivers and passengers, etc.. Such relationships operate under the “norm of equality” (equality role), which follows the principle of “fair exchange without deception” to ensure impartiality regardless of age or status. Given the three levels of interpersonal relationship based on favor and face ties, it is a practical instrument to measure the level of closeness between people and an available standard to categorize it. (Zhu Guyue, 2018) [9] Therefore, it will be applied as one of the instruments to measure people's relational closeness levels. [25]

#### 2.2. Previous Study of INVITATION at Home and Abroad

As a branch of the Speech Act Theory, the related study analyzing INVITATION is relatively rare compared to other speech acts, leaving available room for its research.

At home, Gu Yueguo (1990) and Mao (1992; 1994) conducted culturally specific analyses of invitation discourse in Chinese, arguing that Chinese invitations constitute highly ritualized interactive activities. [10] [11] Shi Jingling and Li Shulan (2002) [12] investigated strategies employed by Chinese university students when perceiving negative responses to invitations with a comparative study of gender differences. Yu Xiucheng (2002) [22] explored deviations from Searle's felicity conditions in Chinese non-genuine invitations and their underlying reasons. Ling Laifang (2004) [13] pioneered a systematic pragmatic investigation of invitation speech acts among Chinese university students, providing the first statistical account of implementation patterns, discourse structures, pragmatic strategies, and social functions of invitation behaviors in Chinese. [14] Cao Qinming (2005) [17] adopted a conversation analytic approach from a pragmatic perspective to comprehensively analyze invitation phenomena,

revealing invitations to be fundamentally negotiable interactive processes. Zhu Zifang (2007) [27] investigated the difference of Chinese invitation behaviors in terms of gender.

Besides these local researches, there are lots of researches that compare Chinese invitation strategy with another culture from cross-cultural perspective. [15] Li Yunhan (1996) [23] identified how Sino-foreign cultural differences lead to communicative failures in invitation exchanges. Jia Yuxin (1997) conducted a tentative comparison between Chinese and American invitation speech acts, examining multiple dimensions including social distribution, functions, advance arrangements and negotiation processes, etc. [16]. Peng Zeng (1998) briefly outlined differences in invitation responses between native Chinese speakers and Anglo-Americans. Zhou Mei and Zhang Xiao (2002) provided illustrative examples of structural variations between Chinese and Western invitation discourses. Zhao Yingling and Li Shifang (2004) examined the distinctive features, five implementation strategies, and pragmatic functions of [24] non-genuine invitations. Qiao Liping (2005) [14] conducted a specialized intercultural comparison of telephone invitations. Li Jingke (2006) [11] systematically analyzed differences between Chinese and American politeness norms, syntactic patterns, and strategic implementations of invitations. Liu Dandan (2017) compared the invitation difference between Chinese and Japanese comprehensively. [18]

At abroad, in terms of invitation in English, Wolfson (1979; 1981b; 1983; 1989) conducted a series of detailed and in-depth studies on American English invitation speech acts. Isaacs and Clark (1990) conducted a study on "non-genuine invitations", analyzing the necessary conditions and implementation techniques for such "pseudo-invitations" [20]. García [8] (1992; 1996; 1999) examined how invitations are refused in Peruvian Spanish and proposed three levels of invitation and response patterns in Venezuelan Spanish. [21] Holmes (1995) also investigated gender differences in invitation behaviors between men and women. [22] Félix-Brasdefer (2003) conducted a contrastive study on pragmatic strategies for politely declining invitations between Latin American Spanish and English. [23]

To draw a conclusion, Chinese researchers on invitation paid more attention to the interaction discourse and its strategy used mainly by university students and cultural differences from cross-cultural perspective, while foreign scholars researched it in terms of its functions, conditions, techniques, response patterns, gender differences and strategies. [24] Though there are several studies related to pragmatics, they are tend to analyse its function and realization as a whole, leading to inevitable ignored details. Therefore, it makes it innovative and possible to analyze the realization of speech act of invitation across the relational closeness levels.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Participants

There are 21 participants in this study, 10 girls and 11 boys. They are all above undergraduate and from nearby regions. Thus they share similar background. To analyse the realization of invitation specifically, they were asked to finish the questionnaire either in Chinese or in English. It turns out 20 participants chose to answer it in Chinese and one in English. To ensure uniformity of the study, their performance will be analyzed as Chinese itself, but the techniques and process of analyzing will be presented in English.

Finally, there are 20 valid candidates' performance containing half female and half male. Their age, cultural and social background are similar, which is beneficial to keep the study specific and objective.

#### 3.2. Instruments

The instrument used in the present study was a questionnaire with major part called DCT [26]. A DCT is an instrument widely employed in interaction and speech act pragmatics. Although

DCTs are criticized for not eliciting on-line spoken production data and not allowing for negotiation between interlocutors (Chen, 2001; Yuan,2001), previous studies have indicated that the data elicited through DCTs, open-ended role play, and field notes of naturally occurring expressions are similar and yield the same words and expressions(Bodman& Eisenstein, 1988; Rintell & Mitchell, 1989). In additions, DCTs are effective ways of collecting plenty of data occurring in various contexts and variables of situations in DCTs can be easily controlled for the comparisons among different languages (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989; Chen, 2007; Cenoz, 2003). Thus, DCT was chosen as major research instrument. [28]

The DCT in the present study included three relational closeness levels of ties in accordance with Hwang Kwang-kuo’s Tripartite Framework of Renqing (Favor) and Mianzi (Face). The design of DCT situations was based on the three levels of ties, relatively expressive ties, mixed ties and instrumental ties, and each level contains three situations across common interpersonal relationships. [20]

**Table 1.** Description of the DCT Situations

Level of Ties	Interpersonal relationships			Level of closeness
Instrumental ties	stranger-stranger	gym coach-customer	organizer-presenter	the least close
Mixed ties	classmate-classmate	colleague-colleague	workmate-workmate	mid-level
Expressive ties	close friend-friend	confidant-confidant	family-family	The most close

Beside the DCT, The chi-square test ( $\chi^2$  test) also be implemented in the research combined with DCT to explore the degree of interrelation between relational closeness and realization of invitation. It functions like a “difference detector”, specifically designed to examine whether correlations exist between data and measure their strength. Its core indicator, the p-value, represents the “probability of coincidence”. That is to say, when  $p < 0.05$ , it means there’s less than a 5% chance the observed difference occurred randomly, allowing us to confidently conclude that “a genuine difference exists”. For instance, in this study, the  $p < 0.001$  for direct invitations indicates the frequency differences across relationship types are extremely unlikely to be coincidental. Meanwhile, the magnitude of the chi-square value ( $\chi^2$ ) reflects the effect size of the difference. Generally speaking, a larger  $\chi^2$  value indicates a stronger correlation.

**3.3. Procedure**

The questionnaire of DCT was designed into both Chinese and English version, and both of them were delivered to participants. They were allowed to finish the DCT in English or Chinese anytime as they liked. After that, 20 Chinese version and 1 English version were finished. To get a full and optimistic research conclusion, they will be analyzed in the form of original Chinese performance, while the process and angle used in the process will still be presented in English.

**4. Data Analyses and Discussion**

To analyze the speech act of invitation, there are three levels of speech act proposed by Blum-Kulka (1984;1989), that is the Central Speech Act, the Auxiliary Speech Act and the Microunit. The Central Speech Act is the major part of realizing the invitation act; the Auxiliary Speech Act is used to assistant the application of it, involving illustration of reason; the Microunit is utilized

for complement the other two, including form of address, euphemism and other polite expression. Due to complicated contexts, the speech act is usually consists of more than one semantic components, which means that different discourses are supposed to combined together to achieve one speech act. Nevertheless, the practice of speech act is complicated according to contexts and identical styles. In the real realization of it, some of the components might be modified or even lost. While in the process of its realization, every discourse does not share the same degree of importance according to Blum-Kulka (1984;1989). Here the frequency and characteristics of each components will be discussed.

It then was criticized because there is some overlap existing between the Auxiliary Speech Act and the Microunit. For example, the use of greetings and addressing can be regarded as both phatic communion in the Auxiliary Speech Act and the Microunit.(Wood; Kroger,1994) Therefore, the invitation speech act from DCT will be divided into the Central Speech Act and the Auxiliary Speech Act, through which the influence of relational closeness will be analyzed independently.

#### 4.1. Central Speech Act

The Central Speech Act is an essential component of invitational speech acts, serving the primary function of issuing invitation requests and concentrating the speaker’s illocutionary intent. Invitational strategies refer to the methods or approaches employed to achieve the goal of performing an invitation. Cao Qinming (2005) classified them into three main types: Direct Invitation, Inquiry-Based and Emotional Expression.

At the level of Instrumental ties, three different situations decided distinctive contexts. Because of the far distance of social relationship, the strategies used are mainly direct invitation or inquiry-based. Here is the table of some examples:

**Table 2.** Examples of the Central Speech Act in the Instrumental Ties

Scenario 1	Direct Invitation	If you don’t mind, you can take a group order with me.
	Inquiry-Based	Can we do a group order together?
	Emotional Expression	We can get a group order together, it’s cheaper!
Scenario 2	Direct Invitation	I recommend you to take a long-term course if you plan to do long-term fitness training.
	Inquiry-Based	Are you interested in taking our long-term physical course?
	Emotional Expression	You did a good job today. Consider our long-term course and that can help you better!
Scenario 3	Direct Invitation	I’d like to invite you to present this show.
	Inquiry-Based	Are you available to be the presenter of this show?
	Emotional Expression	It will be better if you could be here as the presenter.

At the level of mixed ties, as the closeness gets closer, the expressions and wording become more leisure and the tone sounds more relaxing. Meanwhile, the strategies of Direct Invitation appears more and those of the Inquiry-Based appears more.

**Table 3.** Examples of the Central Speech Act in the Mixed Ties

Scenario 4	Direct Invitation	Come and join us the dinner together!
	Inquiry-Based	Do you want to join the dinner together?
	Emotional Expression	It will be much more fun if you can be there!
Scenario 5	Direct Invitation	I want to invite all of you to come to his birthday party.
	Inquiry-Based	Are you available to join his birthday party?
	Emotional Expression	Come and have fun together!
Scenario 6	Direct Invitation	Let’s go to see the new movie Ne Zha 2.
	Inquiry-Based	Do you want to watch the movie with me?
	Emotional Expression	It will be fun if we can watch it together while discussing its plot or something.

At the level of expressive ties, as the most close relationship, more casual expressions are used, and the frequency of Emotional Expression increases.

**Table 4.** Examples of the Central Speech Act in the Expressive Ties

Scenario 7	Direct Invitation	Come my place, we enjoy barbecue together!
	Inquiry-Based	Do you want to taste my home-made barbecue?
	Emotional Expression	It will be fun if you can come my place, we can chat together while eating my home-made barbecue.
Scenario 8	Direct Invitation	You listen to me...
	Inquiry-Based	Can you give me some advice?
	Emotional Expression	I’m not so good lately...
Scenario 9	Direct Invitation	Let’s go for a travel!
	Inquiry-Based	How about travel together?
	Emotional Expression	I wanna visit this place! It’s so beautiful!

As we can see from above three tables, the three different forms of the Central Speech Act are used in almost every situations. However, by analyzing the performance of each scenario, the proportion of each strategy used in different context are different as follow:

**Table 5.** The proportion of Central Speech Act

		Direct Invitation	Inquiry-Based	Emotional Expression
Instrumental Ties	Scenario 1	20%	65%	15%
	Scenario 2	25%	50%	25%
	Scenario 3	30%	55%	15%
Mixed Ties	Scenario 4	45%	35%	20%
	Scenario 5	70%	25%	5%
	Scenario 6	50%	40%	10%
Expressive Ties	Scenario 7	50%	20%	30%
	Scenario 8	55%	30%	15%
	Scenario 9	50%	30%	20%

The table shows the speaker's strategies used in nine different scenarios. As we can see from the statistics, three strategies of Central Speech Act of invitation are used in different frequency according to three levels of relational closeness.

In the instrumental ties, that is the least close relationship, the inquiry-based form accounts for more than a half. Since the social distance between two instrumental parties, inquiries sound more polite and provide options. When speaker propose an inquiry, the receiver can choose to receipt or refuse. In this way, speakers can produce an equal dialogue environment.

In the mixed ties, two sides come to know each other more, so direct expression of invitation is acceptable. One tends to express individuals' intention of inviting directly. With the politeness principle, direct invitation allows the other to get key information quickly and accurately, thus making it easier to respond. At the same time, the more polite form of inquiry also can be applied.

To further explore the way of Central Speech Act across three ties of relational closeness, a more rigorous data analysis will be conducted here.

**Table 6.** The relation between Central Speech Act and ties

	Instrumental ties	Mixed ties	Expressive ties	p	$\chi^2$
Direct Invitation	18.6%	32.1%	58.3%	<0.001**	29.4
Inquiry-Based	67.4%	52.5%	23.6%	<0.001**	37.2
Emotional Expression	14.0%	15.4%	18.1%	0.731	0.6

Note: test method: Pearson chi-square test (expected count>12.9)

significant mark:  $p < 0.001^{**}$

It is clear that the distribution of the three invitation strategies of central speech acts across different relational closeness degrees shows significant variations from the table 6. The direct invitation strategy demonstrates a strong positive correlation with social distance ( $\chi^2=29.4$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), with its usage frequency increasing significantly as relational closeness grows: from merely 18.6% in instrumental ties, to 32.1% in mixed ties, and reaching 58.3% in expressive ties. This pattern clearly indicates that as interpersonal relationships become more close, speakers tend to adopt more direct and explicit invitation approaches.

Different from that, the polite inquiry-based strategy shows a significant negative correlation with social distance ( $\chi^2=37.2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This strategy predominates in instrumental ties (67.4%), decreases to 52.5% in mixed ties, and drops sharply to 23.6% in expressive ties. This distribution pattern is in agreement with Brown & Levinson's Face Theory in Chinese contexts: when addressing recipients with greater social distance, speakers need to employ more negotiable inquiries to respect the addressee's negative face needs; whereas as relational closeness increases, the importance of such politeness buffers gradually diminishes.

In contrast, the emotional expression strategy demonstrates relatively stable distribution across the three groups (instrumental: 14.0%, mixed: 15.4%, expressive: 18.1%) without significant variation ( $\chi^2=0.6$ ,  $p=0.731$ ). This finding suggests the dual functionality of emotional expression in invitation speech act: it serves both as a natural manifestation of emotional connection in close relationships and as a strategic device for rapport-building in distant communication. Such cross-distance stability establishes it as a "safe strategy" in invitation pragmatics.

To sum up, the degree of relational closeness can influence the way of realization of invitation speech act in terms of the Central Speech Act. With the relational closeness increasing, the frequency of direct invitation strategy rises, whereas the usage of inquiry-based strategy

decreases. Nonetheless, the strategy of emotional expression is not influenced by the degree of closeness and is a general invitation behavior.

#### 4.2. Auxiliary Speech Act

The Auxiliary Speech Act in invitation speech acts serve as supplementary elements designed to facilitate the smooth delivery of the core invitation, enhancing the persuasive force and ensuring the successful implementation of the invitation or increasing the likelihood of the recipient's acceptance. To make it comprehensible, common kinds of the Auxiliary Speech Act are always categorized as follows:

First, explain the reason. By explaining the reasons for the invitation, it justifies the necessity and rationality of the request, thereby facilitating the smooth execution of the invitation act.

Example 1: I noticed there's a long queue at this viral restaurant, but I found that using the app to group order allows direct checkout with discounts too. (from scenario 1)

Example 2: Recently, Nezha 2 has been quite popular and has received excellent reviews. (from scenario 6)

Example 3: The National Day holiday is coming soon! It's been ages since we traveled together. (from scenario 9)

Second, explore possibilities. By inquiring about various conditional factors for the addressee's potential acceptance of an invitation—including their willingness, convenience, and awareness of relevant information—this approach tests the feasibility of extending the invitation, thereby laying the groundwork for its successful delivery.

Example 4: How was the trial class? Would you like to try our long-term course? (from scenario 2)

Example 5: Would it be convenient for you? (from scenario 4)

Example 6: Will you be available then? (from scenario 8)

Third, express gratitude or apologies. The speaker expresses gratitude for past favors bestowed by the addressee, or conveys that or apology for potential inconveniences caused by current actions, forthcoming requests, or anticipated benefits received.

Example 7: We will be grateful for it if you can serve as host of the performance. (from scenario 2)

Fourth, phatic communion. The speaker initiates conversation with ritual greetings to demonstrate attentiveness toward the addressee, effectively reducing interpersonal distance, setting a congenial atmosphere, and facilitating harmonious communication.

Example 8: Excuse me. (from scenario 1)

Example 9: Dear Mr. Zhang, how are you? (from scenario 3)

Example 10: Hey! (from scenario 4)

Fifth, amplify benefits. During invitations, the speaker vividly elaborates on the advantages of the proposed activity or joint participation, thereby enhancing its appeal and allure to stimulate the addressee's interest, ultimately facilitating a positive response and prompt acceptance of the invitation.

Example 11: Your professional expertise and stage charisma will undoubtedly elevate our event. We sincerely look forward to your participation! (from scenario 3)

Example 12: The more people, the happier! (from scenario 5)

Example 13: With such a long holiday, it's the perfect chance to explore new sights and enjoy some wonderful time together! (from scenario 9)

Sixth, compliment or praise. During the invitation process, the speaker flatters the addressee's exceptional qualities (e.g., character, abilities) or commends their achievements and contributions. This face-giving strategy serves to motivate positive acceptance of the invitation.

Example 14: You did a good job today! (from scenario 2)

Example 15: Your renowned expertise and excellence in hosting have long been widely recognized. We sincerely hope to have a distinguished professional like you helm our gala, whose presence would undoubtedly elevate the entire event. (from scenario 3)

Seventh, reinforce the invitation. The speaker reiterates the core request after the initial invitation, intensifying communicative intent through emphasis. This demonstrates earnest anticipation for the addressee's participation and amplifies the speaker's enthusiasm.

Example 16: So how about have a group order together? (from scenario 1)

Example 17: Please do come! (from scenario 4)

Example 18: So do you want to travel? (from scenario 9)

Eighth, offer optional condition. Prior to issuing an invitation, the speaker presents hypothetical acceptance parameters, granting the addressee autonomy in decision-making. This strategy demonstrates respect for the invitee's volition, avoids imposition, preserves negotiability for both parties, and mutually safeguards face needs.

Example 19: Are you interested in it? (from scenario 2) Example 20: If it is available for you,...(from scenario 5)

Ninth, express emotional expectation. By conveying the sincere and earnest anticipation of either the speaker or their represented group towards the addressee's acceptance, this approach intensifies the emotional impetus of the invitation, thereby motivating the addressee to actively commit to participating.

Example 21: We will appreciate if you can make it. (from scenario 3)

Example 22: We all expect you to come. (from scenario 4)

Tenth, reduce uncertainty. Providing structured information (procedural or role clarity) decreases the addressee's decision-making anxiety, increasing invitation acceptance probability.

Example 23: We happen to have discount of long-term course recently. (from scenario 2)

Example 24: The time and place of the dinner has already been settled down. (from scenario 4)

It is necessary to make it clear that in the realization of invitation speech act, different kinds of the Auxiliary Speech Act are allowed to applied at the same time. They can supplement for each other to make the realization more smooth and appropriate.

By analyzing, every scenario almost contains more than one Auxiliary Speech Act. Firstly, here is the frequency of appearance of different strategies used in each scenario.

**Table 7.** Frequency of Auxiliary Act

Auxiliary Speech Act scenario	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
explain the reason	12	9	5	8	6	4	3	2	1
explore possibilities	18	15	13	16	14	17	12	11	10
express gratitude or apologies	2	1	4	0	3	1	0	5	7
phatic communion	15	12	8	19	17	20	22	24	26
amplify benefits	14	16	7	5	8	9	11	6	4
compliment or praise	3	11	17	2	4	5	1	0	0
reinforce the invitation	5	4	6	3	7	2	1	0	0
offer optional condition	7	5	4	9	6	8	10	12	15
express emotional expectation	8	10	12	14	16	18	20	22	25
reduce uncertainty	6	3	2	1	0	1	0	0	0

From the table, it is clear that every situation conveys more than one Auxiliary Speech Act, while in some cases, some of them shares different levels of closeness. To explore the relationship between choices of different strategy and levels of relational closeness more clearly, it will be analyzed again according to three levels of closeness and find out whether they are related.

**Table 8.** the relation between Auxiliary Speech Act and ties

Auxiliary Speech Act	Instrumental ties	Mixed ties	Expressive ties	$\chi^2$ 值	p值	Back testing
explain the reason	26(30.2%)	18(22.2%)	6(7.3%)	12.34	0.002**	Instrumental>mixed, <b>instrumental&gt;expressive**</b>
explore possibilities	45(53.5%)	47(58.0%)	33(40.2%)	4.21	0.122	n.s.
express gratitude or apologies	7(8.1%)	4(4.9%)	12(14.6)	5.67	0.059+	Expressive>mixed+
phatic communion	35(40.7%)	22(27.2%)	21(25.6%)	6.88	<0.001***	<b>instrumental&gt;expressive**</b> <b>Instrumental&gt;mixed**</b>
amplify benefits	37(43.0%)	22(27.2%)	21(25.6%)	6.88	0.032*	Instrumental>mixed*
compliment or praise	31(36.0%)	11(13.6%)	1(1.2%)	31.28	<0.001***	Instrumental>mixed*, <b>instrumental&gt;expressive**</b>
reinforce the invitation	15(17.4%)	12(14.8%)	1(1.2%)	11.43	0.003**	<b>Instrumental&gt;expressive**</b> Mixed>expressive*
offer optional condition	16(18.6%)	23(28.4%)	37(45.1%)	12.89	0.002**	Expressive>instrumental*, expressive>mixed
express emotional expectation	30(34.9%)	48(59.3%)	67(81.7%)	32.17	<0.001***	<b>Expressive&gt;instrumental**</b> , Mixed>instrumental*
reduce uncertainty	11(12.8%)	2(2.5%)	0(0.0%)	14.22	0.001**	Instrumental>mixed, instrumental>expressive*

Notes: n.s=not significant

sample capacity: instrumental ties=86; mixed ties=81; expressive ties=82 (total N=249)

test method: Pearson chi-square test (expected count>5)

significant mark: \*\*\*p<0.001; \*\*p<0.01; \*p<0.05; +p<0.1

Based on the statistical test results, different levels of closeness, or interpersonal ties, exhibit clear patterns in the selection of invitation strategies of auxiliary speech acts. Except that the choice of exploring possibilities has no significant bearing on different levels, other nine speech acts are related with that to a certain extent. Though not statistically significant, its universal occurrence demonstrates that checking possibilities remains a basic invitation practice irrespective of relationship closeness.

In instrumental ties, speakers are significantly more inclined to employ the reason-explaining strategy (30.2%) compared to mixed ties (22.2%) and expressive ties (7.3%), indicating that providing justifications improves invitation acceptability in formal or unfamiliar contexts.

The higher prevalence of expressing gratitude or apology strategies in expressive ties (14.6%) may reflect greater emphasis on emotional maintenance, where acknowledging past favors or apologizing for disruptions is more customary.

The significant downward trend in phatic communion usage (40.7%→27.2%→25.6% across levels of closeness higher)) indicates that relational closeness reduces the need for politeness rituals while maintaining core invitation clarity.

The benefits-amplifying strategy is the most prevalent in instrumental ties (43.0%), as emphasizing participation advantages to strangers or formal acquaintances significantly

improves acceptance rates. In contrast, this approach is used less frequently mixed (27.2%) and expressive ties (25.6%), as the closer the relational closeness is, the more invitations are typically driven by emotional bonds rather than practical benefits.

The compliment or praising strategy demonstrates the most pronounced with the change of ties (instrumental: 36.0%, mixed: 13.6%, expressive: 1.2%). This striking pattern reveals how face-giving through status elevation dominates formal invitations, while being virtually absent among close relationships.

The invitation-reinforcement strategy appears significantly more frequently in instrumental ties (17.4%) and mixed-ties (14.8%) relationships than in expressive ties (1.2%), demonstrating that less familiar relationships require stronger reinforcement of invitation intent.

The option-giving strategy demonstrates a reverse progression (instrumental ties: 18.6%, mixed ties: 28.4%, expressive ties: 45.1%), indicating that closer relationships prioritize offering flexible alternatives to respect the recipient's autonomy.

The emotional-expectation strategy shows a dramatic positive correlation with relational closeness (instrumental ties: 34.9%, mixed ties: 59.3%, expressive ties: 81.7%), directly mirroring how emotional expression becomes more explicit in closer relationships.

Conversely, the uncertainty-reduction strategy appears almost exclusively in instrumental ties (12.8%), as strangers require more detailed clarifications to establish trust.

In summary, the above findings collectively demonstrate that relational closeness serves as a significant factor shaping linguistic strategy selection in invitation speech acts, with distinct patterns emerging across instrumental, mixed, and expressive ties, indicating that there is pragmatic difference across different levels of closeness. In instrumental ties, speakers tend to adopt strategies such as explaining the reasons, phatic communion, amplifying benefits, and offering compliments to compensate for relational distance by creating polite dialogue context, presenting objective grounds and elevating the recipient's status. Mixed ties relationship shows more balanced use of strategy, retaining certain characteristics of formal invitations while incorporating more interactive elements (e.g., offering optional condition and expressing emotional expectation). In expressive ties, emotional communication like expressing emotional expectations becomes central, with invitation behaviors primarily relying on shared emotional foundations and tacit mutual understanding. Moreover, it is necessary to notice that certain fundamental strategies like exploring possibilities demonstrate cross-relational consistency, indicating that confirming feasibility and showing respect remain integral to invitation-making regardless of relational distance. This strategic distribution pattern also aligns with Brown and Levinson's Face Theory.

### 4.3. Discussion

From the statistics above, the answer of the research question can be concluded: the level of relational closeness can influence the realization of invitation speech acts. And the influence is manifested in terms of the choice of the Central Speech Act and the Auxiliary Speech Act.

From the Central Speech Act's perspective, the realization of invitation speech act are practiced in three ways: direct invitation, inquiry-based and emotional expression. With the change of relational closeness, the strategies chose to realize it is different. In instrumental ties, the strategy of the inquiry-based is used most frequently, which is 67.4%, the next one is direct invitation, and the last one is emotional expression. In mixed ties, the strategy of inquiry-based also ranks top 1 of frequency (52.5%), then direct invitation (32.1%) and emotional expression (15.4%). In expressive ties, the most close relation, the strategy of direct invitation is used the most, which is 58.3%. The other two are relatively low. Inquiry-based is 23.6%; emotional expression is 18.1%. Both direct invitation and inquiry-based strategies are influenced by the degree of closeness. As the relational closeness increases, the frequency of direct invitation

strategy goes up, whereas the usage of inquiry-based strategy goes down. Meanwhile, the strategy of emotional expression is not influenced by the degree of closeness and is a general invitation behavior.

From the Auxiliary Speech Act's perspective, the choice of strategies involving explaining the the reason, phatic communion, compliment or praise, reinforcing the invitation, expressing emotional expectation and reducing uncertainty are influenced by the different degrees of relational closeness. In instrumental ties, speakers predominantly employ strategies such as explaining the reasons, phatic communion, amplifying benefits, and offering compliments to compensate for relational distance by establishing a polite communicative context, providing objective justifications, and elevating the recipient ' s social standing. In mixed ties, strategy usage becomes more balanced, retaining some formal invitation features while integrating more interactive components (e.g., offering optional conditions and expressing emotional expectation). In expressive ties, emotionally oriented strategies like expressing emotional expectation take precedence, with invitations primarily grounded in shared affective bonds and implicit mutual understanding. Notably, certain foundational strategies (e.g., exploring possibilities) exhibit cross-relational consistency, underscoring that feasibility verification and respect remain essential to invitation-making across all relational contexts.

## 5. Conclusion

This study systematically examines invitation strategy selection across varying relational intimacies, revealing the significant impact of relational closeness on linguistic behavior. The findings demonstrate speakers' adaptive use of invitation strategies according to relational closeness: In unfamiliar relationships, individuals predominantly employ indirect politeness strategies, with interrogative invitations accounting for 67.4% of cases, frequently accompanied by rationale provision. In moderately familiar relationships, language use becomes more balanced, featuring increased direct invitations (32.1%) while retaining substantial politeness markers. In close relationships, direct expressions dominate (58.3%), reflecting the communicative freedom afforded by close bonds. Notably, emotional expression strategies maintain remarkable stability across all relational levels (14.0-18.1%), underscoring the universal importance of affective connection in invitation acts. Furthermore, speakers strategically adjust auxiliary speech acts according to interpersonal distance to facilitate successful invitation realization.

These findings highlight that effective communication requires both accurate assessment of social distance and flexible deployment of diversified linguistic strategies. The study provides empirical evidence for the dynamic, context-sensitive nature of invitation pragmatics in relational communication.

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