Refusal Strategies In English By Malay University Students

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Abstract

Refusals, like other speech acts, occur in all languages. According to Searle (1969), all linguistic communication involves the production of speech acts, such as offering apologies, asking questions, making promises, or refusing. The speech act of refusal has been looked at by many researchers. However, in the Malaysian context, the study of refusals has yet to be ventured, either focusing on manifestations in the speaker's mother tongue, or focusing on manifestations in English. This study aims to discover the preferred semantic formulas or strategies used by Malay university students in Malaysia to refuse a request in an academic context. For this study, 40 undergraduate and postgraduate students were asked to respond to different situations in which they were required to carry out the speech act of refusing a request. The data, collected by means of a Discourse Completion Test, were analyzed in terms of semantic formulas and were categorized according to the refusal taxonomy of Beebe et al. (1990). The findings show that participants differ in the ways they perform refusals. Regret or saying 'sorry', and giving excuses or explanations were the preferred formulas used in refusing requests. The choice of these semantic formulas suggests the influence of Malay culture in respondents' realizations of refusals in English.

Keywords: speech act, request, refusal strategies, semantic formulas.

Introduction

According to Tanck (2003) speakers employ a variety of *speech acts* to achieve their communicative goals, including those of Searle (1969) broad seminal categories – commissives, declarations, directives, expressives, and representatives – as well as more specific acts such as apologies, requests, complaints, and refusals (Kasper and Rose, 2001).

A refusal is a negative response to an offer, request, invitation and suggestion. Refusals are important because of their communicatively central place in everyday communication. It is often difficult to reject requests. Rejecting requests appropriately involves not only linguistic knowledge, but also pragmatic knowledge. It is even harder to reject them in a foreign language, where one risks offending the interlocutor. One may have a wide range of vocabulary and a sound knowledge of grammar, but misunderstandings may still arise if one does not apply pragmatic knowledge appropriately.

Thus, any research that identifies cross-linguistic and cross-cultural influences on the use of various speech act realization strategies can significantly contribute to understanding the culture of the speech community in question. As Rubin (1983) has pointed out, speech acts reflect fundamental cultural values that may be specific to a speech community.

Different cultures have been shown to vary drastically in interactional styles, leading to different preferences for speech act behaviors. Al-Kahtani (2005) pointed out that different cultures realize speech acts in different ways. For example, people from different cultural backgrounds perform refusals differently even while using the same linguistic code (e.g., English). This goes along with Trueba's definition of culture as "composed of socially shared elements, socially shared norms, codes of behavior, values, and assumptions about the world that clearly distinguish one sociocultural group from another" (Trueba, 1993, p. 34, cited in Lee, 2003). It should be noted that differences like these may cause misunderstanding or pragmatic failure when people from different cultures interact with one another. As a result, lack of knowledge of speech act realization patterns and strategies between cultures may lead to breakdowns in intercultural and interethnic communication.

To date, there have been no attempts to investigate the performance of the request refusal speech act by Malays. An empirical study is crucial for enhancing intercultural and interethnic communication in Malaysia. As Malaysia's three main ethnic groups, Malay, Chinese, and Indian, with differing cultural norms and values, interact (intercultural contact), there is a greater chance of misunderstanding and miscommunication if they are not familiar with each other's cultures. Moreover, although Malays are Malaysia's largest ethnic group, accounting for over half the population, so far no study has looked at their performance of refusal speech acts using the English language. Consequently, the present study will examine the speech act of refusing a request by Malay students at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM).

The Speech Act of Refusal

Searle and Vandervken (1985, p.195) define the speech act of refusal as follows: "The negative counterparts to acceptances and consentings are rejections and refusals. Just as one can accept offers, applications, and invitations, so each of these can be refused or rejected". In many cultures, how one says "no" is probably more important than the answer itself. Therefore, sending and receiving a message of "no" is a task that needs

special skill. Depending on ethnicity and cultural-linguistic values, the speaker must know the appropriate form, its function, and when to use it. The skill of refusing another's offer, request, or invitation without hurting his or her feelings is very important since the "inability to say 'no' clearly has led many non-native speakers to offend their interlocutors" (Ramos, 1991, cited in Al-Kahtani, 2005).

Refusals are face-threatening acts (Brown and Levinson, 1987) and belong to the category of commissives because they commit the refuser to (not) performing an action (Searle, 1977). Refusals function as a response to an initiating act and are considered a speech act by which a speaker "[fails] to engage in an action proposed by the interlocutor" (Chen et al., 1995, p.121). From a sociolinguistic perspective, refusals are important because they are sensitive to social variables such as gender, age, level of education, power, and social distance (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Fraser, 1990; Smith, 1998). Overall, refusals are complex speech acts that require not only long sequences of negotiation and cooperative achievements, but also "face saving maneuvers to accommodate the noncompliant nature of the act" (Gass & Houck, 1999, p.2; Félix-Brasdefer, 2006, p.2160).

Selected Studies

Studies on the speech act of refusals can be broadly divided into two strands: those examining refusal behavior in a specific culture or comparing the speech act of refusals across cultural groups; and those investigating the characteristics of non-native speaker refusals in English.

Among studies focusing on the refusals of L2 learners, some have examined how L1 sociocultural norms affect L2 learners' refusal performance, i.e., pragmatic transfer. Beebe et al. (1990) found that in their refusals, Japanese learners of English (JE) resemble native speakers of Japanese (JJ), and differ from native speakers of English (AE), indicating the presence of the pragmatic transfer phenomenon. While Japanese speakers were more affected by the status of the interlocutors than their American counterparts, Americans refused differently according to their degree of familiarity with the interlocutors. With regard to the content of semantic formulas, the researchers found that the excuses the AE group used tended to be more specific than those of the JJ and JE groups.

An important contribution of Beebe at al. (1990) their analysis of semantic formulas based on a classification of refusals into two categories: direct and indirect (see data analysis section). The model used not only captures different degrees of directness and indirectness in refusals, but also reflects differences in the content of excuses provided. It should be noted that the same categories have also been used by other researchers. Also, in their study, i.e. Beebe et al.'s (1990) study, no attempt was made to examine the structure of refusal strategies at the level of discourse. Further, although the authors examined three levels of social status and four different types of situations (invitations, requests, offers, and suggestions) using 12 Discourse Completion Test (DCT) items, only

general qualitative results were provided in which major classification of refusals strategies are discussed.

Despite critics pointing out the weaknesses of their methodology, the classification system and the DCT developed by Beebe et al. (1990) have been adopted by many researchers. Their refusal taxonomy, which includes the two main categories of direct and indirect strategies, has served as an important tool for many interlanguage studies on refusals such as Chen (1996), Fe´lix-Brasdefer, (2006) and (Geyang, 2007).

A number of studies involving native speakers of Arabic have followed the line of research initiated by Beebe et al. (1990) such as Saudi Arabs (Al-Kahtani, 2005), Yemenis (Al-Eryani, 2007), Egyptians (Nelson, 2002), and Jordanians (Al-Issa, 2003). These studies found differences in the ways people from different cultural backgrounds perform refusals even while using the same linguistic code (English). Results showed three areas in which sociocultural transfer is present in Arabic EFL learners' speech: the choice of semantic formulas, the length of responses, and the content of semantic formulas. Each was found to reflect cultural values that had been transferred from Arabic to English.

Other studies have looked at the cross-cultural performance of refusals. Chen (1996) examined speech acts of refusal (refusing requests, invitations, offers and suggestions) by American and Chinese speakers of English. Félix-Brasdefer (2006) investigated the linguistic strategies employed by monolingual native speakers of Mexican Spanish in one Mexican community in refusal interactions in formal/informal situations. Nguyen (2006) similarly investigated similarities and differences in refusals of requests between Australian native speakers of English and Vietnamese learners of English. These studies have highlighted the significance of the speech act of refusals and demonstrated that the speech act of refusals is governed by a systematic set of community-specific rules. Violation or ignorance of these rules is bound to create serious communication problems and widen the social distance between the interacting individuals and groups.

Within the Malaysian context, a few studies, such as Marzuki et al. (2009), and Marlyna Maros (2006) have been conducted on the speech acts of apologies, complaints, and request speech acts. These studies concentrated on Malay speakers by looking at the speech act manifestation in both speakers' mother tongue and English. However, there have been no attempts to investigate the speech act of refusals by Malays. Thus, it will be important to find out how refusals are manifested by Malay university students.

The Study

The present study is an investigation of Malay university students and how they perform refusals in particular request situations. The study aims to answer one question: How do Malay university students realize the speech act of refusals in terms of semantic formulas when refusing a person of lower, equal, or higher social status?

Method

Sample for the study

As mentioned earlier, the study will examine the performance the speech act of refusals by Malay Malaysians students. A total of 40 Malay students participated, consisting of 20 undergraduate and 20 postgraduate at USM in Malaysia. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 26 years old. Of the 40 subjects, 17 were males and 23 were females.

As for the participants' English language proficiency, it should be noted that while Malay is the national and official language of the country, English is widely used in many aspects of everyday life. Lee Su Kim et al. (2010) pointed out that for Malaysians, English is regarded as an important second language for instrumental purposes, a neutral language for social integration and a pragmatic one for professional growth and career advancement. Marlyna Maros (2006) indicated that most Malaysians have been formally exposed to the English language since the age of seven, the year they would normally enter a primary school where English is taught as a second language. Formal exposure to English generally continues in the adult years through work-related needs. Marlyna Maros (2006) stated that informally, at all levels of development, Malaysians have access to the language through various communication channels, such as television, radio, and written advertisements. In spite of the common belief that language proficiency enhances pragmatic knowledge, studies have not yet reached an agreement, showing contradictory results with respect to the extent to which proficiency relates to pragmatic competence (Kasper and Rose, 2002; Barron, 2003; Félix-Brasdefer, 2007; Dalmau and Gotor, 2007, cited in Linde, 2009). Therefore, the effect of proficiency on the linguistic realizations of refusals to requests was not considered in the present study.

Instrument and procedure

The participants were provided with a DCT. It was composed of four prompts taken from the study conducted by Al-Issa (2003). The DCT prompts were created to elicit the specific speech act comprising the focus of the study, refusals of requests. Participants were presented with written situations, typed on paper in English. Participants were then asked to write down what they would say in each situation. Each situation was based on two social variables: "relative power" and "social distance" between the interlocutors. This study investigated refusals of requests by high status (+P), equal status (=P), lower status (-P), and familiar (-D) interlocutors. It should be noted that +P, =P and –P refer to the person making the request. It should be noted that in all the situations the interlocutors are familiar with each other (-D), i.e. they know each other very well as indicated in Table 1. Table 1 provides a description of the four situations in the DCT.

Table 1: Description of the four situations

Situation 1: Books & Papers [+P, -D]	Student – Professor A speaker has to refuse a request from a professor (whom you know very well) asking for assistance to carry his books and papers.
Situation 2: Notes [=P, -D]	Student – Student A speaker has to refuse a request from a classmate (whom you know very well) asking to borrow the notes of a missed class.
Situation 3: Interview [=P, -D]	Student – Friend A speaker has to refuse a request from a close friend asking if he could interview him.
Situation 4: Homework [-P, -D]	Student - Relative A speaker has to refuse a request from a high school student asking for help with his homework.

Data Analysis

The DCT scenarios were examined according to a modified classification of refusal strategies proposed by Beebe et al. (1990), including direct and indirect refusals, and adjuncts to refusals. This classification system has been widely used and adapted to examine refusals among native and non-native speakers in different languages (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartfort, 1991; Gass and Houck, 1999; Nelson et al., 2002; Ramos, 1991). Data collected from the participants were analyzed by using semantic formulas as units of analysis. Semantic formulas represent the means by which a particular speech act is accomplished, such as a reason, an explanation, or an alternative (Fraser, 1981; Olshtain and Cohen, 1983; Beebe et al., 1990). According to Fraser (1981) a semantic formula may consist of a word, a phrase, or a sentence that meets a given semantic criterion or strategy. The terms "semantic formula" and "strategy" have been used interchangeably in the literature of cross-cultural pragmatics to refer to the same concept. Accordingly, responses were classified into semantic formulas. The following is a classification of the refusal responses based on Beebe et al. (1990), with examples:

   I. Direct strategies
        1. Flat 'No' – e.g. 'No.'
        2. Negative ability- e.g. 'I can't.' 'I don't think I can make it.'
  II. Indirect strategies
        1. Mitigated refusal – e.g. 'I don't think it's possible.' 'I wouldn't be able to attend.'
        2. Regret – e.g. 'I'm very sorry.'
        3. Wish - e.g. 'I wish I can do it…'
        4. Excuse/Explanation – e.g. 'I want to leave now.'
        5. Alternatives – e.g. 'I will find somebody to help you carrying your things.'

6. Future acceptance – e.g. 'I can help you tomorrow after final exam.'
7. Principle – e.g. 'I don't like lazy students who like easy notes taking.'
8. Philosophy – e.g. 'Excuse is worse than sin.'
9. Self-defense – e.g. 'You should have attended class.'

Results

Table 2 summarizes the frequency of participants' use of semantic formulas according to their social relationship/status. It should be noted that mitigated refusals as mentioned in refusal categorization have not occurred in participants' realization as they depend on other indirect strategies when formulating refusals to requests.

Table 2: Frequency of semantic formulas according to social status

Semantic Formula		High Status		Equal Status				Low Status	
		Situation 1		Situation 2		Situation 3		Situation 4	
Direct strategies	No	0	0%	4	5%	3	3%	1	1%
	Negative ability	6	7%	8	9%	9	10%	11	11%
Indirect strategies	Excuse/Explanation	37	41%	26	29%	29	33%	35	36%
	Regret/Apology	35	38%	28	31%	24	27%	28	28%
	Future Acceptance	1	1%	1	1%	21	24%	15	15%
	Alternative	8	9%	7	8%	2	2%	5	5%
	Self-defense	0	0%	4	5%	0	0%	2	2%
	Wish	4	4%	0	0%	1	1%	1	1%
	Principle	0	0%	6	7%	0	0%	0	0%
	Philosophy	0	0%	4	5%	0	0%	1	1%

The role of status in relation to the realization of speech acts is addressed in the research question. Of refusing a higher status person, an example is Situation 1, in which the speaker has to refuse a request from a professor asking for assistance to carry his books and papers (the refuser is in a lower status relative to the interlocutor). It was found that participants avoided direct strategies like [no] because saying "no" to someone's face is interpreted as an insult to the other person. Instead, some used [negative ability] (6 participants). This strategy was softened by using an address term. Since the person to be refused was a professor, the use of "Prof." was usual for Malay participants. They sought the satisfaction and the approval of the other person, trying to show their respect, consideration, and willingness to comply with the request by using indirect strategies. Results further indicated that the majority of participants favored the use of the semantic

formulas [regret], [excuse] and [alternative]. The following are examples of responses as shown in their original forms, i.e. no editing for language was made:

Regret   title   explanation   alternative
Sorry, prof. I have next class and I am late. Can I get another student to help you?

Regret   negative ability   alternative
Sorry, I can't but I can ask my friend to help you.

When refusing an equal status person, such as in Situation 2, in which the speaker has to refuse a request from a classmate asking to borrow the notes of a missed class (the refuser is in equal status relative to the interlocutor), it was found that most of the participants used semantic formulas in the order of [regret] and [excuse], e.g., "Sorry, I need to read it tonight". They also used direct strategies like [no] and [negative ability], e.g., "I can't give to you because I need to make a discussion and revision at the moment", and "No, you must go to class to get your note". Some participants suggested the help of others and thus made use of the [alternative] strategy, e.g., "My note is not complete, so may be you can borrow from someone else".

Similarly, in Situation 3, in which the speaker has to refuse a request from a friend asking him if he could interview him (the refuser is in equal status relative to the interlocutor), subjects employed semantic formulas like [regret], [excuse], and [alternative]. For example, "Sorry, I'm busy, you can interview someone else". The employment of other semantic formulas such as [no] and [negative ability] were also evident in this situation. Examples:

 No   explanation
No, I am busy.

   Explanation   future acceptance
I am doing something at the moment, can we make it another day.

   Explanation   alternative
I am not free now, you may interview my friend who sit beside me.

 Regret   negative ability   explanation
I'm sorry, I can't because I have class.

When refusing a low status person, such as in Situation 4, in which the speaker has to refuse a request from a high school student (and the interlocutors know each other very well as they are relatives) asking for help with his homework (the refuser is in higher status relative to the interlocutor), the most frequently used semantic formulas were [regret], to start their refusals, followed by [negative ability] then [excuse] or [future acceptance] or even [alternative]. [negative ability] was used by 11 participants. [excuse] (35 participants) and [regret] (28 participants) were also employed. In order to seek the satisfaction and the approval of the other person, participants also employed an indirect strategy, [future acceptance] (15 participants). Examples:

   Regret   future acceptance
I'm sorry, may be tomorrow we can make it.

Regret   negative ability   future acceptance
I'm sorry I can't help you tonight. I can help you tomorrow night after my final exam.

   Regret   negative ability   explanation
Oh, sorry, I cannot help you, because I'm also busy with my assignments.

   Regret   explanation   alternative
I am sorry, I am not free. Can you please ask other to help you?

Conclusions and Discussion

This study has been an attempt to outline the preferred semantic formulas used in refusing requests by Malay university students. This study investigates the speech act of refusing requests to higher, equal and lower status persons. Although the small sample size does not permit broad generalizations, yet the results do provide a basis for future studies.

Results of this study seem to reinforce the notion stated by Brown and Levinson (1987) that people cooperate in maintaining face in interactions. Refusals are intrinsically face-threatening, and in natural conversation often involve a long negotiated sequence (Beebe et al., 1990). Thus, Malay university students employed some preferred types of indirect refusal patterns when refusing a request.

According to Marlyna Maros (2006) the rules of speaking in a society are always related to the cultural values of the society. Traditionally, Malays value indirectness in speaking in order to save the face of others and maintain good relationships between interlocutors and within society as whole. In other words, being cultured and refined is part of the Malays' effort to preserve "face", which is important in establishing good relationships and maintaining social harmony. In the Malay context, "face" means maintaining a person's dignity by not embarrassing him or her as an individual (Asmah Abdullah, 1996, p.30, cited in Marlyna Maros, 2006). Accordingly, Malays are expected to communicate good manners, breeding and sensitivity to those with whom they interact on a more formal basis. Those who do not conform to these cultural rules are usually looked down on as unrefined or, in Malay as "*tak tahu bahasa*" (Teo, 1996, p.3, cited in Marlyna Maros, 2006).

The Malay cultural rule of speaking indirectly was evident in the content of semantic formulas employed by the participants in this study. Apology [regret] and explanation or excuse, were the semantic formulas most frequently used by the participants and occurred in responses to all four DCT situations. According to Olshtain (1983), "The act of apologizing requires an action or an utterance which is intended to 'set things right'". In the case of refusals, apologizing or expressing regret functions as an indirect refusal that politely mitigates the refusal to accept the request. In Malay culture, it is a norm to refuse

in a polite way; thus Malay participants, when speaking in English, used their own cultural norm of speaking indirectly, starting their refusals with "sorry", which is equivalent to "*maaf*" in their native tongue. However, the participants' responses indicated that they are able to sense that when refusing a request they needed to offer more than simply an apology, but an explanation as well, which indicates their willingness to mitigate the refusal by suggesting alternatives. This concern reflects the influence of the culture in which they were brought up specifically respect for elders.

As for the semantic formula of explanation or excuse, the findings of the present study support the findings of Beebe et al. (1990) with regard to the use of the [excuse] semantic formula. Explanation or excuse was the most frequently used semantic formula among the participants and occurred in responses given to all four DCT situations. However, some participants gave vague or unclear explanations or excuses in some situations, for example: "I am sorry, *I have something to do*". More explicit and acceptable explanations were given in other situations, for example, when asked for notes: "*You know my writing is bad*, better you ask the notes from someone else". This can be explained by the fact that most of the participants, being non-native speakers of English, were not as specific and to the point as native speakers, as indicated by previous empirical studies such as Beebe et al. (1990). It is, as indicated by Al-Kahtani (2005), attributable to their background cultural norms which have not been discussed here as it is beyond the scope of the present study. However, it can be hypothesized that the interference of the background cultures of the non-native speakers may contribute to their "vague" excuses.

In some situations the participants used other strategies, such as suggesting other alternatives or possibilities, in order to maintain positive face with the interlocutor. Chen (1995) observed that alternatives are used to soften the threatening power of refusals. According to the results obtained from Chen' (1995) study, it seems that when Malay students are faced with situations in which they have to refuse a request, they try to avoid refusing the request directly so as to avoid overt confrontation and arousing the feelings of discomfort in the other party; preferring to use formulas such as [alternative] and [future acceptance].

In sum, from examining the responses, it is clear that sociopragmatic factors, such as social power (status) are closely related to the subjects' realization patterns of refusals to requests. Participants displayed variation in the frequency and the content of semantic formulas used in relation to the social variables, including the status of interlocutors (higher, equal, or lower status). Participants tended to use certain semantic formulas when refusing a higher-status professor (regret, negative ability, excuse, and alternative), equal-status classmate (regret, negative ability, and excuse) and lower-status student (regret, negative ability, excuse, and future acceptance). Direct strategies such as [no] were used by only a few participants and mostly in equal- and lower-status situations.

However, there are some drawbacks to this method of data collection (DCT) for this type of study. Most importantly, it is hard to tell how representative written answers are of what subjects would actually say in spontaneous conversations. Nevertheless, the

questionnaire represents a controlled context for collecting linguistic data representing a range of strategies elicited from many participants. It is recommended to redo the same study using a more naturally-occurring data collection technique.

Finally, this study further supports the importance of understanding speech acts across cultures and the fact that understanding, or lack thereof, can either hinder or strengthen communication exchanges between cultures. The language used in social interactions carries with it nuances of culture; imagine having social interactions with people from many different cultures, like the situation in Malaysia. Fear of not fitting socially may cause non-native speakers to shy away from having conversations or even making small talk with native speakers of English or non-natives who are competent in English. This fear and reluctance may further hinder them from becoming competent in the language, linguistically and sociopragmatically. Therefore, teaching the cultural aspects of language is a vital part of our duty as teachers to aid our students in becoming successful second- or foreign-language speakers. ESL teachers should design contextualized, task-based activities that expose learners to different types of pragmatic information along with the linguistic means needed to perform a particular speech act. In addition, because of the function of different social variables (e.g., social status) in speech acts, students should be taught how to perform speech acts appropriately based on the relative status levels of the interlocutors.

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