

Refusal as a Social Speech Act among Thai EFL University Students

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Abstract

This paper discusses the commonly realised social speech act of refusal strategies in English among university students in the Southern part of Thailand, in explaining how they say 'no' to request and the effects of this speech act on the hearer's face. Using Discourse Completion Test (DCT) to collect oral data in naturally-occurring situations, together with a qualitative analysis of the transcribed data according to Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990) classification scheme of refusal, the study affirms that there are two major common ways of realising refusals to request in English among these students, namely: direct and, overwhelmingly, indirect refusal strategies. The findings also reveal that the last strategy of the classification scheme, adjuncts to refusals, was not found in the data. Similarly, not all the indirect refusal sub-strategies were found in the data. However, two novel sub-strategies: giving advice/explanation, and lack of empathy were found in the analysis. The findings have implications for better socio-cultural communication and interaction in a multicultural university context.

Keyword: Refusal strategies, social speech act, Thai EFL university students

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Introduction

Speech acts or 'social speech acts' are expressions that serve a function in communication, such as apology, request, promising, refusing and greeting (Kasper, 1997; Reinard, 1994). These utterances are seen as essential elements of language which can better understand how human communication is carried out using linguistic behaviour (Austin, 1962; Olshtain & Blum-Kulka, 1985; Tanck, 2003). To be more precise, Tanck (2003, p. 2) opines that 'speakers employ a variety of speech acts to achieve their communicative goals' which include wider seminal speech categories (Searle, 1969) including commissives, declaratives, directives, expressives and representatives, in addition to more specific acts such as apologies, requests, complaints and refusals (Kasper, 1997).

Since culture is regarded as communication, just as communication is culture (Al-Khateeb, 2009), this explains why various cultural and social interactions affect discourse language choices. Put differently, "cultural and contextual factors inextricably play a role in developing various ways of communication in a given speech community" (Ambele, 2014, p. 13). It is recommended that we observe social interaction rules that influence language choices, especially when expressing speech acts that affect human behaviour. To this notion, Sarfo (2011, p. 1) states that "one of such acts which influence human behaviour is refusals". Due to its significance to daily interaction and communication, this social speech act of refusal is very crucial. Speakers can choose either to refuse or accept a request. The speaker may, however, risk offending the listener if the hearer whose request has been refused does not know how a refusal is made in the speaker's culture (Fishman, 1972; Meier, 1995, 1997; Richard & Schmidt, 1983). The research therefore aims, because of its importance, to explore the frequently used cultural-specific direct and indirect refusal strategy (among Thai university learners in Thailand). It also tries to study the connection between the message transmitted and its affect / emotional impacts on the hearer. In order to achieve this, the classification scheme of refusal approach by Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz (1990) has been implemented.

Refusal Study and Its Place in Thailand

Searle (1969) defines the speech act of refusal as the negative counterparts to acceptance and consenting. Refusals are face-threatening (Barron, 2007; Brown & Levinson, 1986) as we refuse because of complex personal (Chen, Ye & Zhang, 1995) reason like gender, juniority, education, power and hierarchy (Ambele, 2014; Fraser 1990; Gass & Houck, 1999; Sarfo, 2011; Smith 1998). They are also often negotiated over several turns and involve some degree of directness and indirectness, usually depending on the status and age of the interlocutors and the cultural contexts (Sarfo, 2011). It seems, of course, that speakers have a challenge to be able to dismiss their requests. Refusing to accept request or saying 'no' not only involves linguistic understanding, but also pragmatic understanding. It is more difficult in Thailand, because of its cultural diversity, to refuse requests. This is because each culture communicates rejection policies in a distinct way, as Al Kahtani (2005) has shown, who indicates that individuals from distinct cultural backgrounds reject the same language code (English). Differences like these could result in misunderstanding or pragmatic failure when people from different cultures need to interact with each other and one could risk offending the listener who might have had another cultural orientation (Sadler & Eröz, 2001). The speaker must therefore understand the suitable type of refusal to use, its function and the time when it should be used, according to ethnicity and cultural-linguistic values.

Although culturally universal, it is hard to correctly use refusals in English, whether by native speakers or by foreign language students (Ilmiani, Wijayanto, & Hikmat, 2016). It could be misleading to deploy inappropriately, ruining the mood of the parties involved in the interaction. This communication breakdown, often triggered by the transcultural expectation of linguistic selection, perception, hierarchical differentiation, rights, obligations etc. is called "sociopragmatic failure" (Thomas, 1984, p. 226). When a person is perceived to have committed a linguistic error, it is easy to ignore the act because of the poor language skills of the speaker. However, the speaker could be perceived as rude or disrespectful if the act is perceived as a sociopragmatic error.

Many studies suggested various approaches for refusal (eg, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984; Campillo, 2009; Kwon, 2004). However, the strategies suggested by Beebe et al. (1990), which offer the means of refusal speech-acts, of invitations, offers and suggestions, are acknowledged as the most advanced (Ilmiani, Wijayanto, & Hikmat, 2016).

It was also commonly used and adapted to study refusals in distinct languages between native and non-native speakers (Al-Shboul, Gol, 2013; Maros, & Mohd Yasin, 2014; Sahin, 2011; Sahragrad & Javanmardi, 2011; Wannaruk, 2008; Wijayanto, 2011). In particular, Beebe et al. (1990) states that the refusal strategies are widely divided into two groups: direct and indirect refusal strategies, replaced with communicative supplementation indicating an unambiguous decline without uttering "I decline". For Beebe et al. (1990), formulaic expressions of refusals consist either of a performative refusal (e.g., "I refuse"), or of a non-performative refusal (e.g. "I can't", "I don't think so", "No"). With respect to indirect refusal approaches, Beebe et al. (1990) suggest most popular, but not restricted, indirect refusal strategy as (*I'm sorry.../I feel terrible...*), wish (*I wish I could help you...*), excuse, reason, explanation (*My children will be home tonight*), and proposing alternatives (e.g. "*I can do X instead of Y*", "*I'd prefer ...*", "*Why don't you ask someone else?*"), set conditions for future acceptance (e.g. "*if I am not busy, I will...*"), and make a promise of future acceptance (e.g. "*I'll do it next time.*"). The difference between direct and indirect refusal is important because refusal is confronted with threatening acts which need to be mitigated with different communicative strategies (Ambele, 2014; Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984; Gass & Houck 1999). Knowledge is often required of culture-specific social interaction standards in order to express strategies of direct and indirect refusal appropriately. As stated above, the function of various rejection strategies is to reassure the hearer that he is still approved and thus mitigate the threat to the positive face of the hearer. The speaker can use multiple negotiations approaches to minimize the danger of causing an offense, such as the offer of an option, besides providing a decent sufficient reason for refusal.

Apparently, many scholars have researched on the phenomena of pragmatic transfers in refusals (e.g., Al-Shboul, Maros, & Mohd Yasin, 2014; Amarien, 2008; Gol, 2013; Henstock, 2003; Kwon, 2003; Nelson, Carson, Al Batal & El Bakary, 2002; Sahin, 2011; Sahragrad & Javanmardi, 2011; Umale, 2008; Wannaruk, 2008; Wijayanto, 2011; Yamagasira, 2001). With regards to English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in particular have been studied based on how distinct cultural groups use refusal in several socio-pragmatic research in English as either native, second or foreign language (Al-Issa, 2003; Chen, 1996; Chen et al, 1995; Félix-Brasdefer, 2006; Garcia, 1996; Ikoma & Shimura, 1993; Kanemoto, 1993; Laohaburanakit, 1995; Liao & Bresnahan, 1996; Moriyama, 1990; Nelson et al, 2002; Shimura, 1995; Takahashi & Beebe, 1987; Ueda, 1974;

Sadler & ErÖz, 2001). The studies show that learners' L2 speech performances were significantly influenced by refusal strategies (Byon 2004; Hassall 2003; Huth 2006). For instance, Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz (1990) demonstrate two ideas about Japanese English students and their pragmatic refusal transfers that suggest that the refusal generated in Japanese or Japanese-made English 1) appeared significantly less direct than that of American learners ; and 2) were affected by the social status of interlocutors indicating the connection between cultural consciousness and changes in communication.

The notion of refusal as a social speech act or saying 'no' in Thai English discourses, especially among Thai university learners, was under-investigated when looking back to Thailand where this survey was performed. Wannaruk (2008) notes that Thai English students deploy three refusal strategies: 1) regret sentences, particularly with interlocutors of higher status; 2) future acceptance with people of lower status; and 3) Soft-spoken statements and modest explanations. The approaches reflected three pragmatic transfers from Thai cultural context in corresponding orders: i) softening refusals; ii) maintaining beneficial relationships with subordinates; and iii) showing humility. Moreover, after examining 1) the Thai and English speech acts of apology; and 2) the pragmatic English approaches of Thai undergraduates, Thijittang (2010) discovers that a) there are more methods of apology in English than in Thai; and b) sociolinguistic influences: social class, hierarchical differentiation and severity of offense are key variables in apology. While this study aims to examine refusals, Thijittang (2010) aims to explore apologies. While it was not a direct comparison, it was relatively relevant to the Thai context. Therefore, since most of the previous studies are based on their exploration outside of Thailand, it is a novel area to investigate the different ways in which these students realize refusal in English and their emotional effects on the hearer when interacting with interlocutors with different cultural norms and values. Subsequently, this empirical study will become crucial to the awareness of communication and the rightful realization of this speech act, which is usually considered face-threatening. It will enable participants in the discourse (students) to have a better social operation, thus enhancing intercultural and interethnic communication among Thai university students.

Research Methodology

The current research explores the strategies used by Thai university learners to study English, particularly in the southern part of Thailand, by stating 'no' to request. The information collection technique adopted for this research was Discourse Completion Test (DCT) (Blum-Kulka (1982). It is important to point out here that this is the most common technique of obtaining information in the speech act of refusal studies in a single language or culture, rather than cross-cultural research (Hahn, 2006; Kasper & Dahl, 1991; Nittono, 2003). This is because it is very accurate because it represents what speakers actually say in a specified speech case rather than what they believe they would say (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993). Data was gathered by observing and participating in speeches at Thai universities where speakers (students) use this act of refusal in a natural condition in English to say 'no' to request.

The information were analyzed qualitatively using analytical frameworks at the discourse level to gain a clearer knowledge of how (frequently) Thai university learners negotiate refusals. To start with, all recorded information were transcribed according to Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990)'s suggested classification system. Regardless of the relationship between the refuser

and the refusee, such as status, age, education, gender, jobs and ethnic-cultural background, the refusal strategies were recorded as observed. This was undertaken to be informed of learners and speakers' frequently used refusal strategies, knowing when and what strategy to use depending on how they want the listener to feel. According to this system, in relation to adjuncts to refusals, refusal strategies are categorized into direct and indirect refusals. The classification scheme is applicable to our dataset as exemplified in the next section.

Findings and Discussion

In order to analyze the information gathered, Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz (1990) Classification Scheme of Refusal Strategies were adopted. Although old, this classification scheme is still applicable to present studies into refusal. It relates to the refusal coding system proposed by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990) in their research of refusals in Japanese, English, and Japanese English learners' speech. Their classification scheme comprises of three primary classifications: direct refusals, indirect refusals, and adjuncts to refusals. However, it is worth noting here that only two of the primary methods (direct refusals and indirect refusals) were identified from the information gathered and analyzed. In this research, the speakers did not use the last approach (adjuncts to refusals). The salient refusal strategies observed in the analysis will be outlined in the following parts with examples from the data.

4.1 Direct Refusals

This is Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz's (1990) first major refusal strategy directed at direct or direct behavior. There are two "Performative" and "Non-performative" kinds of direct refusals. The direct performative refusal refers to the use of the expression of actual or definite refusal (*e.g. I refuse*). Without any redressive face action, this strategy is a direct way to say things. Here, the speakers intentionally used face-threatening phrases in a straightforward, clear and concise way to allow the hearer to comprehend his / her point of view (of 'no') on the request. The impact of this sort of direct refusal speech acting on the emotion of the hearer is that it makes the hearer feel ashamed, scorned, disrespected and humiliated, whether in private or public areas. On the other side, non-performative direct refusal strategy also has two kinds: flat 'no' which has the same mental impact as performative direct refusal on the hearer and adverse readiness or capacity without the word 'no'. Although still a face-threatening act, non-performative direct refusal strategy of negative willingness or ability is a bit soft and the hearer does not really feel hurt and humiliated as the direct performative. It should be observed that in these universities, the use of direct refusal strategy among learners was not as prevalent as in the event of indirect refusal strategies. This is corroborated by Chen et al (1995) reporting that, regardless of their backgrounds, Americans and Japanese often do not immediately refuse. It also coincides with Ikoma and Shimura (1993) results. They believe that because of its face-threatening nature, it is not prevalent. Direct refusals can be referred to as refusing strongly (Ambele, 2014; De Devitiis et al, 1989). It involves what Brown and Levinson (1983, p. 33) referred to as "bald on-record". From the data analysed, four types of direct refusals were identified. They include: (a) the direct performative (*e.g. 'I refuse', 'I decline'*); (b) definite or actual 'no' without any other expression (*e.g. 'No, no, no'*); (c) negative expressions without the word 'no' (*e.g. 'I can't', 'I won't, impossible'*); and (d) definite 'no' but with some other expressions (*e.g. 'I don't need anything from you', sorry, I can't accept it', 'it's impossible to accept'*).

4.2 Indirect Refusals

Indirect refusals refer to speech acting methods that speakers use to minimize or soften the illocutionary force of their refusals to save or maintain the favorable face of the listener (Ambele, 2014; Brown & Levinson, 1987). Indeed, it has been discovered that this indirect strategy is used more often than the direct ones (Al-Issa, 1998; Carson, Al Batal & El Bakary, 2002; Nelson, Stevens, 1993). The effect of this strategy on the hearer's emotion is based on their observation that he / she really feels appreciated, loved and happy even when his / her request cannot be granted. Below are discussed the outstanding sub-strategies of this key strategy.

Apologising, giving excuses and postponement

Within this category, the students of the Thai EFL begin by apologizing for their failure to grant the request of the hearer, a finding that supports related research (Al-Issa, 1998; Al-Shalawi, 1997). Here are some instances of how the sub-strategy of apology was used from the data:

- *Unfortunately, I'm too busy now to go home with you.*
- *I'm sorry, my parents didn't tell me to hang around with friends.*
- *Sorry, I can't always be begging on your behalf.*

The learners would offer an excuse as another strategy to soften the rejection closely related to apologizing. It was used to decrease the refusal's illocutionary power by communicating to the hearer that if not for some reason or excuse, the speaker would acknowledge it. Such excuses can be made in detail while others can be made in a vague way. This problem is particularly crucial because in certain cultures such as Japanese (Beebe et al., 1990) and Arabic (Al-Issa, 1998; Al-Shalawi, 1997), as well as Thai (our emphasis), speakers tend to offer vague reasons and excuses when refusing to do so. Speakers, however, tend to be more particular in American society. Data examples demonstrate this:

- *My mom is very sick and is in the hospital.*
- *I really have to be somewhere after work.*
- *I'm really busy now studying.*
- *I forgot the notes at home.*

From apologizing to providing an excuse and later postponing why they refuse to do so. While stating no to someone's request seems to leave that individual bitter and dissatisfied, nevertheless the strategic and linked use of apologizing, giving the students an excuse and future assistance in their discourses is quite interesting.

This sub-strategy was operationalized by Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz's (1990) and Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1990) as an avoidance approach used by speakers to divert their listeners' attention from the illocutionary force of their refusals. It seeks to minimize the danger to the favorable face of the interlocutor. It is essential to note, however, that this approach is comparable to, but also distinct from, the promise strategy of future recognition. In postponement, the participant postpones its decision to comply with the request or accepts the offer in the future to some extent (Morkus, 2009). The following examples show this:

- *Can I talk with my mom and sister and get back to you?*
- *I have to think about it.*
- *I'll get back to you next week.*
- *Let me check with her first and hear what she thinks and get back to you.*
- *I have to talk with my roommate before you can come live with us.*
- *Could you give me time to think about it?*
- *But, I'll have to see, I can't give you an answer about this now.*
- *Let's think about it, maybe we can do it another time.*
- *I could do it, um, another time, it's tough now.*
- *I will consider it.*

Giving alternative option

Again, this seems to be another strategy most frequently used to realize the refusal speech act. This strategy is the attempt by the speaker to negotiate the request to minimize the threat to the positive face of the hearer. The objective of the speaker here is to soften the negative's illocutionary force by providing other alternatives to the interlocutor. Beebe et al. (1990) suggests two kinds of this sub-strategy: 1) I can do X instead of Y, and 2) Why are you not doing X instead of Y? (Morkus, 2009, p. 3.). This difference is not provided in the current research, however, as in the following examples:

- *Isn't there someone else you can take the notes from?*
- *You can read the text books from the library and make your own notes.*
- *Can I call you tomorrow and we talk about it over the phone?*
- *After lecture study, we can meet.*
- *I'd be willing to work an extra three hours on a different day.*

Setting conditions for acceptance while giving advice or explanation

In this strategy, the speaker sets conditions for accepting the request while, at the same time, providing advice or explaining something related to his / her request to the listener. It is a new strategy that Morkus (2009) discovered and has not been reported in another research after him. This is what makes this strategy interesting. This sub-strategy shows: 1) if the situation were different, the speaker would be willing to comply, 2) distracting the listener from the impact of the refusal and minimizing the threat to the face of the hearer. In both situations, the speaker assumes a position of someone who feels he / she is entitled to give advice to the hearer or to explain something to him / her about the request. In other refusal surveys such as the 'chiding' or 'reprimand' (Al-Issa, 1998), similar techniques have been discovered (Stevens 1993). However, because the present research did not concentrate on understanding the participant's intention and whether the interlocutor is providing genuine advice or chiding or reprimanding him / her, Morkus' (2009) definition of this sub-strategy was adopted in this research. This is clarified by the following examples from the data:

- *If you had told me before, it would have been possible, you have to attend classes so that you would be a good person in your life.*
- *If it was yesterday, that would have been possible, at some point, you've got to start copying notes for yourself.*

- *Maybe, if you had let me know beforehand, I would have done something, you have to always attend lectures. I mean, time spent at the university is important, yes, if you don't experience education for yourself, then you've missed a lot. You should try to go to class everyday.*

Lack of empathy

This is the final sub-strategy which has not been discovered in the Egyptian Arabic research of Morkus in 1999. This strategy was not discovered in Beebe et al. (1990). This is interesting as speakers used it to demonstrate that they do not care or sympathize with the listener's issue. Instead of mitigating the illocutionary act of refusal, this strategy aggravates and threatens the positive face of the hearer as it shows that the speaker does not express solidarity with the hearer and does not show that his / her needs and desires are also the hearer. The following are some examples from the data:

- *I have a problem too*
- *That's not my problem.*
- *But I have problems with my girlfriends too.*
- *That's not my fault.*
- *We all, always have problems.*
- *And this is not my problem.*

The following sub-strategies were the most outstanding reported in the data. However, other sub-strategies were also noted in the data, but not so frequently used. They include (i) the willingness of the speaker to assist his or her hearer but at the same moment his or her failure (wish) to do so; (ii) request the hearer's consideration and comprehension that the speaker cannot comply (consideration of understanding) with the request; (iii) remind the hearer that the speaker is doing his / her utmost and that his / her rejection should not diminish that fact (try to dissuade the hearer).

Conclusion and Implications

This finding favors Al-Kahtani's stance (2005), which states that various cultures take a difference in the expression of refusal. This research examines how Thai EFL university learners in Thailand often say 'no.' The impacts of the refusal act on the face of the hearer are also discussed. The influence of age nor any other socio-economic factors in determining the linguistic choice of refusals among these EFL students were not considered in this study. The study shows only two main strategies for refusal (direct refusal, indirect refusal and adjunct refusal): direct and overwhelmingly indirect refusal. The data show that only two have been apparent. That demonstrates that the research only partially confirmed that of Beebe, Uliss-Weltz and Takahashi (1990). Four kinds of direct refusals have also been recognized. These include: (a) direct performative; (b) definitive or real 'no' in the absence of any other phrase; (c) adverse phrases with no phrase, and (d) specific 'no,' but some other phrases. The result of these strategies in the presence of the listener, whether private or public, is that the listener feels embarrassed, under-respected and humiliated.

In the study, these learners used rejection strategies to reject requests. The two new strategies that were not recorded in Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990) refusal classification systems implemented by students in this study are the establishment of conditions for explanation (4.2.3)

and the lack of empathy (4.2.4). The implication of this strategy on the face of the hearer is that he / she really feels appreciated, loved and happy, even if he / she cannot be granted the request. The Thai learners choose not to risk their interpersonal connection or to threaten their interlocutor's face. The speech refusal act is seen as an "a significant intercultural stinking point of ESL / EFL learners," which could lead to an unintended crime and communication breakdown, according to Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliß-Weltz (1990).

All in all, they seem to mean that distinct cultures, based on their own contextual experiences, have a very special and distinctive way of stating no in English. In this way, it would seem that our learners are ideally compromised to equip our learners with intercultural abilities, understanding and expertise to become interculturally conscious and skilled, in order to safeguard their interlocutors' favorable face when they say no to their demands. This has some consequences for educating ESL / EFL learners. Within its socio-cultural context, the findings here can contribute to communicative action studies. Previous research suggested the need to teach L2 pragmatics to develop the lexical and grammatical pragmatic knowledge of the student. The findings suggest that foreign language teaching may not promote the students' metalinguistic awareness without this pragmatic focus. Lastly, this study supports the view that, through proper planning of classroom activities, pragmatic ability can actually and indeed be systematically developed.

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