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Intercultural Pragmatic Analysis of "Sorry" in In-flight Service Refusals by Flight Attendants: A Case Study of a Thai Airline

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Abstract

In seeking to investigate the use of "sorry" in interlanguage refusal by Thai EFL users in an intercultural communication context, the present study collected data from Thai flight attendants who served passengers on international flights for a Thai airline, so as to examine how "sorry" is adopted in refusals in the context of in-flight services. A discourse completion task (DCT) questionnaire was employed to solicit responses from ten male and ten female participants. Through Weerachairattana and Wannaruk's (2016) classification of refusals and the syntactical construction of "sorry" by Arizavi and Choubsaz (2018), the data gathered were coded and analyzed in terms of semantic formulas, strategies used, and pragmatic transfer. Findings revealed that "sorry" conveyed conventional implicatures as "a marker for refusals," "expressing an excuse or reason," and "introducing a reason or showing

sympathy," attested by the constructions used in refusals. The term was also uttered with an "excuse, reason, or explanation" to express politeness and regret in refusals in which pragmatic transfer was produced by flight attendants due to L1 pragmatic norms. These different functions of "sorry" used in refusals were bound to surrounding and situational contexts. However, gender differences did not have much bearing on the use of "sorry" in refusals because organizational culture plays a more significant part in discourse in professional contexts. This study was conducted in the hope that it could contribute to interlanguage pragmatic study, particularly to expand our understanding of intercultural communication between English native speakers and EFL learners and users.

Keywords: sorry, refusals, pragmatic transfer, intercultural communication, interlanguage pragmatics

"Sorry" is used in an extensive range of contexts in everyday communication. The word is normally uttered as part of an apology, excuse, regret or refusal. Arizavi and Choubsaz (2018) demonstrated that "sorry," which is sometimes used interchangeably with "I'm sorry," appears in social blunders and apologies for mistakes or misapprehensions in dealing with opposition or disagreement. Oftentimes, it is used in situations in which the speaker is not even at fault. The word "sorry" gradually shifts from lexical, as an adjective expressing sadness, to pragmatic status implying a different shade of meaning since it is bound to the context (Molina, 2011). It is also used to make an act of talk interruption, self-repair, a slip of the tongue, reason introduction, sympathy expression, polite redirection, and tactical refusal (Arizavi & Choubsaz, 2018).

It has been observed that Thai EFL users utter "sorry," which is basically an apologetic term (Arizavi & Choubsaz, 2018; Cedar, 2017; Jones, 2017; Molina, 2011), when performing the act of refusal in

intercultural communication contexts. As speech acts are understandable as functions of a language (Al-Eryani, 2007) and can be interpreted and realized in various ways in different situations from culture to culture, a speech act of refusal in intercultural communication is a phenomenon that deserves to be studied, especially for non-native speakers of English. It can be assumed that the word "sorry" used in different situations conveys implicature and pragmatic functions. Non-native English speakers and learners must use the language socially and in a culturally appropriate way in a communicative context in order to avoid miscommunication. Studying interlanguage refusal in everyday interaction and communication is, therefore, attention-grabbing in linguistic studies.

The act of refusal commonly occurs in everyday interaction and various contexts, especially in service-providing roles in which "sorry" is employed to express regrets, apologies, and refusals. Flight attendants are tasked with providing in-flight services to attend to the needs of international passengers but are likely to find themselves in situations in which such needs cannot always be fulfilled. Hence the act of refusal in English in their professional context is required. In such situations, "sorry" occasionally occurs. According to interlanguage pragmatic literature, it is possible that flight attendants who are Thai native speakers may produce refusals by using L1 pragmatic conventions in L2 because they are non-natives using English as a foreign language (Cedar, 2017; Wannaruk, 2008). Thus, it is necessary for Thai flight attendants to have more than grammatical and communicative competence in using English as a foreign language in intercultural communication as they also require the pragmatic competence to use a second language in a socially and culturally appropriate manner (Tanck, 2002). Having linguistically proficient airline personnel is one of the crucial factors for an airline's reputation and progression. Therefore, airline personnel must have proficiency in the English language to effectively communicate with multinational passengers (Suwarnnoi, 2016).

Based on previous studies (Saengwattanakul, 2014; Wannaruk, 2008; Weerachairattana & Wannaruk, 2016), it is hypothesized that

Thais tend to say "sorry" when refusing and in seeking to reveal intended meanings and pragmatic functions of the term "sorry" in refusals. The present study aimed to examine how flight attendants in a Thai airline use English to perform the act of refusal in intercultural in-flight service exchanges. In particular, the study aimed to investigate the use of "sorry" in refusals since its actual meaning can vary according to context (Jones, 2017; Molina, 2011).

Although relevant studies exist, including Saengwattanakul (2014), Thaitae and Lerlertyuthithum (2011), and Weerachairattana and Wannaruk (2016) who studied the act of refusal and refusal strategies in which "sorry" was found to play a part in face saving acts and politeness strategies, few studies have examined the interactive role of this word in the refusals of Thai flight attendants. Thus, in an attempt to demonstrate how Thai flight attendants as EFL users employ "sorry" in their in-flight service interactions with international passengers, the study focused on the use of the term in refusals and factors influencing its use. By exploring its patterns, functions, and contextual meanings in practical situations, including influences of culture and gender, the study aimed to answer these research questions:

1. What are functions of "sorry" in refusals given by Thai flight attendants?
2. How do culture and gender differences influence the use of "sorry" in this context?
3. Which types of issue necessitate the use of "sorry" more in these exchanges: service issues or safety issues?

Theoretical Framework

When it comes to intercultural communication, interlocutors from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds impart several things in interaction. Second language users not only need linguistic competence but also pragmatic competence to maintain successful and effective communication. In other words, other than using correct grammatical structures and vocabulary, non-native English speakers require pragmatic competence to use the language both correctly and

appropriately in communication. Thongtong and Srioutai (2019) are among researchers who have conducted interlanguage pragmatic studies. They investigated how EFL Thai undergraduate students used questions to perform complaints when performing role-plays. Their findings revealed that gender difference could affect complaint strategies, and questions were used with different implications in making complaints. In their study, male EFL students used questions as a complaint strategy of "appeal" to solve problems and ask for help, whereas females used questions as a complaint strategy of "inquiry" to ascertain information. Such differences could be explained by their perception of politeness, face-threateningness, relation of interlocutors, and contexts.

Therefore, interlanguage pragmatics, which involves a non-native speaker's ability to perform in the target language (Cedar, 2017), should be examined to enhance language use and pragmatic competence.

Interlanguage pragmatics

Interlanguage pragmatics, according to Cedar (2017), is a field of study correlating pragmatics with interlanguage. While interlanguage is related to studying speakers of a second language, foreign language, or non-native speakers, pragmatics is broadly defined as language in use and how it makes meaning in contexts, in addition to its form and semantic meaning alone (O'Keeffe et al., 2020). Pragmatics is concerned with the meaning of language used in context and the meaning that is interpreted in a real statement, especially for whom and what the language is used, including when, where, and how it is used (Bloomer et al., 2005). Therefore, interlanguage pragmatics research can be described as an area of study that inspects how non-native speakers of a language acquire, understand, and use speech acts in the target language in order to enhance pragmatic competence (Cedar, 2017).

Speech act of refusals

The speech act of refusal is a common communicative feature that occurs in day-to-day interaction. It is also a complicated act as interactants have to respond to various social and language factors (Beebe et al., 1990) such as those in social communication and professional contexts. Refusals are one of the primary speech act functions that has been investigated, especially in cross-cultural communication. It is as Beebe et al. (1990) have stated a complicated speech act that is responsive to social and language factors and entails lasting negotiation and possible offense. It also frequently occurs with a level of indirectness among interlocutors. Moreover, it is a face-threatening act because improper refusals can threaten one's face (Brown & Levinson, 1978, as cited in Jiang, 2015). The way people perform and recognize refusals differs across diverse cultural backgrounds (Lin, 2014). Therefore, in order to avoid a face-threatening situation and to maintain interaction and good interpersonal relationships when refusing, cultural differences should be acknowledged and refusal strategies should be selected accordingly.

Examining distinct constructions of refusals and complaints by Americans and non-native English speakers residing in the US, Tanck (2002), using Discourse Completion Task (DCT), found that non-native speakers overall created the same constituents to form the speech act set of refusals and complaints, but the quality produced by native speakers was occasionally more suitable in terms of appropriateness to the situations and the quality of the component of the speech act set. Likewise, both native and non-native speakers performed very few direct refusals, and both conducted almost the same linguistic and pragmatic practices in their speech acts. Nonetheless, non-native English speakers in the study despite their US domicile displayed an inability to perform communicative acts that were socially and culturally appropriate by default to native speakers, such as occasionally producing indirect and vague refusals. The findings revealed that it was noticeable that pragmatic ability of L2 users was not native-like.

Saengwattanakul (2014) investigated refusal speech acts in requests, employing DCT to draw data from Thai hotel staff and using the taxonomy of Beebe et al. (1990) for data coding. The study revealed that 75% of Thai hotel staff refused customers indirectly by using strategies such as excuses and explanations. Apart from using a less semantic formula when refusing interlocutors with a higher status, they also evaded lengthy discussion with those of a higher status (Saengwattanakul, 2014). In the same way, Thaitae and Lerlertyuthithum (2011) inspected how the politeness strategies of Brown and Levinson (1978; 1987) were utilized in refusing passengers' requests by ground service personnel. With a DCT research instrument similar to Saengwattanakul (2014), they found that ground service personnel used techniques of giving deference, giving reasons, apologizing, and showing attempts to take responsibility as politeness strategies in refusals.

The use of "sorry"

As there have been several studies examining the use of the word "sorry" in various contexts, it can be assumed that this particular word plays an important role in language in use. By means of corpus analysis, Arizavi and Choubsaz (2018) explored various uses of "sorry" and "I'm sorry." They argued that "sorry" and "I'm sorry" used in American English spoken discourse may have a range of functions depending on the context of communication. Although "sorry" and "I'm sorry" were expressed in social blunders, apologies for mistakes, misapprehension, regret, compassion, conversation interference, a start of reason giving, a slip of the tongue, and tactical refusal, there were differences in the use of these two phrases. The study revealed that "sorry" was mostly employed to indicate interruptions, self-repair, and an expression of regret, while "I'm sorry" was mainly used to exhibit an apology and regret. Moreover, the study pointed out that concurrent words as collocational patterns and understanding and cognition of social context influenced their use.

Barr and Gillberry (2010) explored when and how Canadians said "sorry" in numerous contexts and whether its use varied in

different age groups. Utilizing a survey to collect data, it was found that Canadians did not only use the term to show their regret but also to draw attention and to avoid possible trouble. The findings showed that Canadian participants in the study replaced the word "sorry" with "excuse me," which expressed less concern for taking blame than saying "sorry." Moreover, Canadians aged 18–25 used "sorry" more frequently to maintain good interrelationships in the case that they were not even at fault than those aged over 26 who believed that the term should be used when accepting the responsibility for something.

Pragmatic transfer relative to pragmatic competence

An ability to use a language appropriately in contexts of international communication is crucial for everyone including non-native speakers of English. Uraipan (2011) has stated that grammatical competence and sociolinguistics relating to linguistic competence, discursive practices, and social and cultural knowledge mark communicative competence. Therefore, speakers of a second language not only need to be competent in grammar and vocabulary, but also require pragmatic competence to use a second language in a socially and culturally appropriate manner (Tanck, 2002). Native English speakers may be considered models of pragmatic competence (Cedar, 2017) who usually provide specific excuses when giving reasons for refusals (Beebe et al., 1990), express positive feelings followed by regret and giving a reason or explanation when refusing, and are also likely to show gratitude (Jiang, 2015).

However, in analyzing interlanguage interaction, pragmatic transfer is often found. Pragmatic transfer refers to the case in which interlanguage speakers are inclined to use their L1 pragmatic conventions in L2 construction as a result of limited L2 pragmatic competence (Cedar, 2017). Cedar (2017) investigated the use of different apology strategies among Indonesian EFL learners and found via DCT that pragmatic transfers existed with the form of honorific terms and religious-related expressions in apologies performed by Indonesian EFL learners. According to Al-Eryani (2007), whose research sought to investigate refusal strategies in which pragmatic

transfer was presumed to occur when Yemeni EFL learners, in comparison with Americans, performed the act of refusal. Using DCT for data elicitation and the refusal taxonomy of Beebe et al. (1990) for coding semantic formulas and their frequency, Al-Eryani (2007) discovered that Yemeni EFL learners with high English language proficiency exhibited the influence of pragmatic transfer when refusing, and Yemeni norms and cultural background were evidenced in refusals by Yemenis. Moreover, Yemeni EFL learners produced different semantic formulas for refusing in terms of order, frequency, and content. For instance, an excuse was used in the first position of the semantic formula when Yemenis declined an invitation, whereas Americans used regret in this position. In short, EFL users tend to be influenced by their first language (L1) and culture when performing communication in English (L2).

To provide more evidence to support the occurrence of pragmatic transfer induced by L1 language and the culture of learners as the users of EFL, Wannaruk (2008) inspected distinctions in refusals made by Thais, Thai EFL learners, and Americans using DCT as a means to solicit data and explored pragmatic transfer in refusals produced by Thai EFL learners, revealing that most participants used generally similar refusal strategies. Nevertheless, language proficiency, a person's status, and Thai characteristics of being modest apparently influenced the occurrence of pragmatic transfer in making refusals for Thai EFL graduate students and the lower their level of proficiency the more frequent the pragmatic transfer. This result may be due to their insufficient pragmatic knowledge of English. Wattananukij and Pongpairoj (2022) also found that English proficiency influenced pragmatic transfer. In their study, they investigated how Thai EFL learners with high and intermediate English proficiency levels responded to English tag questions. Their results revealed that Thai EFL learners with varying levels of English proficiency had difficulty responding to negative English tag questions, but Thai EFL learners with high English proficiency produced more native-like responses than those with intermediate English proficiency in both speaking and writing tests. However, Thai EFL learners demonstrated pragmatic

transfer by being prone to Thai norms when responding to English tag questions. In the same vein, using DCT for data collection and Beebe et al.'s (1990) refusal coding scheme to elicit semantic formulas, Weerachairattana and Wannaruk (2016) explored refusal strategies made in both Thai (L1) and English (L2) by native Thai speakers. Their findings indicated that the way Thai graduate students, as non-native English speakers, produced refusals in both Thai and English is similar in the choice, content, and order of refusal strategies and was influenced by circumstances, noticeably their social values and cultural norms such as Thai characteristics of being considerate and sensitive to an interlocutor's status. However, due to their inadequate English proficiency, some Thai participants used direct strategies by applying "No" to refuse in English more often than in Thai, even to higher status refusees.

In addition to pragmatic transfer evidenced in the findings of Al-Eryani (2007), Cedar (2017), Wannaruk (2008), and Weerachairattana and Wannaruk (2016), Jiang (2015) using DCT also found Chinese EFL learners produced pragmatic transfer when refusing in English by performing indirect refusal with a vague or imprecise explanation and excuse that was not seen in the act by Americans.

Methodology

Data and participants

This study was conducted in July 2020 coinciding with the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic that kept most airlines on the ground. Due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, the reduced number of flights, and airline disarray, it was challenging to find volunteers to participate in the study.

Despite these limitations, data was obtained from 20 Thai flight attendants from a Thai airline's international division. All participants had a minimum score of 650 on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), a standard requirement for all flight attendants working for the airline. They in addition all had a minimum of five years of experience with in-flight duties and responsibilities and were eligible to perform duties in all three flight classes: economy class,

business class, and first class. Ten of the participants were male and the other ten were female, and they were all between 25 and 50 years of age.

Data Collection

A questionnaire consisting of close-ended questions and open-ended questions was employed as a DCT. Its function was prompting and drawing language use with designed scenarios (O'Keeffe et al., 2020). The questionnaire was divided into two sections. In the first section, flight attendants were asked to provide basic information about themselves (gender, age, and number of years experience working as flight attendants) for the close-ended questions. Then, they were asked to complete a DCT in the form of ten open-ended questions. These questions simulated various in-flight situations in which the respondents would produce refusals for passengers' requests concerning general onboard services and safety and security in different phases of a flight. General onboard services included the provision of food and drinks, comfort, entertainment, and facilities, whereas safety and security concern safety standards and policies, emergency procedures, and in-flight security regulations.

To simulate the natural interaction of the actual in-flight context, the English DCT questions were mixed randomly in the questionnaire (as shown in Table 1). Participants were not able to envisage the type of situation to be presented. They were required to complete the DCT using English within thirty minutes. The limited time frame was imposed to guarantee that the responses best reflect an actual spoken language interaction.

Table 1

Questions Used as Situations of Requests Relevant to In-flight Safety and Security and Service

SAFETY and SECURITY	SERVICE
1. What do you say to reject a leg-injured passenger who requests to put some bags on the floor to support his/her legs for the convenience during the flight?	**2.** What will you do when a young minor asks you for a can of beer?
3. On a night flight to Japan, a passenger seated at the exit row asks for a blanket and a pillow before takeoff, what will be your reply with safety reasons?	**4.** If a business class passenger asks to take a blanket home as a souvenir, how can you decline him/her?
6. If a first-class passenger asks you for a favor to leave his/her favorite bottle of wine on the table during the whole meal service, how will you reply?	**5.** If an intoxicated passenger asks you for more whisky, what will you say to suspend alcohol service?
8. While serving welcome drinks on ground, a first-class passenger informs you that he/she wants to enjoy the drinks and prefers to keep a glass of champagne on the table during takeoff, how will you respond?	**7.** After meal service, a passenger asks you to find another free window seat for him/her. Unfortunately, the flight is full. What will you say?
9. A lady tells you that her son really needs to use the lavatory while the plane is passing through turbulence and the fasten seat belt sign is on, what will you say?	**10.** Realizing that there are many unoccupied seats in the business class, a Gold Card member passenger wants to be upgraded without paying seat fees. What will you reply?

Analytical framework

Once responses from DCT were gathered, they were processed and analysed. Analysis was based on semantic formulas of refusals and the use of "sorry" as interlanguage refusal in the context of intercultural communication. Semantic formulas of refusals included order, frequency, and content of refusals, including direct and indirect strategies (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987). The semantic formulas in each of the responses to refusals in the context were first examined. Then the occurrence of refusals, frequency, and content assessed as refusal strategies in all responses were coded. The data were classified using

the classification of refusals of Weerachairattana and Wannaruk (2016) who studied refusal strategies by modifying Beebe et al.'s (1990) taxonomy of refusal with further attributions by adding more adjuncts in the taxonomy.

One refusal strategy employed was a "direct" refusal for acknowledgement, admittance, or compliance (Wannaruk, 2008). Such direct refusal strategies were classified as "performative" statement, utterance with words directly indicating refusals such as refuse, reject, deny, disagree, and "non performative" statement identified by expression of refusals that the meaning was still effective even without performative refusal terms designating negative ability or willingness such as 'no,' 'I can't,' and 'I don't think so' (Beebe et al.,1985 as cited in Rosa, 2010). Another refusal strategy used was "indirect" refusal where a refuser attempts to minimize negative effects on refusees by avoiding direct rejection or denial, so that politeness could be observed. Such indirect refusals could also be used to soften refusal tone (Wannaruk, 2008). Meanwhile, adjunct to refusals was the utterance that had to be combined with other constituents to indicate or fulfill a refusal (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987; Weerachairattana & Wannaruk, 2016). Likewise, adjunct was used to reduce the aggression or severity of the act (Lin, 2014). It is noteworthy that the refusal classification of Weerachairattana and Wannaruk (2016) was slightly adjusted to take account of the data found in this study as shown in Table 2. Once coded, refusal strategies used with the term "sorry" as structural components in refusal were further analyzed and implications were interpreted. The number of occurrences was also used to support the implication of use.

Table 2

Weerachairattana and Wannaruk's (2016) Classification of Refusal Strategies Modified from Beebe et al. (1990)

DESCRIPTION	CODE
DIRECT	
Performative statement	1A
Nonperformative statement	1B
(1) "No"	
(2) Negative willingness/ability	
INDIRECT	
Statement of regret	2A
Wish	2B
Excuse, reason, explanation	2C
Statement of alternatives	2D
Set condition for future or past acceptance	2E
Promise of future acceptance	2F
Statement of principle	2G
Statement of philosophy	2H
Attempt to dissuade interlocutor	2I
(1) Threat or statement of negative consequences to the requester	
(2) Guilt trip (Pointing out things the interlocutor failed to do in the past	
(3) Criticize the request/requester, etc. (statement of negative feeling or opinion); insult/attack	
(4) Request for help, empathy, or assistance by dropping or holding the request	
(5) Let the interlocutor off the hook	
(6) Self-defense	
Acceptance that functions as a refusal	2J
Avoidance	2K
(A) Topic switch (not used)	
(B) Joke	
(D) Repetition of part of request, etc.	
(E) Hedging	
ADJUNCTS	
Statement of positive opinion / feeling or agreement	ADj1
Statement of empathy	ADj2
Pause filler	ADj3
Gratitude /Appreciation	ADj4
Asking for approval	ADj5
Asking for more information	ADj6
Asking for permission [a]	ADj7

[a] Refusal strategy found in this study

Next, the use of "sorry" employed in refusals from all responses were counted and analyzed with the patterns of the syntactical completement constructions of "sorry," developed by Arizavi and Choubsaz (2018) in Table 3 to identify the range of functions of the term. Lastly, refusal strategies and the use of "sorry" in refusals by different genders were compared and analyzed.

Table 3

Constructions of "Sorry" of Arizavi and Choubsaz (2018)

CODE	CANONICAL AND NON-CANNONICAL STRUCTURES	FUNCTION
S1	Sorry *complement* [that-clause] (elided and non-elided)	(A) Marker for Refusal (B) Self - repair (C) Reporting (D) Compensation
S2	Sorry *complement* [to-infinitive phrase]	Expressing regret or sympathy
S3	Sorry *complement* [an inserted turn]	(A) Interrupting the other speaker' turn (B) Acknowledging error (C) Emphasizing
S4	Sorry *complement* [for / about prepositional phrase]	Introducing a reason or sympathy
S5	Sorry *complement* [a clause prefaced by *but* or *though*]	Representing polite redirection and strategic rejection of what was earlier said.
S6	Sorry *complement* [causative adverbial clause]	Expressing an excuse or a reason
S7	Sorry complement [a proper name]	(A) Mitigating the severity of one's wrongdoing (B) Creating a sense of intimacy

To guarantee the validation of our coding, another graduate student with a background in pragmatics and discourse analysis was invited as an interrater. After being coded in accordance with the taxonomy, the data were counted for frequency of refusal strategies

used and the usage of "sorry." The refusal speech act was analyzed in terms of refusal strategy patterns used with "sorry."

Findings and Analysis

Refusal strategies with "sorry"

Table 4

Three Most Frequent Uses of Refusal Strategies

REFUSAL STRATEGIES	DESCRIPTIONS	COUNT(S)
INDIRECT	Excuse, reason, explanation	126
INDIRECT	Statement of regret	78
DIRECT	Negative willingness/ability	41

As can be seen in Table 4, Thai flight attendants used "excuse, reason, and explanation" the most, and "statement of regret" and "negative ability" were the second and third most frequently used strategies, respectively, when refusing passengers' requests. This shows that Thai flight attendants frequently used these three refusal strategies as a speech act set to complete refusals in the context of in-flight services.

It was also found that Thai flight attendants often utilized service limitations and safety regulations as explanations, reasons, and/or excuses in refusing passengers' requests. As "explanation" is supposed to be extensively conceived as a politeness strategy in realizing a speech act of refusal (Hassani et al., 2011), it can be argued that the way Thai flight attendants conducted refusals in context with explanations, reasons, and/or excuses as refusal strategies was intended to express politeness.

Several refusal strategies occurred with "sorry" as structural components, However, Thai flight attendants used "sorry" the most with "excuse, reason, explanation" to produce refusals in context.

> *Situation 8: "I'm very sorry for your safety reason sometimes there might be turbulence. It's not safe to leave the bottle on the table, and you can call me anytime you need, Sir."*

The frequent use of "sorry" combined with "excuse, reason, explanation" led to a conclusion that Thai flight attendants used sorry to give an excuse, a reason, or an explanation to uphold a regret expression when refusing passengers.

Moreover, analysis revealed that Thai flight attendants employed "statement of regret" as their second most common refusal strategy.

> *Situation 2: "I'm really sorry I cannot serve you alcoholic drinks since you are a minor and under the age of 18. May I offer you a can of soda instead?"*

Arguably, they were induced by the morals of being considerate and sympathetic to the passengers when refusing requests, apart from responsibilities. Thus, "regret" was expressed through the frequent use of an indirect refusal strategy of "statement regret" that was indicated by using the term "sorry."

> *Situation 9: "Sorry, I cannot let anyone use the lavatory at this time since we're passing through turbulence."*

Although "negative ability" has been classified as a direct refusal strategy that could threaten the refusee's face, it was the third most common refusal strategy found in this study. It may have been due to the fact that directness was, in some cases, required for in-flight situational contexts in order to create mutual understanding on crucial matters between interlocutors, such as situations related to in-flight safety.

Noticeably, "asking for permission" was an adjunct additionally found in this study. The strategy could be used to express understanding and attentiveness to the refusal, and it signified respect of the higher status of the interlocutors who were customers. Particularly, it was a direct refusal or abrupt rejection that could lead to dissatisfaction in the service context.

In addition, it can also be noticed that Thai flight attendants often refused passengers' requests with long content refusals to support the act in the context, especially for matters concerning safety

regulations. It can be remarked that long content refusals were frequently found in interactions with first/business class passengers.

> *Situation 3: "Sorry, Sir, I cannot give it to you right now, since you are seated next to the emergency exit and we have to clear all loose objects that can be an obstruction if an emergency occurs during takeoff and landing. Thank you for your understanding."*

It can be argued that long and elaborate refusals used by Thai flight attendants were intended to express politeness and attentiveness to the customers who had higher status in the context. This indicated that the relative status of the interlocutors could have an influence on the act of refusal (Al-Eryani, 2007; Beebe et al., 1990; Thaitae & Lerlertyuthithum, 2011; Weerachairattana & Wannaruk, 2016).

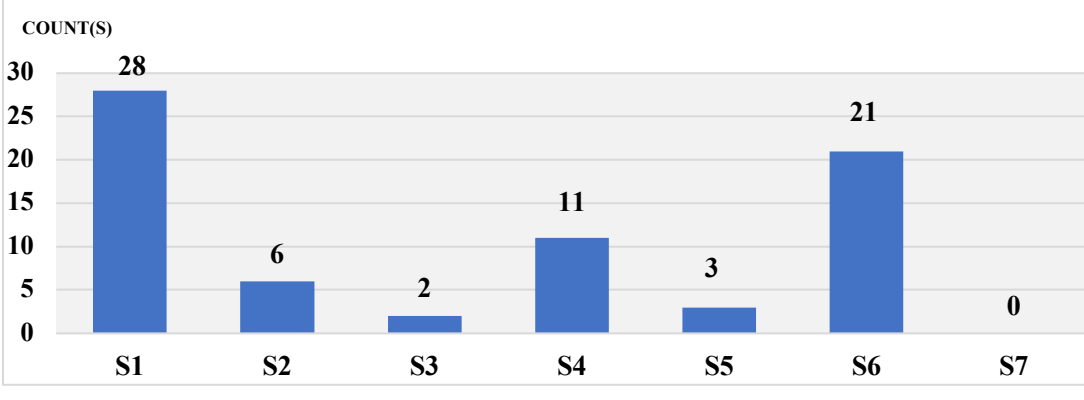
It has also been found that such a direct refusal strategy as *"No"* was not used by Thai flight attendants to reject requests at all. To refuse, participants must say "sorry" first followed by *"negative willingness/ability"* as in the following:

Situation: "Sorry, I can't give it to you right now. May I give it to you after takeoff?" This was classified as a direct refusal. Therefore, it can be concluded that "sorry" was used in combination with negative ability to refuse passengers' requests.

Constructions of "sorry"

Figure 1

Frequency of Constructions of "Sorry" Usage (Based on Arizavi & Choubsaz, 2018)



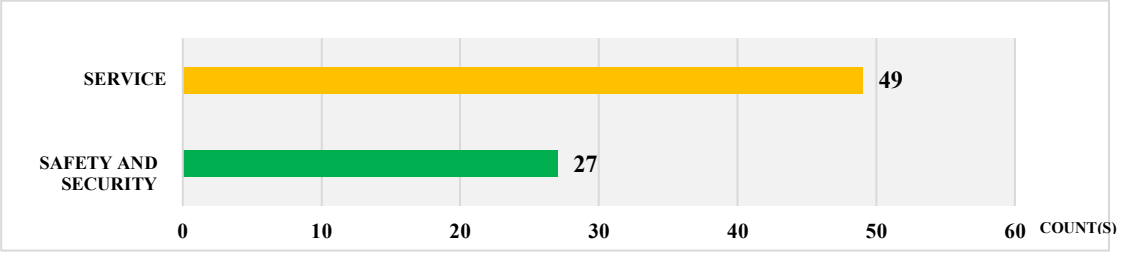
This finding was in line with the constructions of "sorry" developed by Arizavi and Choubsaz (2018) shown in Figure 1. The findings suggested that Thai flight attendants used "sorry" in refusals as S1 the most, "Sorry complement [that-clause] (elided and non-elided)," to function as "a marker for refusal" such as (elided) *"Sorry, I can't give it to you right now. May I give it to you after takeoff?"* and (non-elided) *"I'm sorry that I can't leave the bottle on your table, but don't worry I'll refill your glass before it's finished."* The second most frequent function of the term was "expressing an excuse or reason" with the construction of "Sorry completement [causative adverbial clause]," (S6) such as *"I'm sorry, Sir, because a blanket is a reusable item"* or with the clause co-occurring with "sorry" that functioned as an excuse or reason such as *"Sorry, I'm afraid that it's not safe during turbulence."* The third most frequent function of the term was "introducing a reason or sympathy" with the construction of "Sorry complement [for/about prepositional phrase]," (S4) such as *"… I am so sorry for the inconvenience"* and *"... I am sorry about that."*

According to the study findings, Thai flight attendants possibly expressed their apology through "sorry" since it provided a neutral form of apologizing (Molina, 2011) and as "sorry" is fundamentally an apologetic term (Arizavi & Choubsaz, 2018; Cedar, 2017; Jones, 2017; Molina, 2011). Moreover, it was possible that Thai flight attendants said "sorry" to avoid threatening passengers' face by refusing them due to Asian characteristics of being considerate to interlocutors' face (Jones, 2017) and an awareness that refusal was a face-threatening act (Al-Eryani, 2007; Jiang, 2015; Lin, 2014; Saengwattanakul, 2014; Tanck, 2002; Weerachairattana & Wannaruk, 2016).

Situations for "sorry"

Figure 2

The Use of "Sorry" in Situations Related to In-flight Service and Safety and Security



According to Figure 2, the term "sorry" was employed in refusing passengers more in situations concerning normal services than those of in-flight safety and security. It may have been that Thai flight attendants, as service providers, were engaged with responsibilities to do their best to satisfy passengers. Not being able to provide service was seen as their own shortcomings thus bringing about the feeling of guilt. On the other hand, in-flight safety and security were priorities of the flight and were strictly regulated. Both flight attendants and passengers had a duty to collaborate and comply with requirements stipulated. Flight safety and security was seen as a common responsibility of everyone on board. That may have helped explain why expressions of regret such as "sorry" were not found as frequently in situations involving safety issues. This confirmed Thaitae and Lerlertyuthithum's (2011) finding that the ground service personnel from the Thai airline in their study used safety rules and regulations as reasons when refusing customers' requests to make sure that the refusee understood that the reason for service rejection was beyond the flight attendant's control. For this same reason, "sorry" was less used in rejecting situations related to in-flight safety and security than those concerning general in-flight service. This demonstrates how it is easier to refuse passengers with a direct strategy in obligatory situations.

Although "sorry" and "I'm sorry" were treated as one in this study, it is worth noting that "I'm sorry" was used to express a higher

degree of regret and remorse in refusing things that Thai flight attendants felt responsible for, as evidenced its usage with passengers in higher classes of service, and during in-flight service situations. Flight attendants may have been aware that passengers in higher seating classes had to pay more money, so they naturally expected higher quality service. Failing to meet the passengers' high expectations may have brought about more feelings of guilt, as reflected in a more elaborated use of "I am sorry."

On the other hand, "sorry" was often found in responses to issues of unpleasantness happening by chance that were not caused by the flight attendants. Since such incidents were outside of their duty or responsibility, shortened forms like "sorry" may only imply "regret" for mishap or inconvenience. This confirmed Arizavi and Choubsaz's (2018) claim that when a situation concerning emotion affected interaction, "I'm sorry" which signaled more formality than the shorter form "sorry" was preferred.

Additionally, in some cases, Thai flight attendants substituted the term "sorry" with "excuse me" to imply less concern for being culpable than saying "sorry." It could be seen from the findings that "excuse me" was repeatedly uttered as a pattern discernable in the situations of in-flight safety and security. This has been seen in Barr and Gillberry's (2010) assertion of the similar usage of the expressions among the same age of Canadians to express less concern for apologizing and accepting the responsibility.

Exploring gender differences in refusal strategies

Table 5

Comparison of the Three Most Common Refusal Strategies Used by Gender Differences

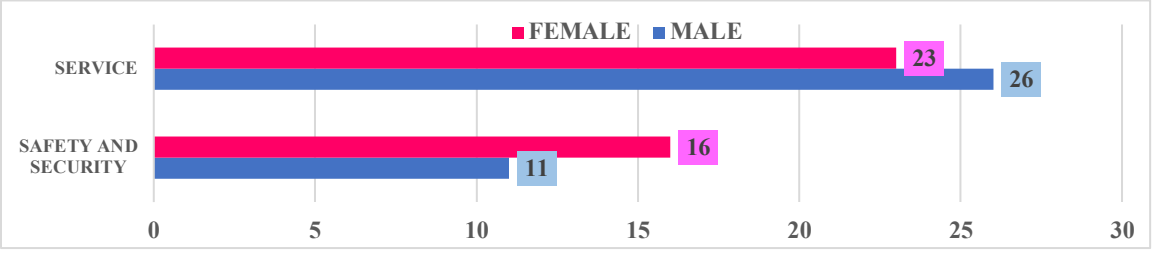
REFUSAL STRATEGIES	MALE (COUNTS)	FEMALE (COUNTS)
Excuse, reason, explanation	56	70
Statement of regret	37	39
Negative willingness/ability	15	26
TOTAL	**175**	**215**

As shown in Table 5, both male and female Thai flight attendants had the same order of preference when it came to refusal strategy, with the indirect refusal strategy of "excuse, reason, and explanation" as the most frequently used strategy, followed by "statement of regret", and direct refusal strategy of "negative ability". The convergence in terms of preferred refusal strategies used by both genders of Thai flight attendants may have been relevant to how they were trained to perform their in-flight duties, including regulations and procedures that had to be followed in the guidelines for in-flight services. Also, the way these three strategies were used with "sorry" as structural components evidently supported the similarity of favorite strategies used in refusals by male and female Thai flight attendants in the context. Male as well as female flight attendants uttered "sorry" combined with "excuse, reason, and explanation," "statement of regret," and "negative ability" when refusing.

However, it can be seen in Table 5, female flight attendants used more refusal strategies than their male counterparts (215 vs. 175). Indeed, female flight attendants used each of the three refusal strategies more than male flight attendants. This could be because female flight attendants were more aware of the importance of politeness and face-threateningness in refusals, particularly in this service business context in which politeness was significantly important. According to Jones (2017), women in general tend to be more polite and feel inferior to men in some societies. They tend to care more about social involvement and connection. Moreover, refusing in this context could be considered as asking for cooperation or agreement, such as compliance to safety and security. The reason why Thai female flight attendants used relatively more strategies may have been because they felt that they were asking for passengers' cooperation, so direct refusal was not an option because this would be a face-threatening act (Beebe et al., 1990).

Figure 3

Frequency of "Sorry" Used by Genders in Situations Concerning In-flight Safety and Security and Service



In terms of frequency, Figure 3 shows some differences in the use of "sorry" between male and female flight attendants. It was found that both male and female flight attendants said "sorry" rather frequently when refusing passengers' requests concerning in-flight services. However, disparity could be observed as female flight attendants used "sorry" more in refusing requests concerning in-flight safety and security, while their male counterparts used it more in refusing requests for in-flight services.

As the requests in situations concerning safety and security of flights conveyed a high degree of imposition, such as getting out of the seat when the seatbelt sign was on and smoking in the cabin was not allowed, and those involving in-flight services also had service limitations and restrictions, both male and female flight attendants had to adhere to service procedures and regulations used as guidelines for in-flight services and performance, including refusing. Accordingly, this signified that obligation and situational contexts affected refusal strategies and the use of "sorry" in refusals in the context. Also, the necessity that Thai flight attendants should adhere to the standard service operations of the airline could be used to explain the similarity of speech act behavior in refusals for both genders of Thai flight attendants.

Discussion

Pragmatic transfer

The use of "sorry" with indirect refusal strategies by Thai flight attendants may have been inspired by the Thai values of being thoughtful, caring, and hospitable and Thai characteristics of being humble and sensitive to an individual with a higher status. This finding is consistent with Wannaruk (2008) and Weerachairattana and Wannaruk (2016) who have reported that Asian people often use indirect strategies to save an interlocutors' face when refusing in relation to the interlocutors' status and the nature of the situation. By the same token, Chinese learners of English prefer to use indirect rejection more than Americans (Jiang, 2015). The way Thai flight attendants showed their care and consideration for passengers by refusing through the use of indirect refusal strategies in the context displayed pragmatic transfer influenced by L1 culture as being attentive and considerate to the interlocutors, which was regarded as L1 culture of Thais in Weerachairattana and Wannaruk's (2016). In the same manner that Thai flight attendants performed a delicate negotiation in rejecting passengers' requests by creating support and attempting to avoid causing embarrassment to passengers reflected the Thai values of being caring and considerate to interlocutors. The Thai flight attendants in this study expressed consideration and sensitivity to interlocutors which is Thai culture when refusing. Therefore, cultural transfer was evidenced when Thai flight attendants performed the act of refusals as Beebe et al. (1990) stated that refusals concern sensitive negotiation among individuals, and non-native English speakers tend to become involved with social and cultural transfer when performing the act of refusal. Such findings also confirm Weerachairattana and Wannaruk's (2016) findings that Thai values influence refusals in English.

Moreover, the fact that flight attendants may have had different levels of English language proficiency could explain why different refusal strategies were used in the context. On a basis of English proficiency, flight attendants with a higher level of English proficiency may use the strategies similar to those used by native English

speakers, while those with a lower level of proficiency were more likely to adopt Thai pragmatic norms when producing refusals. This study's findings concur with previous studies which have found that English proficiency influences pragmatic transfer (Wannaruk, 2008; Wattananukij & Pongpairoj, 2022)

"Sorry" is bound to structural components

Thai flight attendants said "sorry" with the three most frequently used refusal strategies, "excuse, reason and explanation," "statement of regret," and "negative ability." Strategies played an important role in the service context. This agreed with Tanck's (2002) findings that non-native speakers oftentimes perform the act of refusal with speech act sets to imply indirect refusal strategies, and both non-native English speakers and native speakers conduct direct refusals with a low frequency.

Regarding the content and co-text of the term "sorry" as structural components, "sorry" was used with indirect refusal strategies, such as offering alternatives, "promise of future acceptance," an adjunct of "asking for permission," and the refusal strategy of "excuse, reason, and explanation" in particular. It is with regard to the fact that indirect refusal strategies are used to show politeness in refusals according to Al-Eryani (2007), Beebe et al. (1990), Saengwattanakul (2014), and Thaitae and Lerlertyuthithum (2011), and "explanation" is considered a politeness strategy (Hassani et al., 2011). Accordingly, Thai flight attendants applied "sorry" with indirect refusal strategies in passengers' refusals to promote polite behavior. This indicated that politeness was necessary and required in the context of the service provision profession.

In this study, it was evident that Thai flight attendants showed similarity to English native speakers' rejection in some respects, particularly the way they used "sorry" to express regret by providing reasons and explanations in refusing passengers. As pointed out by Beebe et al. (1990) and Weerachairattana and Wannaruk (2016), "sorry" was used with an excuse, reason, and explanation as a structural component that functioned to express regret. This could be

because Thai flight attendants had opportunities to be exposed to English native speakers who were their customers in their profession, and that offering choices, especially giving a reason or an explanation when refusing a request in a service context may have made the refusees feel that they were still taken care of and paid attention to. Likewise, the way they often gave a specific explanation by relying on safety regulations and service limitations as grounds for refusals was much like the way Americans made specific details as an explanation when they refused in the study of Beebe et al. (1990). Similarly, Tanck (2002) proved that a necessary excuse was always specified in American culture, while Japanese and Chinese speakers of English refused more indirectly and vaguely.

In addition, the airline's rules and regulations used as an explanation when refusing a passenger's request reflected an imposition and obligation of the situational contexts restrained by specific rules and inviolable safety regulations. Thus, Thai flight attendants used "sorry" less in refusing passengers' requests conveying a high degree of imposition or obligation, such as requests that were against in-flight safety and security. This displayed the importance of the imposition and situational context that had an influence on the use of "sorry" in refusals. Indeed, this concurs with Thaitae and Lerlertyuthithum (2011) who found that airline ground personnel were more likely to use flight safety reasons when having to refuse customers because of importance and obligation of flight safety.

Furthermore, "sorry" was used by Thai flight attendants to begin their refusals followed by refusal strategies and was employed to signal refusals in contexts such as *"Sorry, the windows seats are all occupied but if you want to look outside the window, we have the window at the exit door that you can come to during the flight."* The term, thus, functioned as "a marker for refusal" most frequently used preceding a "that-clause".

Gender difference and refusal strategies

According to gender perspectives, the findings revealed insignificant difference in terms of refusal strategies used by male and female flight attendants in the context. The way Thai flight attendants favored the same three refusal strategies and used "sorry" more in refusals for requests concerning general in-flight services may have been due to the nature of in-flight services. Thai flight attendants serving as representatives of their airline had to comply with its rules and aviation regulations. If organizational culture plays a more important role in the selection of discourse, the gender factor may not have much bearing on language usage in this context.

However, the study found that there were differences in the numbers of strategies employed by male and female flight attendants. Female flight attendants appeared to use more strategies than their male counterparts. Since saying "sorry" and using indirect refusal strategies are expressions of politeness and regret, it can be argued that Thai female flight attendants used more indirect strategies and said "sorry" more often because they were more sensitive to possible face-threatening situations and felt the need to keep the degree of face threat to a minimum. This concurs with Jones (2017), who found that females in general tend to be more polite and feel inferior to males in some societies, and that females tend to be more concerned with social involvement and connection. Likewise, it has been attested that females are likely to consider supportiveness, mutual agreement, and interdependencies to be important (Holmes, 1995 as cited in Thongtong & Srioutai, 2019). Therefore, both this study and its antecedents concur that in professional contexts, gender can be considered a significant factor that affects the use of "sorry" in refusals.

Conclusion

"Sorry" used by Thai flight attendants when refusing passengers' requests conveyed intended meanings, and its usage bore different functions and implications in this particular context. Not only can "sorry" be an alternative for apologizing in an apology (Jones, 2017) but it can also be used in refusals. Moreover, apart from being used to

express regret, and politeness in refusals by occurring with indirect refusal strategies as structural components, the term "sorry" noticeably functions as "a marker for refusals," "expressing an excuse or a reason," and "introducing a reason or showing sympathy," as attested by its construction used in refusals. The term helps promote polite behavior in the act of refusal in this professional context as well. This study demonstrated that the use of "sorry" in refusals by Thai flight attendants was influenced by Thai cultural values and characteristics of being caring, modest, and sensitive to an interlocutor's status by means of frequent use of "sorry" with indirect refusal strategies.

However, the use of the term in this context was not much inspired by gender differences of Thai flight attendants. Both male and female Thai flight attendants favored to use "sorry" with the same refusal strategies which illustrates how organizational culture has an important role in the use of "sorry" in the context of in-flight services.

In the context of in-flight services in the present study, "sorry" served to reinforce the intended meaning or seriousness of the act of refusal. The way in which "sorry" was repeatedly employed manifested that the use of "sorry" in refusals by Thai flight attendants was a language phenomenon that structurally happened in language use. Therefore, understanding of the use of "sorry" in daily communication is important and needed in social interaction and professional contexts, especially in an intercultural communication context in which there are cultural and linguistic differences in the use of language among speakers of English with different mother tongues.

Limitations

Although DCT is helpful to control contextual factors (O'Keeffe et al., 2020), actual responses and interlocutors' naturalistic interactions in context could not be investigated, including non-verbal practices implying refusals. Moreover, more diverse findings on the use of "sorry" in refusals may have been obtained if social status in the study was not only established as various classes of passengers and flight attendants.

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