

A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE SPEECH ACT OF REFUSAL STRATEGIES BY
INDONESIAN EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract

This study is conducted to investigate the speech act of refusing made by Indonesian EFL learners based on refusal taxonomy by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990). The participants of this study were 20 EFL learners of first year students in Engineering Education Faculty at one State University in Bandung. The EFL learners consist of 10 males and 10 females who were asked to respond in English to six different situations. Each situation carried out the speech act of refusal. The data were collected through a Discourse Completion Test (DCT). The data was analyzed to draw out some acts such as request, invitations, offers, and suggestions. The result shows that in the situation given, the refusal strategies commonly used were expression of regret. The second strategies frequently uttered were the expression of excuse, and then followed by expression of negative willingness and expression of positive opinions. A refusal strategy can be used in an utterance or some refusal strategies are used at the same time dealing with face threatening-acts.

Keywords: *Speech act of refusal, EFL Learner, Strategies in refusing, Face-threatening Acts*

INTRODUCTION

Speech act, the thesis of this study, has led a lot of research which investigated interlanguage pragmatics. The research investigated on some acts of speech acts, including thanking, apologizing, complaining, and refusing. Concerning on this, this study attempts to conduct a pragmatic analysis on one of the acts of speech acts, which is refusal strategy. The basic idea of this study is regarding to some works on refusal strategies have been carried out to investigate the strategies of refusing in different cultures and the effect of cross-cultural differences. It can be seen in Genc & Tekyildiz (2009), Al-Eryani (2006), Phuong (2006), Al-Khatani (2005), Aziz (2000).

With regard to the refusal strategies discussed above, it has been known every culture has its own strategies in making utterances of refusing. In it, the refusal strategies applied by the speaker tends to avoid threatening act, in this case Face Threatening acts (FTA). In this study, the EFL learners who are from different area may possess the appropriate contextual use of the particular language's linguistic resources. In line with this, tertiary EFL learners who learn English at the advanced level of grammar and vocabulary of a foreign language may lack pragmatic competence (Al-Eryani, 2007). In order to be able to use a target language appropriately in terms of pragmatic competence, furthermore, Al-Eryani (2007) argued that foreign language learners should employ a variety of speech acts including requests, apologies, complaints and refusals. However, it is not only simply to use speech acts appropriately in a communication context with certain situation, but also necessary to use indirect speech acts where a speaker means more than or something other than what he or she says (Yule, 1996). For instance, a speaker may utter the sentence —It is hot in here and it means not only as a statement but also as a request to turn on the air conditioner and or to open the window (Grundy, 2008).

Concerning the essential of conducting research of refusal strategies in EFL context, thus this study attempts to investigate the refusal strategies employed by Indonesian EFL learners. This study is also intended to compare between males' and females' strategies in refusing a request, offer, invitation, and suggestion. Due to this reason, by adapting the use of semantic formula in the refusals style, this study is aimed to address the following question, which are: (1) what are the refusal strategies used by Indonesian EFL Learners both males and females?; and (2) what are the refusal strategies which are frequently used situations in which refusal is occurred. Moreover,

this study also examined the refusal strategies that can be employed to react to various refusal situations in Indonesian culture and categorized situations of refusal according to the initiating acts of refusal.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Notion of Speech Act

The concept of speech act is used as a unit of speaking and performs different functions in communication and it is generally defined as actions performed via utterances (Grundy, 2008; Huang, 2007; Cruse, 2000; Yule, 1996; Leech, Thomas, 1995; 1983; Levinson, 1983). This speech acts consist of thanking, apologizing, complaining, and refusing strategies. In sum, when people making apologies, making requests, expressing gratitude and making refusals by using utterances, they perform speech acts.

The study of speech acts comes from Austin's work, which proposes that a single speech act actually contains three separates but related speech acts: locutionary acts, illocutionary acts, and perlocutionary acts. Whenever a speaker produces an utterance, they perform a locutionary act (Grundy, 2008; Huang, 2007; Cruse, 2000; Yule, 1996; Thomas, 1995; Leech, 1983; Levinson, 1983). This is simply the act of producing a linguistically well-formed, and thus meaningful, expression. As matter of fact, it devotes to communicate people sometimes express propositions with a particular illocutionary force. When a speaker says "Could you please pass the salt?", he/she does not only utter the sentence as a statement, but he/she also expects the listener to pass him/her the salt. This kind of act via utterances which people produce with communicative purpose in mind is generally known as an illocutionary act (Cruse, 2000; Grundy, 2008; Huang, 2007; Leech, 1983; Levinson, 1983; Thomas, 1995; Yule, 1996).

The second term is illocutionary act. It is the function of the utterance that the speaker has in mind, for example, the communicative purpose that is intended or achieved by the utterance (Cruse, 2000; Grundy, 2008; Huang, 2007; Leech, 1983; Levinson, 1983; Thomas, 1995; Yule, 1996). In it, an utterance, such as "It is hot in here", can have the illocutionary force of a statement, an offer, an explanation, or a request. It might be uttered by someone who is experiencing hot in a room to just comment on the condition. It can also be uttered by a person who intends to turn on the air conditioner so that everyone in the room can feel a bit cool with the air conditioner.

Furthermore, having said an utterance, it might have an effect when a speaker utters that statement (Yule, 1996: 49). It is called Perlocutionary acts. For instance, when saying "Could you please pass me the salt?", the speaker wishes the act of passing the salt to be performed: This is its perlocutionary force. The perlocutionary act refers to the hearer's recognition of and response to the illocutionary act (that is, the hearer may feel amused, annoyed, as a consequence of the speaker's utterance).

To sum up, among the three acts, the illocutionary act is regarded as the most important, as it is actually what the speaker wants to achieve through the action of uttering the sentence. It is consistent with Yule's claim that regardless the types of speech acts, the most typical one is illocutionary force: "Indeed, the term speech act is generally interpreted quite narrowly to mean only the illocutionary force of an utterance"

Moreover, to follow Searle's proposition as cited in Yule (1996), the notion of speech acts in this study have been classified from the five-way classification of illocutionary acts, including: *representatives*, *directives commissives*, *expressive*, and *declarations*.

The first is *representatives*. These speech acts constitute assertions carrying true or false values (e.g. statements). Then, *directives*, in these speech acts, there is an effort on the part of the speaker to have the hearer do something (e.g. request, advice). The third is *commissives*: speech acts of this kind create an obligation on the part of the speaker; that is, they commit the speaker to doing something (e.g. promises). Then, *expressive*: these speech acts express an attitude or an inner state of the speaker which says nothing about the world (e.g. apologies, congratulations, compliments). And the last is *declarations*. These speech acts in which declarative statements are successfully performed and no psychological state is expressed (e.g. an excommunication). These notions have contributed to the understanding of refusals of requests.

Speech Act of Refusal

The concept of speech act of refusal used in this study has been drawn from the classification of refusal strategies proposed by Beebe & Takahashi (1990, pp. 72-73 as cited in Phuong, 2006). These literatures explain that a speaker directly or indirectly reject to a request or invitation when he/she employs speech act of refusal. While, due to the listener/requester/inviter, refusal has a face-threatening act, because it is opposite with his/her expectations, and is often realized through indirect strategies. Therefore, it might the act of refusing itself is potentially become a problem in communication exchanges. In relation with this, refusal takes role as one of the central issues of communication, the basic idea is refusal may become the potential problems for miscommunication through misinterpreted refusals (Al-Eryani, 2007; Phuong, 2006; Genc & Tekyildiz, 2009). It can be inferred the perception that by saying something, we actually do something.

Classification of Refusals

Certain classification of refusal strategies are featured in speech acts of refusing. There are three classification of refusal strategies proposed by Beebe & Takahashi (1990, pp. 72-73 as cited in Phuong, 2006). Their classification comprises of direct strategies, indirect strategies and adjuncts to refusals.

The first category of refusal strategies is *direct strategies*. It covers two strategies; a. Performative (e.g., "I refuse"), and b. Nonperformative statement, such as "No" and Negative willingness/ability ("I can't", "I won't", "I don't think so").

Meanwhile, the indirect strategies are classified into ten categories. These include the following:

1. Statement of regret; for instance "I'm sorry...", "I feel terrible..."),
2. Wish; e.g. "I wish I could help you..."),
3. Excuse, reason, explanation; e.g. "My children will be home that night"; "I have a headache"),
4. Statement of alternative I can do X instead of Y; e.g., "I'd rather do..." "I'd prefer" and why don't you do X instead of Y; e.g., "Why don't you ask someone else?"),
5. Set condition for future or past acceptance; e.g., "If you had asked me earlier, I would have..."),
6. Promise of future acceptance; e.g., "I'll do it next time", "I promise I'll..." or "Next time I'll..." using "will" of promise or "promise",
7. Statement of principle; e.g. "I never do business with friends",
8. Statement of philosophy; e.g., "One can't be too careful",
9. Attempt to dissuade interlocutor,
10. Threat or statement of negative consequences to the requester; e.g., "I won't be any fun tonight".

The other categories is the adjuncts to refusals which consists of some categories such as (1) statement of positive opinions/feeling or agreement ("That's a good idea..."; "I'd love to..."), (2) statement of empathy (e.g., "I realize you are in a difficult situation"), (3) pause filter (e.g., "uhh"; "well"; "uhm"), and (4) Gratitude/appreciation.

Face-threatening Act

It is stated before in section 2.2 that the act of refusing is potentially become a problem in communication. Uttering a refusal may affect on an act that threatens the face of a hearer in which it involved a long negotiated sequence and the risk of offending one's interlocutor and sensitive to other sociolinguistic variables such as status of the interlocutor (Beebe et al., 1990 as cited in Aziz, 2006: xiii).

Refusals, as all the other speech acts, occur in all languages even each culture refuse in different way. In daily communication, people may give refusal as a threat to another individual's self-image, it given the possibility that some action might be interpreted as a threat to another's face or create a "face-threatening act" (FTA). In result, these acts delay the freedom of actions (negative face), and the wish that one's wants be desired by others (positive face) – by either the speaker, or the addressee, or both (Yule, 1996: 61). Moreover, requests potentially threaten the addressee's face because they may restrict the addressee's freedom to act according to his/her will (Holtgraves 2002, as cited in Phuong, 2006).

Refusals, on the other hand, may threaten the addressee's positive face because they may imply that what he/she says is not favored by the speaker. In an attempt to avoid FTAs, interlocutors use specific strategies to minimize the threat according to a rational assessment of the face risk to participants. Refusals are realized by means of both direct and mostly indirect strategies the use of which depends on some other sociolinguistic variables such as status of the interlocutor (e.g. high, equal or low status) and the form and the content of the refusals such as refusing invitation, request, offer or suggestion (Genc & Tekyildiz: 2009).

METHOD OF INVESTIGATION

Participants

The participants of this study were 20 EFL learners of first year students in Engineering Education Faculty at one State University in Bandung. They are divided into two groups: male and female.

Data Collection Technique

The data of this study was obtained from a written questionnaire. The written questionnaire consists of six situations. This questionnaire adopted the Discourse Analysis Test (DCT) (cited in Aziz, 2006). This test was originally designed by Blum-Kulka in 1982 and has been widely used since then in collecting data on Speech Acts Realization Project (SARP) both within and across language groups.

The questionnaire used in this investigation involves six written situations. The situations on refusal were categorized into four categories: refusals to (1) request, (2) invitations, (3) offers, and (4) suggestions. Besides that, the written situations were grouped into four groups: two request, two invitations, one offer and one suggestion. Each situation could only be answered by a refusal. In each case, the questionnaire was designed so that one refusal will be made to someone of higher status, lower status, or a status equal.

Procedure

Due to systematic of this study, this study employed three moves of research procedure. For the first stage, all participants were asked to fill out a Discourse Completion Test (DCT). It was a form of questionnaire depicting some natural situations to which the respondents were expected to respond making refusals. Particularly, it consisted of a brief description of situation which clearly identifies the setting, the social distance between participants, and their relative status. Then, participants were asked to provide their response in the blank space provided as they were the person who were depicted exist in certain situation.

Data Analyses

Data analyses in this study were conducted after the data collection. The data from DCT were examined to analyse on each response. Employing DCT usage in this study is effective to creating an initial classification of semantic formulas that will occur in natural speech (Beebe and Cummings: 1985 as cited in Aziz: 2006). The semantic formula used in the analyses is adapted from Beebe, Takahashi, & Ullis-Weltz (1990). For example, if a respondent refused an offer by saying "I'm sorry, I can't". This sort of refusal is coded as: expression of regret, excuse, or offer of alternative (Beebe, Takahashi, & Ullis-Weltz: 1990 as cited in Al-Eryani: 2006). Then, the data were coded in the range order of semantic formulas used in each refusal in a form of table. For example, [expression of regret] was first, [excuse] in the second position and [alternative] in the third position (see Appendix C). The total amounts of semantic formula derived from any kinds of expressions used for each situation which was obtained for each situation and listed them. Finally, the similarities between males and females responses were counted and analyzed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Having established the concept of speech acts of refusal strategies and explained the methods selected for this study, this section turns to the data presentations and discussion about the result of this study.

Table 1-Refusal of Invitation in ‘lunch at fast food restaurant’ situation
Refusal status = higher Item #1

| Group | Order of Semantic Formulas | | | |
|--------|---|--|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Male | Agreement (4) No (3) Regret (2) Wish (1) | Explanation (2) Appreciation (2) Reason (1) Statement of principle (1) Threat (1) Set of condition for future (1) Promise of future acceptance (1) Self defense (1) | | |
| Female | Self defense (1) Pause filler (1) Agreement (4) Regret (1) Appreciation (1) Promise of future acceptance (1) | Reason (1) Promise of future acceptance (3) Negative Willingness (1) Agreement (1) Regret (1) | Self defense (2) Promise of future acceptance (1) Explanation (1) | |

Table 1 show that both of the group mostly used agreement in their refusals of requests. In line with this, Beebe & Takahashi (1990) categorize agreement as one of the adjunct to refusals which employs indirectness. However, it can be seen from responses given by the male and female respondents such as “yes” and “ok” (represented by male respondent 1, 4, 8, 9). In sum, refusal of request in ‘request for remedial test’ situation has shown similar form. This situation may be influenced by attitude of the speaker; in this case, the speaker is a lecturer. It is in line with Thomas proposition that someone employs indirectness because people may use indirectness regard for students’ ‘face’ (Huang, 2007:115; Thomas, 1995: 143).

Table 2-Refusal of Invitation in ‘lunch at fast food restaurant’ situation
Refusal status = equal Item #2

| Group | Order of Semantic Formulas | | | |
|--------|--|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Male | Regret (7) Appreciation (2) No (1) | Negative willingness (8) Explanation (1) | | |
| Female | Pause filler (2) No (3) Regret (5) | Regret (1) Appreciation (2) Negative willingness (5) Alternative (1) | Negative willingness (3) Reason (2) Self defense (1) Pause filler (1) Explanation (2) | Explanation (1) Negative willingness (1) |

According to table 2, the form of regret is frequently uttered by the respondents. Both male and female group use similar strategies such as regret and negative willingness to refuse an invitation. Meanwhile, female group tends to utter longer sentences than male group which presents indirectness. It is in line with Mizokami’s (in online journal 2011) work that female speakers use more indirect speech than males.

In this situation, males and females mostly used regret by saying “I’m sorry” and they extended their utterance by saying “I don’t like...” to express negative willingness.

Table 3-Refusal of Invitation 'wedding party' situation
Refusal status = lower Item #3

| Group | Order of Semantic Formulas | | | |
|--------|---|---|---|-----------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Male | Regret (4) No (1) Pause filler (1) Agreement (1) Positive opinion (1) | Negative willingness (3) Explanation (5) Promise (1) | Reason (2) | |
| Female | Explanation (1) Regret (6) Agreement (2) Negative willingness (1) | Self defense (3) Reason (2) Wish (1) Explanation (3) Regret (1) | Explanation (1) Negative willingness (1) | Explanation (1) |

According to the results in table 3, males and females tended to be more similar by using the expression of regret in the first position. In addition, to show expression of regret, most of respondents extended their utterances through giving reason. The reason deals with the desire of speaker not to hurt hearer's feeling (Thomas, 1995: 145).

Table 4-Refusal of Offer in 'offering kitchen utensils' situation
Refusal status = higher Item #4

| Group | Order of Semantic Formulas | | | |
|--------|--|--|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Male | No (2) Regret (5) Positive opinion (2) | Negative willingness (4) Explanation (3) | | |
| Female | Regret (6) Agreement (1) Explanation (1) Appreciation (1) Pause filler (1) | Pause filler (3) Positive Opinion (1) Promise (1) Explanation (3) Reason (1) Regret (1) | Negative willingness (3) Explanation (2) | Alternative (1) Negative willingness (1) |

Concerning the data revealed in table 4, males show that they typically used indirect refusal strategies by saying expression of regret such as "I'm sorry". It takes place as first position in the semantic formula. Then, it is continued with expression of negative willingness by saying "I don't..." and "I can't..."

Having the same situation like males, the female group response similarly in the first position. On the other hand, females merely use explanation to support their refusal of an offer.

Table 5-Refusal of Offer in 'offering sea food' situation
Refusal status = equal Item #5

| Group | Order of Semantic Formulas | | | | |
|--------|---|---|-------------------------------|---|------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Male | Reason (2) No (1) Regret (3) Agreement (1) Positive Opinion (1) Pause filler (1) Appreciation (1) | Appreciation (2) Negative willingness (2) Explanation (3) | Reason (3) Regret (1) | Promise (1) Negative willingness (1) | Reason (1) |
| Female | Regret (5) Reason (2) Explanation (1) Agreement (1) Pause filler (1) | Explanation (5) Reason (1) Negative willingness (1) Regret (1) | Reason (1) Explanation (1) | Appreciation (1) | |

Having equal status between speaker and hearer, the response of males and females has similar refusal expression. The expression of refusal is applied through regret. The expression can be seen from the use of “sorry” and “I’m sorry”. In Indonesian culture, it is believed that we must appreciate someone’s effort; in this case, males and females are respect to their friend who has cooked special food for them.

Arising out of this, one of the respondents acts differently. He uses longer sentences in refusing his friend’s offering. In this situation he uses indirectness of refusal in order to express negative politeness. It indicates that the speaker attempts to establish solidarity with the addressee (Brown & Levinson, 1987:101-29).

Table 6-Refusal of Suggestion in ‘go to sleep before midnight’ situation
Refusal status = lower Item #6

| Group | Order of Semantic Formulas | | | |
|--------|----------------------------|--------------------------|------------------|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Male | Agreement (2) | Explanation (2) | Explanation (1) | |
| | Regret (6) | Reason (1) | Reason (4) | |
| | Negative willingness (1) | Negative willingness (3) | | |
| | No (1) | Self defense (2) | | |
| Female | Regret (3) | Self defense (1) | Self defense (1) | |
| | No (1) | Regret (1) | Explanation (1) | |
| | Self defense (1) | Explanation (3) | Reason (1) | |
| | Explanation (1) | Reason (3) | | |
| | Negative willingness (3) | Negative willingness (1) | | |
| | Pause filler (1) | | | |

From the table 6, it shows those males and females groups employ expression of regret in coping with refusal of suggestion because the status of hearer is higher than the speaker. Males using regret in the first position. Then, they extend their talks with negative willingness and explanation in the second and third position. On the contrary, females use explanation or reason in the second position. In this case, the expression of regret applied by males and females through some statement which include “Sorry”, ”I’m sorry”, and “I can’t”.

Discussion of the Results

Having presented data in section 4.1, this study revealed that there were two kinds of responses given by males and females EFL Indonesian students. It would potentially be uttered when they were faced with a situation in coping with giving refusals. The responses given were classified as direct and indirect refusals. The direct strategy employed by saying “No”, “I don’t ...”, or “I can’t ...” presented the using of one of the various indirect strategies of refusing.

Therefore, the data analysis has shown that males and females tend to use indirect strategies. The frequency of the use of indirect strategies is mostly appeared in the first column in the semantic formulas responses. Meanwhile, females showed that they mostly applied indirect strategies such as regret, negative willingness and explanation or reason. Regret and negative willingness appeared as the greater strategies used by females in refusing a request, invitation, offer, and suggestion. They tend to use some expressions such as “sorry” or “I’m sorry”. In addition, they also tend to use negative willingness in the second position of the semantic formula such as “I don’t”, and “I can’t”. These greater expressions in the second position are mostly applied to emphasize the refusal statement. In line with this phenomenon, it is widely believed that women were more polite than men (Lakoff, 1975 as cited in Aziz, 2000).

Concerning the status discussed in section 1, it has revealed that having older age or higher status influenced the refusal strategies applied by refuser. Both male and female refuser have mostly used ‘expression of regret’ to show their feeling of regret in refusing something. In addition, they attempted to avoid the use of direct refusal and used excuse to express refusal.

Regarding the data analyzed, both males and females employed the same refusal strategies. They merely performed the refusal strategies through expressions regret and negative willingness. In relation to this, as writers concern, males and females were not significantly different in employing refusal strategies.

CONCLUSION

This study has investigated the refusal strategies uttered by 20 EFL learners of first year students in Engineering Education Faculty at one State University in Bandung. Besides, it analyzed the expression that respondents employed with the distinction between males and females. Based on the discussions in Findings Section, the respondents showed their performance in target language which is highly assumed to share some aspects such as: native language and target language, norms of appropriateness and politeness. It is occurred in their refusal strategies according to their social status in the situation, higher, equal, or lower and according to the situation itself, a request, an offer, an invitation or a suggestion. Concerning on the differences of gender, males and females act similarly when refusing some condition such as: refusal of requests with the higher status of refuser, refusal of invitation with the lower status of refuser, and refusal of offer with the equal status of refuser.

From this study, it appeared that both males and females are aware with the appropriate contextual use of the particular language's linguistic resources. Regarding the pragmatic competence given, most of them have shown their respect to person in higher status and in good behave dealing with offering something. In addition, this study concluded that males tend to use direct strategies by saying "No" rather than females who are adopting politeness when they intermingled with certain condition such as refusing an offer from a salesman. Males used direct refusal style in the first position when they are in higher status. However, in general, the use of direct refusal expressions in the first position of semantic formula followed by statements of excuse in the second position and third position of the order of refusal semantic formula.

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