

Refusal Strategies Used by Males and Females in Najdi Arabic

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Abstract:

This paper investigated the refusal strategies used by males and females in Najdi Arabic. It took into consideration the difference between males and females when performing the speech act of refusal. Understanding the usage of refusal strategies in a specific speech community helps in developing effective communication and avoiding misunderstanding. The data-collection tool was a discourse completion test (DCT). It contained four situations: two requests, an invitation, and an offer. The analysis revealed fourteen refusal strategies. There were two direct refusal strategies of the non-performative category: explicit 'No' and expressing inability or unwillingness. As for the indirect strategies, eight strategies appeared in the data, such as giving an excuse or an explanation, giving an apology, and giving indefinite answers. Besides, there were three adjunct strategies: gratitude, emphasis, and statements of positive opinions. The analysis showed that the two genders had used direct refusal equally; nevertheless, female participants used adjunct strategies more than males in general.

Keywords: Speech Act, Refusal Strategies, Gender, Pragmatics

Introduction

Language serves as a tool for creating interactions between people. The choice of linguistic expressions is affected by different factors, such as the specific social norms, which differ according to each society and culture. Each speech community usually has its own conventions and expectations of the speech conversations between interlocutors. Various pragmatic studies have been conducted on speech acts based on Austin's theory (1962), in which he said that some utterances function as acts, not as information. Requesting, refusing, apologizing, and promising are all examples of speech acts. Each utterance has three aspects which are the uttered words themselves or 'locution', the force of uttering these words or 'illocution', and the effect of this force on the hearer or 'perlocution' (Austin, 1962, as cited in Thomas, 2013).

Refusal is a response to an initiated act such as a request, suggestion, offer, or invitation. It is a negative response in which the participant refuses to perform an act. Brown and Levinson (1987) stated that refusals are face-threatening acts and that they are commissive speech acts in which the refuser is committed to refuse to perform. Al-Kahtani (2005) indicated that "how one says 'no' is more important in many societies than the answer itself" (p. 3). Beeb et al. (1990) classified refusal strategies into three basic categories: direct refusal strategies, indirect refusal strategies, and adjuncts strategies. The direct refusals can be performative in which the refuser uses the speech act explicitly, such as saying 'I refuse'. There is also the non-performative direct refusal in which the refuser expresses negative ability or unwillingness. On the other hand, the indirect refusal has various subcategorizations, such as regret and reasoning. As for the adjunct

strategies, they are usually attached to the refusal, such as expressing gratitude and appreciation. Various aspects may affect the chosen strategy. According to Shareef et al. (2018), the initiated act plays a role in the content and form of the refusal strategy.

The current paper is about refusal strategies in Najdi Arabic (NA). Becoming aware of the appropriate forms of refusal strategies and their functions helps the speaker to interact appropriately with people of a specific speech community since each community has its own culture and linguistic values. The study attempts to investigate the refusal strategies used by males and females in the NA dialect: whether males and females differ in their usage of such strategies. The paper seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the refusal strategies used by NA speakers?
2. Are there any differences between males and females when using refusal strategies?

The first question in (1) aims to examine and present refusal strategies that are used by NA people and how they implement such strategies under the culture and tradition of NA society. The second question (2) seeks to explore the differences observed in the usage of refusal strategies between NA females and males: whether NA males tend to use specific strategies more than NA females and vice versa and if there are any differences in the way they implement such strategies.

Below in section (2) the author presents a brief review of the studies that have been conducted on refusal strategies in different languages and cultures, followed by the methodology of the study in section (3) and the data analysis section in (4). Before the conclusion section (6), a table that summarizes the strategies and an attempt to clarify the answers to the research questions appears in the results and discussion section (5).

Review of Literature

Various studies have been conducted on refusal strategies in different languages and dialects. The focus of each study differs as some studies aimed to make a comparison of refusal strategies across two or more cultures or to examine the refusal strategies of non-native speakers in their foreign or second language and if they transfer aspects of their native languages. Farenkia (2018) conducted a quantitative study of the refusal strategies used in Canadian English for invitations, offers, and requests. The indirect refusal strategies were preferred by the participants of the study as they accounted for 60% of all the refusal strategy types. The inability expression was the most common direct refusal strategy for declining an invitation or refusing a request. As for the indirect refusal strategies, giving explanations or apologizing were the two most common strategies in declining an invitation or refusing a request. Moreover, giving reasons or discussions were the two most common strategies in refusing an offer. The analysis of the strategies also showed that power distance and familiarity degree played a role in the choice of a specific strategy.

Abdul Sattar et al. (2012) investigated the way Malay university students in Malaysia refused requests in English in an academic setting. The social relationship between interlocutors was an important factor in the study. The semantic formula that was common among the Malay

students consisted of words of apology followed by an excuse or an explanation and then an alternative. For instance, the participant said, "Sorry, prof. I have the next class and I am late. Can I get another student to help you?" where the student refused the request of a person of higher status (Abdul Sattar et al., 2012, p. 76). The choice of this formula indicated an influence of the Malay culture on refusals in English.

Moreover, Wang (2019) conducted a comparative study on gender differences concerning refusal strategies among Chinese students. Many male participants preferred the direct refusal strategy, such as saying "no" directly. The direct refusal of male students accounted for 65% of all the responses. On the contrary, only 20% of the female participants used direct refusal strategies. Wang (2019) stated that the difference between males and females might be attributed to psychological differences as females are usually more careful and sensitive to the feelings of others. Moreover, social status may have a great effect on refusal strategies.

There was a study that examined the way Indonesian students refused a suggestion or an offer or declined an invitation to people with a different social status (Chojimah, 2015). The study investigated the social effects of equal statuses, from a higher to a lower status and from a lower to a higher status. Generally, the study did not show a significant difference in terms of directness or indirectness, although it did reveal that indirect refusal strategies were more dominant than direct ones among the different social statuses. The study also examined the politeness strategies and found that the most common strategy used by Indonesian students was redressive expressions such as making apologies and giving thanks. Besides this, the study also pointed to the use of verbose refusals in which students mostly used three speech acts in order to minimize an offence. However, this study aims to examine if there are any gender differences in the speech act of refusal by NA-speaking males and females. Besides, it seeks to examine the refusal strategies that are used in NA in general.

Methodology

The data-collection tool was a discourse completion test (DCT). It contained four situations: two requests, an invitation, and an offer (see appendix A). Thirty subjects answered the DCT by refusing the speech act in each situation. They were fifteen male participants and fifteen female participants. All were Qassimi people living in Al-Qassim region. Qassimi Arabic is a local dialect that is considered a variety of NA which is the dialect spoken in Najd region in Said Arabia. Most participants were 18–35 years old. The data were coded and analyzed according to the Beeb et al. (1990) taxonomy of refusal strategies. The taxonomy has three basic categorizations for refusal strategies: direct, indirect, and adjunct. Various subcategorizations go under the basic categories. The data were first analyzed into the basic categories and then analyzed into the subcategorizations.

Data Analysis

All the collected data were analyzed and classified according to Beeb et al. (1990) classifications. This section shows the main classifications of the strategies and under each main

type appears its subclassifications. One or two examples are provided for each category and an attempt to discuss and explain the strategies is included.

Direct Refusal Strategies

As for the direct refusal, the data included the two following strategies:

- a. Non-performative Statement: ‘No’

(1) *la: fukran*

No Thanks

‘No, thanks.’

This is a non-performative direct refusal in which the participant explicitly said ‘*la:*’ ‘No’. It is followed by a gratitude adjunct to mitigate the direct refusal. The sequence of these two semantic formulas was common among many participants in responding to a shop employee who offered them some products (situation 1). The choice of being direct here may attribute to the social relation between the interlocutors since usually the refuser does not know the other interlocutor.

- b. Negative Willingness/Ability

(2) *ʔa:-ʕteðir ma: ʔa:-gda:r ʔa:-zi:b li-ts*

1SG-apologize NEG 1SG-able 1SG-bring for-2SG.F

‘I apologize I cannot bring it to you.’

Here, it is also a non-performative direct refusal in which the participant expressed her ‘negative ability’ by saying she cannot do what the speaker requested ‘*ma: ʔa:gda:r*’ (situation 2). The refusal is preceded by an apology strategy which may lessen the effect of the direct expression.

Indirect Refusal Strategies

The following examples of refusal strategies indicated how Najdi participants refused indirectly:

- a. Reason/Excuse/Expression

(3) *wallah ʔa:-daʕwa hu:l baʕd⁶-ah*

Swear-god the-issue similar some-3SG.OBJ

‘I swear to God, we share the same issue.’

This is an indirect refusal strategy in which the refuser gave the requester a reason implied that ‘he cannot help him’. The refuser simply indicated that he also had a similar financial problem. This reason was very common among both male and female participants in replying to a request of a relative asking to borrow some money. They tried to make the requester feels that they also not better than his/her financial situation, that is why they could not help. Emphasis strategy ‘swearing’ preceded the indirect refusal which may make it sounds more sincere (situation 4).

- b. Regret

(4) *li-l-ʔa:saf ma: ʔa:-gdar*

For-the-sorry NEG 1SG-able

‘Unfortunately, I cannot.’

The refuser expressed his regret for not being able to help the requester, and then he said that he did not have the ability to help in a direct way (situation 4). Another very common strategy in expressing regret among participants was the word ‘*maʕali:f*’ ‘sorry’. The refusers

usually used these regret strategies before the other refusal strategies, whether a direct strategy or another indirect strategy.

c. Acceptance that Functions as a Refusal: An Unspecific or Indefinite Reply

(5) *zi:n ʔa:-bfu:f*

OK 1SG-see

‘Ok, I will see.’

The utterance here did not give a clear answer to the requester (situation 2). The refuser also indicated in the test that he would later say ‘*he did not have the time*’. Another common indefinite reply was ‘*jasʕi:r xi:r*’ ‘all will be all right’. This strategy was more favored by male participants. In this situation, the requester did not know if the person will help him/her. Indefinite utterances may usually sound more like a negative answer, but sometimes the person would actually do something without saying it directly.

d. Promise of Future Acceptance

(6) *ʔalsat-ik ma: ti-tfau:it mi:r ʔini: fajita le-i: waʕad marah θani:ah ʔin-fa-llah*

Setting-2SG NEG PRS-miss but 1SG pass for-me promise time second if-willing-god

‘I cannot miss the opportunity, but I already have another commitment, next time by Allah willing.’

Here the refuser promised the inviter (situation 3) with a future acceptance, and this strategy usually appeared after all other strategies. In this example, the refuser first mentioned her positive opinion then refused the invitation by giving a reason, and lastly gave a promise with future acceptance saying ‘*marahθani:ah ʔinfallah*’.

e. Statement of an Alternative: I Can Do X Instead of Y

(7) *ʔa:llah jarzig-ak wa-llah ma maʕ-i: ha-lmablay ta-bi:n mi:t-i:n ?*

God bless-2SG Swear-God NEG have-me this-amount 2SG.F-want hundred-two

‘May Allah bless you. I do not have this amount of money. Do you want two hundred?’

The refuser stated that she can help the requester with a lesser sum of money and gave her an alternative amount (situation 4). A prayer for the requester was uttered at the beginning. A swearing preceded the reason strategy to make it more sincere, and then the alternative was given. This strategy may sound very polite, especially in the example of this situation since it gives the requester that the refuser is willing to do something for him/her.

f. Statement of a Principle

(8) *ma: ʔa:-dajjn ʔa:ħad*

NEG 1SG-lend anyone

‘I do not lend money at all.’

For refusing a request for money (situation 4), the refuser only replied by saying he did not lend money at all as a basic principle in his life. There was no other further explanation. It could be acceptable because the hearer may not take it personally. One normally respects other people’s principles.

g. Set Conditions for Future Acceptance

(9) *ʔiða: ħasʕal le-i: ʔi:-t*

If occur for-me come-1SG

‘If I can, I will come.’

The refuser in such response gave a condition and stated that if this condition was met, he/she would do or follow the initiated act. In this example, the refuser stated that if she can come, she will come (situation 3). Although, this strategy is not always expressing refusal since one can give a conditional acceptance and left the decision for the future, not really means the condition.

h. Wish

(10) *jali:t bas ma: ?a:-gdar mirtabtʿah*

Wish but NEG 1SG-able committed

‘I wish, but I cannot. I already have a prior commitment.’

The refuser wished that she could accept the invitation (situation3). After she expressed the wish strategy, she directly mentioned her inability to attend, then gave a reason for her inability. This specific reason was very common among female and male participants with the same word ‘*mirtabtʿah*’ for female participants or ‘*mirtabtʿ*’ for male participants. They choose to say only this word without any further explanation. It may sound fairly enough without an attempt to attached it with other strategies of adjuncts or more explanation because the word in itself may remove the blame from the speaker and make her/him looks like s/he does not even have her/his own choice.

Adjuncts Strategies

The data showed three types of adjuncts as follows:

a. Gratitude and Appreciation

It subcategorized into two types which are thanks and prayers. Thanks strategies were common among the refusers who usually attached it to the uttering of direct refusal strategies such as ‘*fukran*’ in example (1). Besides, prayers were very common in all types of refusals such as ‘*?a:llah jarzigak*’ as in example (7). Both are used to make the refusal more polite or lessen the negative effect on the hearer. Prayer is a new subclassification, and the data showed that it has a great value in the Najdi speech community since most of the participants used prayers when they refused. Its value comes from the religious culture. Najdi people usually use it daily in their communication and in performing other speech acts. It lessens the directness of the speech act and clearly mitigates the negative effect of the refusal.

b. Statement of a Positive Opinion

It is another type of adjuncts in which the refuser expressed his/her positive feeling or opinion such as ‘*zalsatik ma: tiffau:it*’ in example (6). The refuser wanted to lessen the effect of refusal by giving a positive statement, and then followed it by the refusal.

c. Emphasis

It is a new classification based on the data of this study. Many refusers used it before or after the utterances of refusal. The participants uttered the swearing by only saying ‘*wallah*’ as in example (3). It is a religious expression that emphasizes the sincerity of the speech. Moreover, it assumes when people use this expression, they give the hearer a great value and they do not want to leave any negative effect on the other speaker. I named this classification ‘emphasis’ because I think it is the function of swearing in these situations.

Findings

Table 1 below shows the frequency of each strategy. It presents all the strategies that were employed by male and female participants in NA in the DCT. It adequately involves the answer to the first research question (1) in addition to the qualitative analysis of the NA strategies above. The table is also followed by a brief comparison between males' and females' usage of refusal strategies in an attempt to reach an answer to the second research question (2) based on the data of the study.

Table: 1

Refusal strategies used by Najdi males and females

Strategy	Semantic formula	Female		Male	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Direct refusal	'No'	5	4.16	1	1.06
	Negative ability and willingness	8	6.66	11	11.70
	Reason-excuse-explanation	50	41.66	39	41.48
Indirect refusal	Regret	13	10.83	10	10.63
	Acceptance that functions as a refusal: Unspecific or indefinite reply	2	1.66	8	8.51
	Promise of future acceptance	3	2.5	1	1.06
	Statement of alternative: I can do X instead of Y	1	0.83	0	0
	Statement of principle	0	0	1	1.06
	Set conditions for future acceptance	1	0.83	1	1.06
Adjuncts	Wish	1	0.83	0	0
	Gratitude and Appreciation:				
	➤ Thanks	8	6.66	5	5.31
	➤ Prayers	15	12.5	5	5.31

Statement of positive opinion	5	4.16	2	2.12
Emphasis: swearing	8	6.66	10	10.63
Total	120	100	94	100

The result reveals two direct refusal strategies in addition to eight indirect refusal strategies and three adjunct strategies. Emphasis by swearing is a new classification that appears in adjunct strategies. The table shows that swearing was a highly common adjunct when NA speakers refuse an initiated speech act. Such a tendency could be considered an indication of NA society's principles since traditionally refusing requests or invitations may be considered very offensive by some NA people. Along with the high tendency to use prayers instead of thanks, swearing may reflect the effect of the religious aspect in the NA dialect.

The data shows no difference between males and females in the frequency of direct refusal strategies. This does not agree with Wang's (2019) study that found there was a significant difference between males and females as the latter were less direct than the former. Moreover, the table indicates that male participants preferred expressing their negative inability more than females. Such difference may be attributed to another difference obtained from the data where the simultaneous usage of more than two strategies was common among females. Females used more adjunct strategies which accounted for 36 frequencies while males' frequencies were 22. This may help females to explicitly say "no" since it mitigates the negative effect on the hearer. As for indirect refusal strategies, females generally used more strategies than males. Examples (6), (7), and (10) were all presented by females and clearly indicate the usage of various strategies in one response. The overall frequency of males' refusal strategies was 94 whereas females' frequency of usage was 120.

Conclusion

Refusal is a very sensitive speech act that requires consideration from a speaker to avoid an offensive response. Thus, pragmatic competence is important to facilitate successful communication and avoid misunderstanding. The NA data showed two direct refusal strategies that were used equally by male and female participants, in addition to eight indirect refusal strategies and three adjunct strategies. One new classification appeared in the data, the adjunct of emphasis. Although females did not use less direct strategies than males, they generally have used more strategies in their responses. However, indirect refusal strategies were preferred by most participants. This study may contribute to the area of research on speech acts in varieties of Arabic dialects.

Suggestions and Recommendations

More aspects, like social relations, can be taken into consideration in future research. NA has its own unique linguistic expression values that are worth further investigation.

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Discourse Completion Task

- Participant Gender: _____
 - Please consider the following situations and imagine yourself as if you were in the actual situations, then respond by only a **refusal response**. Please try to make your response as natural as possible:
1. You enter a shop in the mall and the shop's employee wants to show you some of the shop products. **Employee**: Hello! I will show you our most popular items, look at this product...
❖ **You** want to continue your shopping and **refuse** his/her offer by saying:

 2. Your friend is known to be the person who does not pay back borrowed money. One day s/he calls you while you are shopping at an electronic shop and s/he asks you to buy him/her an expensive device. **Friend**: Could you please buy this device for me?
❖ **You** do not want to buy for her/him since you know that s/he will not give your money back and **refuse** his/her request by saying:

 3. Your friend invites you to come to a party at his/her house next weekend, but you do not want to go. **Friend**: You mustn't miss my party this weekend!
❖ **You refuse** the invitation by saying:

 4. Your cousin comes to you in a family gathering. **Cousin**: I have a financial problem these days, could you please lend me 500 SR and I will return it later?
❖ **You refuse** her/his request by saying:
