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## REFUSAL STRATEGIES IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION OF NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKERS

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to outline the different strategies used in business English setting by native English speakers when realizing the speech act of refusal. The data is collected through a discourse – completion task (DCT) and the refusals of the subjects are compared with respect to the frequency of the semantic formulas. The 12 scenarios in the DCT represent requests from subjects of either equal, higher or lower status to that of the respondents.

In order to contribute to a more comprehensive classification of the refusal strategies the adjunct entries available under the taxonomy of Salazar et al. (2009) are augmented to include the entries: *Voicing fears, Warning, Wish/hope, Softeners/Address, Promises/Pay-offs/Booby prize, Unwillingness* along with the already existing adjunct options of *Positive opinion, Willingness, Gratitude, Agreement or Solidarity/empathy*.

As for the semantic formula classification entries, modifications and new ones are introduced only to the indirect formulas. The entry Reason/ explanation under the taxonomy of Salazar et al. (2009) is extended to include also Faulty features of the item/ person requested. The entry Alternative is extended to include the subcategory Redirecting to someone/something else. The entry Disagreement/ Dissuasion/ Criticism is extended to include also Advice/ Plea/ Counter request. The Statement of principle/philosophy entry under the taxonomy of Salazar et al. (2009) is extended to include also Statement of facts/ feelings/ limit. The two new strategies that are proposed within the indirect refusal strategies are: Questions – counter/ clarifying/ imperatives and Barter. The strategy Conditions for future or past acceptance is taken from Beebe et. al's classification (1990) because it is employed by some of the respondents.

The findings show that the pattern of refusal strategies employed when an action is requested by a speaker of a higher status is the most rigid with the semantic formula Reason/explanation being the most frequent, followed by Regret/ apology or Negation of the proposition. When the request comes from a speaker of a lower status the refusal strategies used are more diverse. The semantic formula Reason/explanation is employed in 3 out of 5 of the cases, while the strategy Regret/ apology comes in second in 4 out of 5 of the cases. Other frequent strategies are Redirecting to something or someone else, Negation of proposition, Statement of fact, Clarifying or counter questions and Imperatives. The widest range of strategies employed is seen when refusing someone of equal status. Reason/explanation and Regret/ apology are consistently occupying the top positions, but are followed by the semantic formulas Postponement, Statement of fact, Blunt refusals, Plain indirect, Faulty features and the adjunct Gratitude. These findings are intended to facilitate research conducted in the field of comparative analysis of intercultural communication.

**Keywords:** Refusal, speech act, discourse – completion task (DCT)

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to outline the three most frequently used strategies in business setting by native English speakers when realizing the speech act of refusal. The earlier studies focusing on the speech act of refusal were conducted with Japanese and English native speakers (Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz, 1990), American, Arab and Japanese native speakers (Al-Kahtani, 2005), Korean and German native speakers (Cho, 2007), Chinese and American/ English native speakers (Honglin, 2007, Jiayu, 2004), but none of them has taken a special interest in the strategies employed by these speakers for realizing the speech act of refusal in business setting in particular. In this study we will be also looking at the role that status plays for determining the set of strategies which are preferred by the participants in the verbal exchange.

For the purposes of the analysis we have resorted to the most widely used classification systems concerning the speech act of refusal and namely those of Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz (1990) and the more recent and improved taxonomy proposed by Salazar, Safont and Codina (2009).

### 2. PSYCHOLINGUISTIC EXPERIMENT

This study looks into the specifics of the refusal strategies employed by English native speakers in business communication. The empirical data was obtained mostly online - 95 respondents filled the online google docs quiz (see the link in the references), where the informants were given 12 work - related situations and requested to refuse to them. 23 respondents submitted the paper version of the quiz and their answers were subsequently added to the digital database. The total number of the informants is 118 - 75 of them are American university

students, majoring in economics. 62 of them identified themselves as American, one naming the ethnic group of the White and one - that of the African American. The other 13 are foreign students distributed among the following nationalities: Malaysian – 7 informants, Bahamian - 2, Egyptian - 1, Chinese - 1, Japanese - 1, Indian – 1. For the purposes of this survey we decided to take into consideration their responses, because language proficiency among Malaysians is high, ranking second in Asia after Singapore. English is an official language in the Bahamas. The Japanese student claimed to have an US citizenship. The other international students (Chinese, Egyptian and Indian) participating in the study have all met the criterion for entering the university of SAT 1180 average and ACT 24 average. Apart from the students' group, aged between 18 and 25, the rest of the informants are of different ages, ranging from 23 to 71 years. The most numerous group is that of the British – 20 people, followed by Americans – 14, Australians – 4, Irish – 2, Scottish and British/Australian – 1 person from each group.

The initial intention was to use the classification proposed by Salazar, Safont and Codina (2009) and to modify it to include some of the entries present under the Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz (1990) taxonomy. Reviewing the results of the respondents required some modifications to be introduced to the already well-established taxonomy systems of Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz (1990) and Salazar, Safont and Codina (2009). The modifications were made in regards to both functional elements of the speech act of refusal, which consists of 1) an Adjunct, which is a part of the refusal, but does not constitute one in itself; and 2) a Semantic formula – the expression used to perform the refusal itself.

<b>REFUSALS</b>
<b>Direct Strategies</b>
1. Bluntness / Flat “no”: <i>No/ I refuse.</i>
2. Negation of proposition: <i>I can't, I don't think so.</i>
<b>Indirect Strategies</b>
1. Plain indirect: <i>It looks like I won't be able to go.</i>
2. Reason/Explanation: <i>I can't. I have a doctor's appointment.</i>
3. Regret/Apology: <i>I'm so sorry! I can't.</i>
4. Alternative: Change option: <i>I would join you if you chose another restaurant.</i> Change time (Postponement): <i>I can't go right now, but I could next week.</i>
5. Disagreement/Dissuasion/Criticism: <i>Under the current economic circumstances, you should not be asking for a rise right now!</i>
6. Statement of principle/philosophy: <i>I can't. It goes against my beliefs!</i>
7. Avoidance Non-verbal: Ignoring (Silence, etc.) Verbal: Hedging: <i>Well, I'll see if I can.</i> topic Joking Sarcasm
<b>ADJUNCTS TO REFUSALS</b>
1. Positive opinion: <i>This is a great idea, but...</i>
2. Willingness: <i>I'd love to go, but...</i>
3. Gratitude: <i>Thanks so much, but...</i>
4. Agreement: <i>Fine, but...</i>
5. Solidarity/Empathy: <i>I'm sure you'll understand, but...</i>

Table 1. Taxonomy on the speech act of refusing (Salazar, Safont and Codina, 2009: 145)

The adjunct classification entries available under the updated taxonomy of Salazar et al. (2009) did not prove exhaustive for the refusal strategies employed by the respondents. This required adding the entries: 6. Voicing fears (#6 I am afraid I don't have any money with me at the moment.); 7. Warning (#7 Taking on more work will degrade the quality of my work; It will affect you negatively); 8. Wish/hope (#1 Hope you have a good time.); 9. Softeners/ Address(#5 boss; sir); 10 Promises/pay-offs/booby prize (#2 I will make up for it later that week; #6 I will donate personally to her.); 11. Unwillingness ( #2 Damn; #6 Uff!) along with the positive adjunct options of *Positive opinion, Willingness, Gratitude, Agreement or Solidarity/empathy* preferred by the English native speakers. It should be noted that some of the entries may overlap as is the case with

*Voicing fears* and *Warning*. The utterance “The job will not be completed on time” may be interpreted both ways.

As for the semantic formula classification entries, modifications and new ones were introduced only to the indirect formulas. The entry 2. Reason/ Explanation under the taxonomy of Salazar et al. (2009) was extended to include also Faulty features of the item/ person requested (The battery is about to die.). The entry 4. Alternative was extended to include one more subcategory which is Redirecting to someone/something else (You could ask someone else.). The entry 5. Disagreement/ Dissuasion/ Criticism was extended to include also Advice/ Plea/ Counter request (Please be patient; Just google the number!). The 6. Statement of principle/philosophy entry under the taxonomy of Salazar et al. (2009) was extended to include also Statement of facts/ feelings/ limit (*statement of fact* - I paid for this; *statement of feelings* - I don't feel comfortable giving money; *statement of limit* – For a little bit.). The two new strategies that are proposed within the indirect refusal strategies are: 8. Questions – counter/ clarifying/imperatives (What type of party?; Just give me a second!) and 9. Barter ( If you work this day I can give you two days off later.). Strategy 9. Conditions for future or past acceptance was taken from Beebe et. al's classification (1990) because it was employed by some of the respondents (I am not working harder without any increase in wages;...unless it is super critical; ... if you can wait.)

### 3. RESULTS

The difference in expressing refusals is related to either the order of the semantic formulas, their content or the frequency. This paper will be presenting findings at the level of frequency. In the following scenarios, enlisted in Table 1.1 the boss is making different requests.

Table 1.1: Frequency of Semantic Formulas in Refusal of Request from a Person of a Higher status.

Scenarios	#2 working late before birthday	#5 a lift back home	#7 taking up the tasks of someone
1st most used	Reason / Explanation	Reason / Explanation	Reason / Explanation
2nd most used	Regret/ Apology	Regret/ Apology	Negation of Proposition
3rd most used	Negation of Proposition	Negation of Proposition	Regret/ Apology
4th most used	Plain Indirect	Redirecting to Someone/sth. else	Redirecting to Someone/sth. else
5th most used	Questions	Statement of Fact; Softeners	Statement of Fact; Plain Indirect; Condition

The findings show that the pattern of refusal strategies employed when an action is requested by a speaker of a higher status is the most rigid with the semantic formula Reason/explanation being the most frequent, followed by Regret/apology or Negation of the proposition. Due to the authority aspect in business settings interlocutors opt for safer strategies using Reason/ explanation and less often and also when the degree of imposition changes (#7) the more direct Statement of fact. When the case allows for involvement of the respondents in resolving the request they tend to use the Redirecting or Question strategy.

In the following scenarios, exemplified in Table 1.2 it is either the cleaning lady, a client, an employee, a new colleague or the assistant who are making different requests.

Table 1.2 Frequency of Semantic Formulas in Refusal of Request from a Person of a Lower Status.

Scenarios	#4 cleaning lady asking for help	#8 client - spilt coffee	#10 employee –day off	#11 new colleague - cell volume	#12 assistant - taxi
1st most used	Reason/ Explanation	Redirecting to Someone/Sth. else	Statement of Fact	Reason/ Explanation	Reason/ Explanation
2nd most used	Regret/ Apology	Reason / Explanation	Regret/ Apology	Regret/ Apology	Regret/ Apology
3rd most used	Redirecting to Someone/Something else	Bluntness	Negation of Proposition	Statement of Fact	Questions
4th most used	Negation of Proposition	Imperative	Reason/Explanation; Plain Indirect; Questions	Negation of Proposition; Bluntness	Negation of Proposition
5th most used	Willingness	Statement of Fact	Condition	Faulty Features	Imperative

When the request comes from a speaker of a lower status the refusal strategies used are more diverse. The semantic formula Reason/explanation is employed in in 3 out of 5 of the cases of the cases as the respondents' first choice, while the strategy Regret/apology comes in second in 4 out of 5 of the cases. This shows that regardless of the status of the speaker who utters the request respondents try to keep the imploring element of their refusals by either giving reasons why they cannot cooperate or asking to be excused for their inability to help. Redirecting to something or someone else and Questions – counter/ clarifying/ imperatives are solution-oriented strategies that rank among the five most frequently used. While the strategy Statement of fact is in fifth position when dealing with higher status scenarios, here it can be seen in the odd number positions suggesting that communication tone changes into a more direct one. Negation of proposition is another strategy that moves one notch downwards in terms of frequency use when we compare the findings about higher and lower status cases indicating a tendency to be more lenient with people of less authority, while trying to keep one's territory with superiors. The adjuncts Willingness is indicative of the more lenient trend towards people of lower status thus securing their loyalty despite the need to refuse.

In the scenarios in Table 1.3 it is either the cleaning lady, a client, an employee, a new colleague or the assistant who are making different requests.

Table 1.3: Frequency of Semantic Formulas in Refusal of Request from a Person of an Equal Status.

Scenarios	#1 a colleague – party invitation	#3 a colleague – to use your laptop	#6 a colleague – injured donations	#9 a colleague in a hurry use printer
1st most used	Reason / Explanation	Regret/Apology	Reason /Explanation	Reason /Explanation
2nd most used	Regret/ Apology	Statement of Fact	Regret/ Apology	Regret/Apology
3rd most used	Gratitude	Reason / Explanation	Postponement	Statement of Fact
4th most used	Bluntness	Bluntness ; Faulty Features, Plain Indirect, Statement of Principle	Negation of Proposition	Postponement
5th most used	Negation of Proposition	Negation of Proposition; Redirecting to Sb./Sth. else	Bluntness; Plain Indirect; Change Option	Faulty Features

The widest range of strategies employed is seen when refusing someone of equal status. Reason/explanation and Regret/ apology are consistently occupying the top positions. While respondents are inherently trying to keep the imploring element of their refusals by either giving reasons why they cannot cooperate or asking to be excused for their inability to help, brevity in communication between peers steps in and is presented here by the Statement of fact, Faulty features and Blunt refusals strategies. The reduced demand for niceties and polished expressions and the more casual style of speaking between people of equal status can be seen by the drop of frequency of the strategy Plain Indirect and at the same time of the use of the Postponement strategy which allows for more flexibility and prolonged time for executing the task. The adjunct gratitude occupying 3<sup>rd</sup> position is indicative of the will to preserve the good relationships between peers despite the need to refuse.

If we are to comment on the top three most commonly used strategies across all scenarios regardless of status, the findings are consistent with the data that has already been presented. The first and the second most frequently used strategies in business settings are Reason/explanation and Regret/ apology receiving respectively 25 % and 18 % of all the responses given. The grounds for such results lie in the pure context of business and its demand for reliability. Individuals do not want to be perceived as uncooperative and trying to steer clear of work-related responsibilities without having a valid reason. Due to the interdependent nature of business and its inherent reciprocity, inability to comply with the requests of others is mitigated by expressing an apology and stating undeniable facts that will soften the refusal. What is interesting about the third most frequently used strategy Statement of fact is that it is avoided when dealing with people of higher status (occupies 5<sup>th</sup> position), while when dealing with peers and lower status interlocutors it can climb to the top three positions. The following table shows samples from the data with the three most common strategies.

Strategy	Higher Status Cases	Equal Status Cases	Lower Status Cases
2.1. Reason/ Explanation (Indirect)	<i>working late before birthday - It's my birthday and things have</i>	<i>the party - I already have plans that day; I will not be</i>	<i>the cleaning lady - I'm running late; I hurt my back and my</i>

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<p>strategies) – 25 % of the responses given</p>	<p>been arranged; I have to collect my birthday cake; <i>lift for the boss</i> - I've got to go in the other direction tonight as my friend is in the hospital and visiting time ends in half an hour...; I have an engagement after work.; I have to run errands...; <i>taking someone's tasks</i> - I'm currently really busy with my workload; I have got lots on my plate at the moment;</p>	<p>able to make it; <i>the laptop</i> - I need it to do some urgent work, I'm currently using it and I need to get stuff done; <i>donation</i> - I don't have any money on me today; I have no cash on me now;</p>	<p>doctor said I shouldn't lift anything heavy; I am very busy right now</p>
<p>3. Regret/ Apology (Indirect strategies) – 18 % of the responses given</p>	<p>I am sorry; I apologize; Excuse me, but... This is so embarrassing; My apologies</p>		
<p>6.2 Statement of facts (Indirect strategies) – 8,6 % of the responses given</p>	<p><i>working late before birthday</i> - The next day is my birthday; <i>lift for the boss</i> - Not going that way; There will be no space; ...we do not live in the same area; I didn't drive to work today; <i>taking someone's tasks</i> – It's not my job; I haven't completed my current tasks; ...my work ability is limited; That is not part of my work description;</p>	<p><i>the laptop</i> - I have stuff in my computer that you do not want to know; there are confidential files on it; I need it all day; I'm working on it at the moment; I'll be needing it myself; <i>donation</i> - I don't get paid for another couple weeks; Short of money this month; I'm a college student; <i>borrowing the printer</i> - It's already in use with masses to print; I am already in the middle of my task; My printer is currently being used.; The printer is in use at the moment; I'm almost finished; I am almost done printing; <i>We're all in a hurry and wait our turn.(SP)</i>; You are not authorized to use the printer; I paid for the ink and it costs a lot; I'm running a big printing job currently; I'm still using it; I am trying to meet a deadline myself;</p>	<p><i>the cleaning lady</i> – I did my back in at the weekend; ...that isn't my job...; <i>spilled coffee</i> - It's not the mess I created; That's a job for the cleaning staff; That's not my responsibility; You spilled that coffee; It's your mess; <i>a day-off</i> - Your performance here is still under review; I really need you to be in work that day; These tasks must be completed now; There isn't availability that day; That day is not available to have off; We're really going to need you that day; ...we are short of staff; We are very short staffed at the moment; It's a regular work/school day and everybody has to be here; We are spread very thin in the office and we need everyone working; the business is very reliant on your being here that day; We have some important deadlines coming up; We are extra busy; I have had my request in for approval for weeks; Too many employees will be absent on that day; ..too much work to do at the moment; It isn't a good day to miss; <i>turning down the ringing sound</i> - I won't hear it ring; I can't hear it otherwise; No one else has complained about it; I need to be alerted; I am the boss here; I needed it to be loud; I need the volume up right now; My mom has a disability; it is down as low as it can be; I am deaf and need this volume; <i>calling a taxi for the assistant</i> – You are my assistant, not vice versa; I am in the middle of a piece of</p>

			work; there's a taxi number on it...; you're much better on the phone than I am; I'm doing something just now
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It must be noted that for the sake of classification the distinction between *Statement of fact* and *Reason/explanation* was made on the basis of brevity and distance between speakers – facts are considered to be more concise and impersonal while explanations more verbose and personal. Overlaps with other categories are also possible. Depending on the intent of the speaker the utterance “We're all in a hurry and wait our turn.” can be coded as a *Statement of fact* followed by a *Statement of principle* or just a statement of two facts to amplify the effect. Another conclusion that stands out is that when the request comes from a superior, respondents resort more often to the strategy Reason/explanation, while the strategy Statement of fact is most favored when it comes from a person of lower or equal status. This implies that the tone of refusal varies depending on who is being denied. Respondents tend to justify their behavior in front of superiors while they are more concise with equals and inferiors. This confirms the observation that in a work-related setting where stakes are higher one tends to resort to the more face-saving strategies.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

As it has been shown by the results of the empirical data English native speakers tend to employ certain strategies for realising the speech act of refusals more than others. The most favoured semantic formulas turn out to be the strategy of Reason/explanation, Regret/apology, Statement of facts. As for the adjunct part of the speech act of refusal, the most preferred strategies are expressing Willingness and Gratitude. These findings are valuable for anyone engaged in teaching TESOL courses, business communication or negotiations as they show clearly the standard practice of native English speakers when it comes to realizing the speech act of refusal.

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