

The Speech Act of Refusal: Jordanian vs. Syrian Arabic

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating the refusal styles of Syrian Arabic speakers and Jordanian ones. The sample consists of 30 Syrian Arabic speakers which are divided equally into two gender groups. Similarly, 30 Jordanian Arabic speakers who are also divided equally into two gender groups. At the time of the experiment, the Syrian and the Jordanian subjects were in Jerash, Jordan. The subjects responded to a twelve-item Discourse Completion Test (DCT). And, the findings reveal that there are slight differences between Syrian speakers and Jordanian speakers in terms of directness/indirectness. With regard to the gender differences, the findings show that both Syrian and Jordanian males are more direct in their refusal strategies than their female counterparts. Thus, the findings of the study will help material developers in making for resource books or modules for teaching and training of language and cultural awareness. The findings can increase the awareness about the sociocultural rules that rules about the use of language functions.

Keywords: Syrian refusals, speech acts, politeness theory, intralingual study

INTRODUCTION

There is common belief shared by most people that Arab speakers are more indirect in their speech than British and American speakers. Arabs tend to elaborate in delivering their messages to the recipients (Al-Adaileh, 2007; BaniKalef & Maros, 2013). This common belief is often supported by those research papers which investigate the communication styles of Arabs compared to other people in other cultures (Banikalef, 2020). Most linguists agree that Arab speakers often follow the indirect style in their verbal interactions particularly speech acts, such as accepting invitations, requesting, expressing preferences, etc. (cf. Cohen, 1987, 1990; Feghali, 1997; Katriel, 1986 and Zaharna, 1995). Cohen (1990) maintains that in Arabic what is not said is sometimes more important than what is said; whereas, in English words represent truth. Cohen also

argues that Arabs take great pains to avoid saying 'no' as directness is disliked since it causes embarrassment.

Arabs use of the language reflects their way of life. Their fear of causing embarrassment to others and to themselves makes them avoid being direct and clear. For Arabs, language is a social tool which is used to form and shape their way of thinking and their way of life. Several research studies assert that Arabs tend to be more indirect than Western cultures due to their linguistic, social and cultural (Ala'Eddin Banikalef, 2019; Ala Banikalef & Bataineh, 2017; Bayoumi, 2017). They do so simply because they have different orientations of thoughts than Westerners. Similarly, most linguists agree that Arab speakers often follow the indirect style in their verbal interactions, particularly speech acts, such as accepting invitations, requesting, expressing preferences, asserting, questioning, threatening, apologizing, etc. (e.g. Al-Shboul & Huwari, 2016; Ala'Eddin Banikalef, Marlyna, & Ashinida, 2014; Bayoumi, 2017).

When the subject is related to the speech act of refusing, the researchers argue that things might be different. Refusing as a speech act challenges another important conversational principle, namely politeness principle. The need to 'save face' that is, to be polite might force speakers who are known to follow direct speech styles to shift to indirect speech strategies in order to 'save face'. Beebe & Takahashi (1989) considered refusal as facing-threatening acts, and the risk of offending someone is inherent in this act itself. According to Brown, Levinson, & Levinson (1987), in a face-threatening act, two goals are often in conflict: 1) the objective of communicating clearly, and 2) the objective of protecting or saving face. Therefore, the person who refuses, may need to be more careful not to violate another's face. This is why most refusers tend to soften the force of the refusal by using indirect strategies.

Many cultures deal with refusals in different ways, but most of them tend to be indirect to avoid the conflict between conducting the act of refusing and being polite. It would be interesting, then, if this study compares and contrasts between two dialects of the same culture, a culture that is well-known of its indirectness, which is the Arabic culture. Most speech acts studies in Jordanian context have compared and contrasted the Jordanian culture with another foreign culture (e.g., Al-Omari, 2008; Al-Shboul & Huwari, 2016; Al-Shboul, Maros, & Mohd Yasin, 2012).

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To find out whether Syrian speakers are more or less indirect from Jordanian ones.
- To examine the gender differences in performing a refusal (Speech Act).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Refusals are significant because they play communicatively central role in everyday communication. In the Jordanian context, much research has been done by various researchers to examine and identify the cross-linguistic and cross-cultural influences on the use of different speech act realization strategies in different languages. Al-Omari (2008) studied the pragmatic strategies of the face-threatening act of

complaining which were employed by both Jordanian and American speakers. She investigated the differences and similarities between the two groups mentioned below in terms of length, complexity, and level of directness of the head act. The sample consisted of (76) female and male Jordanian speakers while American speakers included (60) males and females. The researcher used a discourse completion test (DCT) which consisted of nine situations each of which required a complaint. The responses were classified into 15 strategies. The findings showed that Jordanian and American speakers used somewhat similar strategies. Joking and demanding justifications were used by American respondents only while regret was used by Jordanian respondents. American speakers tended to be more direct in their complaints than their Jordanian counterparts. Differences in complaining strategies may be culture-specific, while similarities may reflect the universality of complaining as a speech act.

In another study, Ghawanmeh (2011) studied the differences and similarities between the refusal strategies of Jordanian Arabic speakers and British English speakers. Emphasis was in discovering whether British speakers were more or less direct than Jordanian ones. The sample consisted of 56: 28 Jordanian Arab speakers (half males and half females) in Irbid and 28 British English speakers (half males and half females). She used a discourse completion test (DCT) consisted of 12 situations: three invitations, three requests, three offers and three suggestions, in which, both groups of participants have to refuse. The findings showed that there were no significant differences between British English speakers and Jordanian Arabic speakers in terms of directness/indirectness in their refusal styles. In terms of the number of strategies used, it was found that the British subjects used more strategies than their Jordanian counterparts. In other words, the British English speakers' refusals were longer than those of the Jordanian Arabic speakers. With regard to the gender factors, the study showed that the females' refusals consisted of longer utterances than those of the males.

Huwari & Al-Shboul (2015) examined the similarities and differences of the speech act of refusal between Jordanian Arabic (JA) and American English (AE). Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was used for collecting the data. Results exposed that both groups of participants preferred indirect strategies followed by adjunct strategies followed by direct strategies. However, Jordanian participants inclined to use more indirect strategies than the American participants who used direct refusal style.

Kreishan (2018), likewise, studied the strategies of refusal and complaint speech act employed by Jordanian undergraduate EFL learners. Data were collected through using a discourse completion test and role-plays. The findings showed that the EFL participants preferred to use indirect strategies, including, for example an explanation or excuse, apology, negative ability, postponement or adjuncts to refusals. Data analysis showed similarities between the strategies used by the sample EFL learners and the strategies used by native English speakers.

Theoretical Framework

The Speech Act Theory

The theory of speech acts was primarily founded by the British philosopher John L. Austin in 1962. His book *How to Do Things with Words* (1962) established the foundations of the theory. Austin's work in the field of speech acts has had a great influence on other fields of linguistics, such as child language acquisition and cross-cultural pragmatics (Siemund, 2018). Speech act theory stems from the broad assumption that "to say something is to do something" (Austin 1962, p. 12). This assumption challenged previous assumptions about verbal utterances, i.e., the truth/falsity one. Austin (1962) argued that some utterances could not be judged by their truth but have performative properties. When a bride or a bridegroom says 'I do' in a marriage ceremony, he/she does not commit themselves to the truth value of that utterances; in fact, they do something, i.e., marrying (Austin 1962, p. 13).

Austin divides the performative action into three levels of performance or three acts:

1. A locutionary act: the actual production of a well-formed utterance in whatever language, i.e., saying the utterance.
2. An illocutionary act: the meaning the speakers wish to convey to the addressees, i.e., the intended meaning of the utterance
3. A perlocutionary act: the effect of the utterance on the addressees.

For example, when a mother utters the following utterance addressing her little child:

- You have an exam tomorrow.

The simple act of saying the above utterance with its semantic sense and reference is often referred to as its locutionary act. Another illocutionary act may be involved as follows:

- a. If the mother wants to remind her child of the exam, then the illocutionary act is 'reminding'.
- b. If the mother, haven't seen her child studying, means to warn him/her child that he/she might not pass the exam tomorrow, then the illocutionary act is 'warning'..

According to Searle (1979), refusals fall under the 'commissive' speech acts, for they commit the speaker (and sometimes both the speaker and the addressee) to some future action. Searle proposed five classifications for speech acts, particularly for illocutionary acts. These five classifications are presented below with explanations and examples:

1. Representative or assertive speech acts: "The speaker offers her view of the world as she understands it" (Black, 2006, p. 20). By doing so, the speaker commits himself/herself to the truth of the expressed proposition. Representative speech acts include: asserting, concluding, stating, describing, complaining and claiming.
2. Expressive speech acts: They are those acts that reveal the speaker's attitude feeling and emotions towards the expressed proposition. Expressive speech acts include: thanking, apologizing, congratulating, condoling, and expressing pleasure.

3. Directive speech acts: Directives are essentially commands that are intended to cause the hearer to do something or to perform a particular action. Directives include: requesting, questioning, advising, commanding, ordering and advising.
4. Commissive speech acts: Commissives are acts which commit the speaker to some future course of action. They include: promising, threatening, and vowing.
5. Declarative speech acts: Declarations are a unique form of speech act, in that their successful performance depends upon the status of the speaker, and the precise circumstances surrounding the even. They include: declaring war, resigning, performing marriages, christening and sentencing criminals.

Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson (1987) developed a theory to explain how speakers deal with face-threatening acts. Their theory states that "politeness is the expression of the speaker's intention to mitigate face threats carried by certain face threatening acts toward another. They (1987, p. 62) assert that threatening acts have a positive and negative force. Moreover, they define positive face as "the want of every member that his or her wants be desirable to at least some others" (p. 62), and negative face as "the want of every 'competent adult member' that his or her actions to be unimpeded by others" (p. 62). Black (2006, p. 72) defined the two types of faces in the following way:

1. Negative face: the right to freedom of action and freedom from imposition.
2. Positive face: the need to be appreciated by others, and to maintain a positive self-image.

Refusals are face-threatening acts; therefore, speakers are often very careful when communicating them in order to 'save face (Brown and Levinson, 1987). The act of refusing may consist of only one word 'NO' or a complete utterance 'I can't lend you some money'. Both previous instances are examples of direct refusals. However, speakers in real life situations tend to avoid such direct ways of refusing in order to avoid being rude. They may say 'I am sorry. I would love to, but I must fix my house' (Al-Shboul et al., 2012). Similarly, Félix-Brasdefer (2008, p. 42-43) asserts that "the linguistic expressions employed in a refusal sequence may include direct and indirect strategies". For example, "No", "No, I can't", and "I can't" are direct refusals, whereas, "Unfortunately, I don't think I can attend the party" is a softened indirect refusal.

METHOD

Sample

The sample consists of 30 Jordanians (half males and half females) and 30 Syrian speakers (half males and half females). They are ages range from 25 to 35. All of them live in Jerash, Jordan. Most Syrian participants arrived to Jordan between 2011-2013.

Data collection

Data was collected using translated version of Discourse Completion Test (DCT) adopted from Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, (1990) and Nelson, Al Batal, & El Bakary (2002).

The DCT consists of 12 situations, including: three requests, three invitations, three offers and three suggestions. The researchers read the situations to the participants aloud and asked them to respond verbally because oral responses are more suitable for Arabic speakers. If the researchers asked them to write their responses in written form, that would be unrealistic since they would produce ideal responses that they would not often use in real life situations in Arabic.

Data Analysis

In this current study, data were analyzed in terms of semantic formulaic sequences and were categorized by the trained coders based on the taxonomy of refusal strategies created by Beebe et al. (1990). According to Cohen (1996, p. 265), a semantic formula refers to “a word, phrase, or sentence that meets a particular semantic criterion or strategy, any one or more of these can be used to perform the act in question”. For example, if a respondent had to refuse an invitation to a friend’s home for lunch by saying “I’m sorry, I already have plans. Maybe next time,” this was coded as: I’m sorry [statement of regret], I already have plans [excuse], May be next time [statement of alternative] (Beebe et al. 1990, p.57). Nevertheless, some strategies, used in Beebe et al., were not found in our data and were thus omitted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A descriptive analysis of refusal strategy was performed. The frequency of each strategy appeared in any situation were calculated. The total for each strategy in all situations was then computed. Therefore, the direct and indirect refusal strategies were calculated for each category, i.e., for female Syrian subjects (FS), male Syrian subjects (MS), female (FJ) Jordanian subjects and male Jordanian subjects (MJ). Table (1) below shows the figures for the female Syrian subjects in terms of number of strategies used.

Table 1. The Frequency of refusal Strategies Used by Syrian Females and Males

Strategy	Syrian females		Syrian Males	
	No.	%	No.	%
Direct				
Performative	2	2%	2	2%
Nonperformative ‘No’	34	33%	30	34%
Negative willingness	66	65%	50	64%
Indirect				
Statement of regret	84	15%	64	15%
Wish	10	2%	6	1%
Excuse, reason, explanation	180	32%	138	31%
Statement of alternative	20	4%	24	5%
Set condition for future or past acceptance	12	2%	15	3%
Promise of future acceptance	4	1%	10	2%
Statement of principle	4	1%	6	1%
Statement of philosophy	6	1%	4	1%
Threat or statement of negative consequences	10	2%	10	2%
Criticize request/requester	8	1%	6	1%
Lack of enthusiasm	0	0%	4	1%

Repetition of part of request	4	1%	2	1%
Postponement	4	1%	10	2%
Hedging	3	1%	9	2%
Statement of positive opinion	65	15%	34	8%
Statement of empathy	7	1%	12	3%
Pause fillers	25	4%	7	2%
Gratitude\appreciation	90	16%	65	19%
Total Direct Strategies	102	100%	82	100%
Total Indirect Strategies	536	100%	426	100%

Tables (1) shows that the Syrian females used more direct and indirect strategies than their Syrian male counterparts did. The females used 102 direct strategies while the males used 82. Moreover, the females used 536 indirect strategies while the males used 426 which meant that the Syrian females' refusals were longer than that of the males'. Table (1) also shows the percentages for each strategy as used by the male Syrian subjects. Based on the percentages in tables (1), one can clearly see that there are statistically insignificant differences between Syrian males and females in terms of their directness or indirectness in refusing strategies. In other words, both groups used similar strategies when making refusals although the Syrian females' refusals were longer than their male counterparts. Moreover, the Syrian male participants used direct strategies with the same frequency (64%) with their Syrian male counterparts (65%). This means that there was no significant difference between the two groups in their use of direct and indirect refusal strategies.

As for the Jordanian subjects, the findings for the Jordanian female subjects were similar to the findings of their Syrian counterparts in terms of the number of strategies used. They were found to use more strategies than their male counterparts. However, in terms of percentages, no statistically significant differences were found between Jordanian males and females in connection with directness/indirectness in refusing styles. Table (2) below also shows the frequency and the percentages of refusal strategies among female and male Jordanian subjects.

Table 2. The Frequency of refusal Strategies Used by Jordanian Females and Males

Strategy	Jordanian females		Jordanian Males	
	No.	%	No.	%
Direct				
Performative	2	3%	2	3%
Nonperformative 'No'	25	33%	24	34%
Negative willingness	49	64%	44	63%
Indirect				
Statement of regret	61	14%	50	14%
Wish	10	2%	6	2%
Excuse, reason, explanation	135	32%	120	33%
Statement of alternative	15	3%	21	6%
Set condition for future or past acceptance	9	2%	12	3%
Promise of future acceptance	3	1%	8	2%
Statement of principle	3	1%	5	1%
Statement of philosophy	4	1%	4	1%
Threat or statement of negative consequences	8	2%	8	2%

Criticize request/requester	6	1%	5	1%
Lack of enthusiasm	2	1%	3	1%
Repetition of part of request	3	1%	2	1%
Postponement	3	1%	9	2%
Hedging	2	1%	8	2%
Statement of positive opinion	48	15%	28	11%
Statement of empathy	8	2%	10	3%
Pause fillers	23	5%	6	2%
Gratitude\appreciation	64	15%	50	14%
Total Direct Strategies	76	100%	70	100%
Total Indirect Strategies	407	100%	355	100%

According to table (1), the Syrian females used more direct and indirect strategies than their male counterparts. The females used 102 direct strategies while the males used 82. The females used 536 indirect strategies while the males used 426. This means that the Syrian females' refusals were longer than their male counterparts.

Based on the findings in table (1), one can clearly notice that there are statistically insignificant differences between Syrian males and females in terms of their directness or indirectness in refusing strategies. Table (1) showed that Syrian females and males used the indirect strategy (excuse, reason, explanation) the most. On the other hand, the indirect strategy (lack of enthusiasm) was the less used by Syrian females, while Syrian males used (repetition of part of request) the least.

For the Jordanian subjects, the findings for the Jordanian female subjects were similar to those of their Syrian counterparts. In terms of the number of strategies used, they were found to use more strategies than their male counterparts. The females used 76 direct strategies while males used 70 and females used 407 indirect strategies while males used 355. However, in terms of percentages, no significant differences were found between Jordanian males and females in connection with directness/indirectness in using refusing strategies. Table (2) shows that the indirect strategies (excuse, reason, explanation) were the most frequent strategies used by Jordanian females and the indirect strategies (hedging and lack of enthusiasm) were the less used by them.

CONCLUSION

This particular study tried to investigate the refusal styles of Syrian Arabic speakers and Jordanian Arabic speakers in terms of directness and indirectness. The sample consists of 30 Syrian Arabic speakers (half male and half females) and 30 Jordanian Arabic speakers (half males and half females). At the time of the experiment, the Syrian subjects were in Jerash, Jordan and the Jordanian subjects were also in Jerash, Jordan. The subjects responded to a twelve-item Discourse Completion Test (DCT) adopted from that of Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz (1990). The subjects had to refuse each situation in the DCT orally. The richness of data, came from the fact that Arabic is a language, in which the written form is totally different from its spoken form. Both direct and indirect strategies were counted in order to see which group is more direct than the other.

According to the data analysis, both Syrians and Jordanians have used the same direct and indirect refusal strategies. However, it was found that Syrians have used more

indirect strategies than their Jordanian counterparts in performing refusals. In other words, the study has found that both Syrian and Jordanian subjects have used the same refusal strategies with different frequencies. Syrians' refusals were longer than those of the Jordanian Arabic speakers. This conclusion reflects the nature of both cultures; Syrian people are known to be obsequious and flattered while Jordanian people are known to be serious and tough (Banikalef et al., 2014).

This study contributes to the field of speech act. Since most speech act studies have been conducted to examine the refusal styles in two different languages, the current study is can be a reference to those who are investigating the similarities and differences in refusing styles between two dialects within the same language. Therefore, it is recommended that this study could be broadened by using subjects from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

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