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Refusals in the Malay Culture: Gender Differences in Focus

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Abstract

Expressing 'no' is by no means a simple act. In a multicultural and gendered society such as Malaysia, the speech act of refusal is realised in a multitude of ways across ethnic groups as well as gender types. This paper investigated the refusal strategies of Malay male and female students in a Malaysian public university. The research participants consisted of 15 Malay male and 15 female undergraduates who were asked to complete a Discourse Completion Test (DCT). The DCT contains nine authentic real-world contexts; designed to elicit genuine and spontaneous responses from the respondents. The data was then analysed in accordance to Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz (1990) semantic formula taxonomy. The findings revealed that indirect refusal is the predominant strategy employed by both male and female participants; with the choice of refusal being negative willingness ability. However, the male participants utilised direct refusal strategies more frequently than their female counterpart. Despite the small sample size, specified participants' age range and singular setting, this preliminary study sets fresh impetus on investigating the cultural dynamics underscoring Malay community refusal pattern. Empirical exploration of this nature could be expanded to other gender-oriented multicultural communities as it is pivotal in mitigating and dissuading miscommunication stemming from the rich diversity.

Keywords: *Speech Act, Refusals Strategies, Linguistic Politeness, Semantic Formula, DCT*

Introduction

Language is an intentional behaviour and should be regarded as a form of action. Under this purview, language is viewed as speech acts or performative utterances; necessitating one to understand the speaker's intention in order to fully gauge the language used. When the speaker's intention is not appropriately acknowledged, a breakdown in communication would occur. Stemming from the aforesaid premise, expressing 'no' is by no means a simple linguistic expression; it is an act laden with layers of cultural underpinnings. According to Searle (1969), refusal refers to the act of refusing or the state of being refused. It is a highly sensitive and potentially offensive speech act needing extensive pragma-linguistic skills and strategies. It also requires one to have knowledge on the target

language and the appropriate use of the language framed within the context of the speakers' culture. If any of the pragma linguistic maxims of the target language is not observed, expressing refusal could harm relationships and affect the 'face' of the person being refused to.

The general rules of speaking in a community are intertwined with the community's core values (Al-Mahrooqi & Al-Aghbari, 2016). The challenge in manifesting refusal lies primarily in mitigating the speakers' (of diverse ethnicities and genders) perception, expectation and verbalised comprehension of politeness and the 'face-saving' concept. In the case of a multicultural and gendered society such as Malaysia, having the relevant pragma linguistic skills for refusal purposes is augmented as refusal is subjected to and realised in a multitude of ways across ethnic groups as well as gender types. For instance, in the Malay community, politeness is an essential cultural value (Lim, 2017; Shamshudeen & Morris, 2013); expressed through non-confrontational speech and behaviour. As such, using indirect speech as a strategy to refuse, criticise and request is expected and deemed to be praiseworthy (Abdul Sattar, Che Lah & Suleiman, 2012). The Malay culture is also patriarchal in nature; positing distinctively different cultural roles and expectations on the male and female members of the community (Lim 2017; Mansor et. al., 2016; Jerome, 2013). For instance, Malay men are expected to be more aggressive, assertive, henceforth more direct in their conduct. Malay women on the other hand are expected to be shy, reserved and indirect. On hindsight, the notion of Malay women displaying nuances of hesitation and tentativeness when communicating also resonates with the concept of women talk (Leaper and Robnett, 2011). Women talk however is a concept that is consistently being challenged as more studies conducted on the subject claimed that men too, showed elements of the so-called 'women talk' (Leaper & Robnett, 2011).

The complex and diverse cultural make-up of Malaysia presents a rich data for cultural, cross cultural and intercultural research to be carried out. Diversely, several researchers have highlighted the paucity in politeness-hence speech acts research vis-à-vis the Malaysian context and the Malay community. To the researchers' best knowledge, gender-oriented studies emphasising on refusal strategies among Malay men and women are not frequently conducted. This is in spite of Malay being the biggest ethnic group in the country (Abdul Sattar, Che Lah & Raja Suleiman, 2011; Al-Shboul, Maros & Mohd Yasin, 2012; Amirrudin & Salleh, 2016). On this premise, this preliminary research aims to fill in the research gap by investigating the refusal strategies of Malay male and female students in a Malaysian public university.

The Concept of Face

Brown and Levinson (1987) define 'face' as a manifestation of a person's self-worth and self-image. The notion of 'face' facilitates the way people interact with and understand each other in their everyday lives. Specifically, they will attempt to handle, guide or control others' impression of them by maintaining, fixing or changing their appearance, setting and manner (Goffman 1957). It also refers to one's self esteem which they would naturally want to protect (Goffman 1957). The face can be divided into two types; namely positive and negative face. One's needs be liked, appreciated and approved by others are referred to as 'positive face'. 'Negative face' conversely denotes one's desire to not be imposed upon, to be free from obligation and intrusion. In tandem with aforementioned

premise, Brown and Levinson (1987) posited another concept termed as 'face-saving'; an act where interlocutors in an interaction cooperate to maintain one's face and avoid miscommunication. Asmah (1996) further conceptualised 'face-saving' as an act of upholding a person's dignity by not causing them any forms of embarrassment. In the community-oriented Malay culture, 'face' or *air muka* is a highly regarded. In fact, it is considered to be a sacred aspect of the Malay identity as '*air muka*' represents not just one's feelings, but also one's reputation and most importantly, public image.

Face-Saving Strategy

Saying 'no' often creates a dilemma for interlocutors as it involves giving a negative reply to a request, invitation, suggestion and offer (Hedayatnejad & Rahbar, 2014). The dilemma stems from the fact that a refusal threatens the face of the person making the request, 2) indicates impoliteness and c) creates friction between one's desires to express refusal with one's need to maintain a positive face. For these reasons, many researchers undertake the study of refusal, specifically examining the various strategies employed by interlocutors in rejecting a request or to providing favourable replies.

Selected Studies

Extant studies on the subject of refusal are divided into two distinctive ends of a spectrum. On one end, the emphasis is on refusal realisation in the English language while on the other end, the focus is refusal realisation in speakers' mother tongue (Abdul Sattar, Che Lah & Raja Suleiman, 2011; Hedayatnejad & Rahbar, 2014; Shishavan & Shairifian, 2016). Between the two, the former is the more dominant research trend. One example is kreishan's (2018) study on Jordanian EFL learners, where it is found that in contexts where English is used, most of the respondents refused indirectly. This finding is parallel with Mahrooqi and Al-Aghbari (2016)'s research on the refusal pattern of 41 Omani college students. Both studies employed the use of direct completion test or DCT as the research tool, but Kreishan (2018) included role-play as a second instrument. Interestingly, Mahrooqi and Al-Aghbari (2016)'s research also revealed that while indirect strategy is the predominant way of realising refusal among Omani college students, they tend to use direct strategies to people of higher status. The researchers concluded that this is a result of direct cultural transfer from the Omani culture to English culture, as well as lack of knowledge on the target culture. Lee (2016) on the other hand did a research on 156 Cantonese English learners. Lee's (2016) respondents were all teenagers and it is found that their preferred strategies of realising refusal are all indirect in nature. Facilitated by an-oral-production instrument which is akin to a DCT or role play, this research also discovered a correlation between the frequency of indirect refusal realisation with age and English Language proficiency. Specifically, the older and more proficient in English the respondents are, their tendency to use the indirect strategies is also increased.

Amirrudin and Salleh (2016) conducted a research on 43 Malay ESL learners at a Malaysian university while in the same vein, Radhiah (2017) looked into the possible differences in refusal strategies between Malay and Spanish graduate students. It is found that most of the respondents in both studies utilised indirect strategies in refusal-inducing situations; especially the Malay speakers. Radhiah's (2017) added depth to this finding by reporting that in comparison to the Malay, the Spanish participants used a variety as well as a lot more of strategies when realising indirect

refusals. Abdul Sattar, Che Lah and Raja Suleiman (2011) focused on Malay refusal patterns vis-à-vis social status. Similar to other research conducted, Abdul Sattar, Che Lah and Raja Suleiman (2011) reported that the types of indirect refusals preferred by their participants are statement of regret; *sorry* as well as providing explanations and reasons. Hedayatnejad and Rehbar (2014) did a research on the effect of gender on refusal realisations among Iranian EFL learners in informal situations. Their research highlighted that both genders refused indirectly more than as compared to directly. Their research also brought to light that social distance is more influential in determining a refusal strategy as compared to gender. Specifically, more direct strategies are used when refusing families as well as close friends, while indirect strategies are for others. There is a minimal percentage difference in both genders' refusal patterns across all contexts; but female learners tend to use indirect strategies more to men.

As for mother-tongue refusal realisation, Azwan (2018) conducted a study on refusal strategies vis-à-vis Ambonese community while Farnia and Wu (2012) investigated differences refusal strategies of Chinese and Malaysian students. It is found that in their native tongues, both Ambonese and Malay communities showed high usage frequency of indirect strategies in realising refusal. Wu's (2012) finding echoes an earlier finding reported by Hei (2009); where it is apparent that while generally Malaysians employ both direct and indirect refusal strategies, they are more inclined to use the indirect strategies to convey 'no'. The empirical paucity in researching mother-tongue refusal pattern prompts this particular research to be conducted; primarily within the context of Malaysia and the Malay community (Hei 2009; Abdul Sattar, Che Lah & Raja Suleiman, 2011). Adding weight to this claim, Amirrudin and Salleh (2016) pointed out that not many studies have been done on the Malaysian communities in light of specific contexts such as gender, social distance or social status, aside from Abdul Sattar, Che Lah and Raja Suleiman's work (2011). Researching refusal strategies within the Malaysian context, particularly focusing on gender for instance could bring about rich findings on the interaction patterns of genders across ethnic groups in Malaysia. Since Malay is a culturally conscious and driven society, emphasising on this ethnic group could also shed light on the dominance of culture in governing the behaviour of the Malays in general.

This Study

This study believes that female and male Malays differ in terms of realising refusal due to the prominent influence of culture within the community. As such, this research investigated the refusal strategies of Malay male and female students in a Malaysian public university. The objectives of this study were to 1) identify the frequency of the direct and indirect refusal strategies between Malay males and females as well as 2) analyse the choice of refusals strategies between Malay males and females based on the semantic formula adapted from Beebe et. al (1990). This study hypothesised that due to the influence of the Malay culture, there would be a significant difference in the refusal realisations between Malay females and males; the Malay females would use more indirect strategies while the Malay males would be more direct in expressing their refusal.

Limitations

The limitations of this study are sample size, participants' age and setting. Firstly, the number of participants were only 30, which is rather small to be reflective of the entire Malay population. Additionally, the setting is limited to only the academic setting. Finally, this research is limited in terms of participants' age range; which was restricted to be between 19 to 23 years old only. This means the findings would only represent the younger Malays. Although the limitations of this preliminary study hinder it from providing an all-encompassing and holistic outlook on the Malay female-male refusal strategies, the data collected have managed to yield fresh findings. These findings could potentially challenge the existing notions gender and refusal patterns, this laying the ground for more research to be done on this subject matter.

Research Methodology

Research Design and Instruments

This research utilised quantitative approach to gather as well as analyse the frequency of direct and indirect strategies used by Malay male and female respondents. Two instruments were used for gathering data, namely demographic survey as well as a Discourse Completion Test (DCT).

a) Demographic Survey

In the demographic survey, the participants had to provide basic information such as age, gender, faculty, MUET (Malaysian University English Test) scores and their primary language. Specific information such as their primary language must be included because the language choice affects the refusal strategies that they employ in daily life. This demographic survey was only given to the participants once they agreed to take part in the study.

b) Written Discourse Completion Test (DCT)

The written DCT composed of nine different real-life situations to elicit genuine refusal response to various initiating speech acts such as requests, invitations, command, etc. The construction of this DCT is based on a DCT by Juan and Flor (2011). All of the situations in this DCT vary according to the socio-pragmatic factors such as social distance and the social status. All respective levels of social status and social distance are included in the DCT. The situations also suggest various relationships between interlocutors. Acknowledging the participants' reality and socio-cultural schemata, Hudson, Detmer & Brown's (1995) guideline was adapted into this DCT; where all the prompting situations or scenarios are ensured to be familiar to the participants. Hence, familiar settings such as cafeteria, bookshop, library and cinema were used in the DCT, including typical refusal-inducing situations in those selected settings. The respondents were instructed to provide refusals as they would as a student in the given situations.

The nine situations are listed below:

Situation	Contextual setting	Participant's Role	Social status	Social distance
1	University	Student refuses to lend notes to a classmate	Equal	Intimate
2	University	A third-year student refuses to participate in an interview	Low	Acquaintance
3	Cafeteria	Student refuses to give the exact amount of money to the cashier	Equal	Acquaintance
4	University	Research assistant refuses to help a lecturer to organize the conference	High	Intimate
5	University	Graduate student refuses giving his/her signature for a health issue	Low	Stranger
6	Cinema	Student refuses to give his/her ticket to a middle- aged woman	High	Stranger
7	Home	Student refuses to help his/her cousin with a science project	Low	Intimate
8	University	Student refuses to help a lecturer to carry books to his/her office	High	Acquaintance
9	University	Student refuses to watch another student's laptop on the table while she/he buys food	Equal	Stranger

Table 1: Refusal-Inducing Situations

These nine situations were included in the written Discourse Complete Test which the participants had to complete. Below is an excerpt of the written DCT used in this research. It must be highlighted that the DCT is provided with a Malay Language translation.

Situation	Scenario
1	Student- Classmate You are a student at a university and your classmate was not able to attend the English class last week because he/she was sick. During a Malay Language class, your classmate asks if he/she can borrow your notes for two days. Although you understand he/she was sick, you do not want to lend him/her your notes.
2	Third year student- Second year student You are the third-year student at a university. A second- year student who is taking the same course as you is doing an assignment and she/he asks if she/he could interview you for a while. Although you really want to help him/her, you do not have the time to spare.
3	Student- Cashier You are a college resident at a university. You go to the café to buy food. The food costs you RM3 and you only have a 50 ringgit note. The seller said that he/she does not have small change and insists that you pay the exact amount of money charged.
4	Research assistant- Lecturer You are a research assistant to your lecturer and you have a good academic relationship with him/her. At the end of your last semester, you are busy analysing the result of your final year project. Your lecturer asks you to help her/him to organise a conference where he/she is the head of the committee.

Table 2: DCT excerpt

Data Collection Procedure

The researcher personally invited the respondents to participate in this study. Before the respondents started answering the written DCT, the respondents were asked to sign an Informed Consent form; denoting their agreement to fill in the written DCT. Then, participants were briefed as well as provided with detailed instructions on how complete the DCT. They were reminded to respond without overthinking or overanalysing the situations. They were free to answer in either both Malay or English as to increase the authenticity of the responses.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data gathered via DCT were first categorised according to the gender type. Then the data were thematically-identified based on the type of refusal: direct or indirect. After that, the refusal types were further analysed by the choices of direct and indirect refusal. In determining the type and choice of refusal, this study employed Beebe et.al (1990) semantic formula taxonomy. The analysed data were finally keyed-in into the pre-prepared tables which will be shown in the findings and discussion section.

Participants

Thirty Malay university students participated in this study; namely 15 males and 15 females. All respondents were native Malay Language speakers from both East and West Malaysia. They were undergraduates from various faculties of a Malaysian public university; with their ages ranging

between 20 to 24 years old (mean age: 22 years old). The selection criteria for the respondents are determined to ensure that cultural relativity could be elicited from the data.

No	Selection Criterion	Explanation
1	Race	All participants must be pure Malay
2	Proficiency	All participants must be well-versed in the Malay Language
3	Language Engagement	All participants must be comfortable with using the Malay Language and uses it to facilitate a significant amount of meaningful interactions on a daily basis

Table 3: Participants Selection Criteria

Findings

a) Refusal Strategy and Frequency

Analysing the semantic formula or statements written in the DCT according to gender revealed that the female participants used indirect refusal strategies more frequently as compared to their male counterpart.

Strategies	Malay Male	Malay Female	Male-Female	Difference
	No	%	No	%
Direct	45	15.3	40	13.0%
Indirect	249	84.7%	267	87.0%
Indirect – Direct Difference	204	69.4%	227	74%

Table 5: Number and Percentage of direct and indirect strategies used by both male and female respondents

However, it must be highlighted that the percentage of difference in relation to direct strategies is insignificantly only 2.3% between genders. Indirect strategies still dominate refusal realisation; with only 2.3% difference between gender groups. Examples of direct strategy semantic formula are shown in table 6. The italicised sentence indicates refusal.

Situation	Actual Response	Translated Response
5	Minta maaf banyak brader, sebab <i>saya tak nak</i>	I'm so sorry, because I don't want
5	Maaf saya ada presentation projek tahun akhir esok jadi <i>tak dapat nak tolong</i>	I'm sorry I have a final year project presentation tomorrow, I can't help you
7	<i>Tak nak</i>	Don't want

Table 6: Examples of Realisation of Direct Refusal

b) Indirect refusal Strategies

Out of 14 choices of indirect refusal strategies, 9 strategies surfaced in the analysis of the semantic formulas. The five (5) choices which did not appear in the analysis are 1) set condition for future/past acceptance, 2) let the interlocutor off the hook, 3) silence, 4) repetition of the request and 5) postponement. The following table states the 14 choices and demonstrates the indirect strategies chosen by male and female participants.

Indirect Refusal Strategies	Male		Female	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Statement of regret	92	37.0%	89	33.3%
Wish	0	0.0%	3	1.1%
Reason/explanation	106	42.6%	110	41.2%
Statement of alternative	27	10.9%	36	13.5%
Set condition for future/past acceptance	0	0.0%	0	0
Promise of future acceptance	11	4.4%	11	4.1%
Statement of principle	2	0.8%	9	3.4%
Criticize the interlocutor	2	0.8%	1	0.4%
Let the interlocutor off the hook	0	0.0%	0	0
Unspecific/indefinite reply	5	2.0%	3	1.1%
Lack of enthusiasm	4	1.6%	5	1.9%
Silence	0	0.0%	0	0
Repetition of the request	0	0.0%	0	0
Postponement	0	0.0%	0	0
Total	249	100%	267	100

Table 7: Indirect refusal strategy choices of male and female participants

The top three indirect strategies used by both genders are reason and explanation, statement of regret and followed by statement of alternative. The least preferred strategies by the male participants are 1) statement of principle, 2) criticize the interlocutor and 3) lack of enthusiasm while for their female counterpart, the least popular strategies are 1) wish, 2) criticise the interlocutor and 3) unspecific/indefinite reply.

A consistent pattern in the analysis revealed that the participants tend to combine more than one semantic formula in realising refusal. This means in manifesting one refusal, the participants used more than one strategy. On this premise, it is pivotal to state that across genders, statement of regret is usually paired with the statement of reason and explanation. Examples of such combination are demonstrated in table 8.

Situation	Actual Response	Translated Response
4	<i>Maaf sir, sibuk hari tu, tak ada masa, jadual full</i>	Sorry. Im busy on that day. My schedule is full
8	<i>Sorry. Saya kena jumpa kawan saya sekarang</i>	Sorry. I have to meet my friend now

Table 8: Realisation of refusal by combining statement of regret with statement of regret and explanation

The other preferred choice of indirect refusal strategy by both gender groups is statement of alternatives. This strategy enables the positive face of interlocutor to be maintained, while portraying the interlocutor making the refusal as polite and helpful. In other words, the role of statement of alternative is to soften the threatening power of refusals. Table 9 provides example for statement of alternative taken from the data.

Situation	Actual Response	Translated Response
4	<i>Maaf, tapi saya sibuk analisis tentang FYP saya, mungkin boleh minta tolong orang lain untuk bantu?</i>	Sorry, but I am busy analysing my FYP, maybe you can ask other people to help you?
8	<i>Maaf puan. Saya minta tolong Adilah lah untuk puan. Saya minta maaf puan.</i>	I'm sorry madam. I will ask Adilah to help you. I am sorry.

Table 9: Examples of statement of alternative

Discussion and Conclusion

Culture- Gender Dynamics

This research hypothesised that the female participants would communicate indirectly more than men in face of a refusal-based situation. This hypothesis is concretised by the fact that in the Malay culture, women are conditioned to be less assertive than men in all manners of behaving (Jerome 2013; Lim 20117). Therefore, indirectness is not just expected, but almost obligated of a Malay woman. It must be highlighted that indirectness is also a prominent feature in Lakoff's (1973) theory of women language. In spite of the rise of feminism and women empowerment movements in the 21st century, the Malay women participating in this research seemed to maintain their passive nature, as shown by their frequent use of indirect strategies. However, it is also observed that the male participants in this study primarily used indirectness in manifesting their refusal. In fact, there is only 2.3% difference between the frequency of indirect strategies used between the male and female participants; an insignificant percentage to support the established hypothesis. In this light, it could be argued that while the Malay culture assigned certain rules and roles for the female members of the community, the practice of indirect speech as symbol of politeness, alongside the concept of face-saving are the more dominating cultural tenets. This also means that a Malay woman's indirect responses could no longer be deemed as a sign of 'negative cultural conditioning', but rather a result of adhering to an acceptable societal practice.

Malay Culture as part of the bigger Asian Culture

The predominant use of indirect strategies discovered in this study is similar to the findings of other studies reviewed in this paper. Since most of the research papers reviewed are based on Asian

communities, it could be contended that the use of indirect strategies in a refusal-inducing context is central to the Asian cultures. This premise is supported by the fact that the concept of 'face' and face-saving act is a significant cultural aspect in Asia (Lee 2016); in which the possibility of threatening someone's 'face', especially an older person or a person of a higher status is considered as a taboo. The findings of this research also raise the point on the constitution of politeness and interpretation of indirectness. In the American culture for instance, being direct is not a measure of impoliteness (Meier 1995) while indirectness is often linked to low self-confidence and passivity. As such, studies such as this one is crucial in raising awareness while at the same time correcting misconceptions regarding the various Asian cultures.

In sum, this study has revealed that indirect refusal is the predominant strategy employed by Malay male and female participants in the academic domain, with the choice of refusal being negative willingness ability. However, the male participants utilised direct refusal strategies more frequently than their female counterpart. Despite the small sample size, singular research setting and participants' age range, this preliminary study sets fresh impetus on investigating the cultural dynamics underscoring Malay community refusal pattern, particularly where gender is concerned. This research has also proven that in this increasingly globalised world, culture still plays an important role in governing people's behaviour, perception as well as weltanschauung. In other words, culture still has a predominant influence in shaping their communities understanding of world especially in social domains. Empirical exploration of this nature could be expanded to other gender-oriented multicultural communities such as India and Indonesia, where the multicultural societal make-up has sparked racial tensions and gender-based oppression. Ultimately, it is expected that research of this nature could mitigate and dissuade miscommunication stemming from the aforesaid communities' rich diversity.

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