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RECOGNIZING SPEECH ACTS OF REFUSALS

Liliek Soepriatmadji
Dosen Tetap FBIB Universitas Stikubank

ABSTRACT

This article discusses how a speaker should recognize refusals of requests in English. The choices of whether or not uttering refusals or the selection of expressions to be used in uttering the refusals could disrupt or maintain the interaction with language in progress. Therefore, a discussion on related theories needs to be presented in this article in the effort as to provide insights of significant aspects in uttering refusals of requests. It is a descriptive discussion that it only presents arguments on speech acts of refusals by reviewing its related theories. Speech Acts of Refusals (SARs) may gain much attention in the discussion since it is the central focus of the discussion. Conversational Principles and Face Threatening Acts of Politeness Theory are also touched because they also help the speaker to think of how to utter refusals of requests. Thought Patterns, on another side, culturally and pragmatically color the manner a speaker should utter refusals of requests in a given cultural context. Finally, the discussion also presents the degree of sensitiveness to social status, social distance and gender between the interlocutors in expressing refusals since those factors influence the choices of expressions of refusals.

Key words: *Speech Acts of Refusals (SARs), Conversational Principles, FTA in Politeness Theory, Thought Patterns.*

INTRODUCTION

A Japanese expression "Zensho shimasu" may literally be translated into "I'll take a proper step". Pragmatically and culturally speaking the original Japanese expression is usually understood as a polite way of refusing (Beebe and Takahashi 1989). So the speaker doesn't really mean to make any commitment upon the requested service. However, when such a pragmatic expression is communicated to

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an interlocutor who lacks of Japanese cultural understanding, he may think that the speaker agrees upon the requested commitment made between both of them. The question is why it goes in that way.

When a communication involves such an act of refusal, the interlocutors sharing ideas in the exchange may experience a communication barrier. They may be at risk in creating misunderstanding, and what is more threatening the interlocutors' faces which in turns generates the tension in the interaction with language and finally creates a communication disruption.

People in Indonesia realize that English becomes increasingly important in almost any field, such as business, industry, education and so on. As a result Indonesian people can't avoid experiencing international interactions in English that the potential for miscommunication through misinterpreted refusals of requests is also growing. However, this may also go in the same way for people in Indonesia involved in an English communication.

To prevent people from experiencing misinterpreting the speech acts of refusals of requests they need to be well informed with the importance of pragmatic competence, thus they develop their ability in the realization of speech acts of refusals. There must be extensive trainings and thorough studies on the issue, refusals of requests because of their communicatively central place in everyday communication. It is often difficult to refuse requests. It is even harder to refuse them in a foreign language—English—without risking offending the interlocutor. This involves not only linguistic knowledge, but also pragmatic knowledge. One can have a wide range of vocabulary and a sound knowledge of grammar, but misunderstandings can still arise if he or she cannot apply his or her pragmatic competence appropriately. This is why the writer has chosen the topic the speech acts of refusals of requests for the present discussion.

This article will only give light on how learners should think and react when refusing requests. The discussion, therefore, can be used to provide insights and

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background knowledge needed for conducting a research on the nature of refusals of requests. The article is also intended to discuss the necessary variables identified in a communication act.

Speech Acts

People are said to perform intended actions while talking. This may imply that there is a close link between speech acts and language functions. Austin's main contribution to speech act theory is the axiom that by saying something, someone actually does something (Austin 1962). A speech act is a unit of speaking and performs different functions in communication. Thus a single speech act actually contains three separate but related speech acts: locutionary acts, illocutionary acts, and perlocutionary acts.

Whenever a speaker produces an utterance, he performs a locutionary act. This is simply the act of producing a linguistically well-formed, and thus meaningful, expression.

A speaker usually does make utterances with certain purposes. Accomplishing communicative actions in everyday life requires employing necessary words under appropriate circumstances. In other words, when a speaker says something, he is simultaneously accomplishing a communicative action, that is, he is using words to perform actions in real world contexts. For example, when a speaker says, *"Could you please pass me the salt?",* he wishes to achieve the goal of having the intended audience help him gain access to the salt. In the example a speaker does not only utter that sentence but also intends the listener to pass him the salt. This kind of act of saying an utterance which a speaker produces with communicative purpose in mind is generally known as an illocutionary act. The illocutionary act is the function of the utterance that the speaker has in mind, i.e., the communicative purpose that is intended or achieved by the utterance. Another example is the statement "*You left the door open*". This sentence can have the illocutionary force of a request, a statement or

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an explanation. It might be uttered by someone who is experiencing noise from outside and asking the interlocutor to close the door again. It may be uttered by a speaker who is experiencing the cold breeze from outside since the door is no longer closed. It can also be uttered by a person who intends to explain why everyone in the room finds it hard to concentrate on what is being discussed, and to explain what is happening outside disturbs the people in the room.

Perlocutionary acts occur when a speaker wants a speech act to have an effect when he utters that statement. When saying "*Could you please pass me the salt?*", the speaker wishes the act of passing the salt to be performed: This is its perculutionary force. The perlocutionary act refers to the hearer's recognition of and response to the illocutionary act (that is, the hearer may feel amused, annoyed, generous, etc. as a consequence of the speaker's utterance).

Among the three acts, the illocutionary act is regarded as the most important, as it is actually what the speaker wants to achieve through the action of uttering the sentence. Yule (1996) claims that, of these types of speech acts, the most distinctive one is illocutionary force: Indeed, the term speech act is generally interpreted quite narrowly to mean only the illocutionary force of an utterance.

Searle (1975) proposes a five-way classification of illocutionary acts. They are as follows:

- representatives: these speech acts constitute assertions carrying true or false values (e.g. statements);
- directives: in these speech acts, there is an effort on the part of the speaker to have the hearer do something (e.g. request, advice);
- commissives: speech acts of this kind create an obligation on the part of the speaker; that is, they commit the speaker to doing something (e.g. promises);
- expressives: these speech acts express an attitude or an inner state of the speaker which says nothing about the world (e.g. apologies, congratulations, compliments);

- declarations: speech acts in which declarative statements are successfully performed and no psychological state is expressed (e.g. an excommunication).

A study on speech acts does help people learning a language, in this case English, to realize that language can be made complicated by the speaker. A request can be expressed in a statement, as in "*You left the door open*", and allows the interlocutor to understand the illocutionary acts and perlocutionary himself with a potential of risking misinterpretation. This evidence may convince that an English learner should reconsider the importance of speech act theory.

Conversational Principles

There are ways to keep the conversation progressing smoothly. In any speech act, the exchange participants have to follow many rules in using language for communication, one of which is conversational principles. Conversation proceeds on the basis that participants are expected to deal considerately with one another. In considering the suitability of participants' moves in conversation, Grice (1975) formulates a broad general principle, the Cooperative Principle, that is making the speaker's conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which the speaker is engaged.

Grice (1975) enumerates the four following maxims, which characterize the Cooperative Principles:

1. Maxim of Quantity, or to be brief, means that a speaker should make his contributions as informative as is required and no more. When a speaker speaks to someone, he feels obliged to give them enough details to enable them to understand him. At the same time, he should avoid giving too much information. Thus, if something is said, there's a reason for it. If something is left out, a speaker's already supposed to know it.

2. Maxim of Quality, or to be true, requires a speaker not to say what he believes to be false or for which he lacks adequate evidence. Therefore, lying is an obvious violation of the Cooperative Principle. If something known to be untrue is said, it is assumed to be intended to mislead, or to indicate ignorance. Language can be made arbitrarily complex in this respect so a speaker should consider irony or sarcasm.

3. Maxim of Relation, or to be relevant to the context and to what has been said previously. People who change the subject abruptly are usually considered rude or uncooperative. Of the many possible meanings of any language a speaker should select the one relevant to the shared goal.

4. Maxim of Manner, or to be clear, requires a speaker to avoid ambiguity and obscurity. A speaker has to organize his utterances in an orderly manner, that is, to provide information in a way which can be assimilated by the listener. If something seems to be obscure or ambiguous, a speaker is probably misunderstanding it.

Observing the four Maxims helps to sustain conversations. The speech act of refusing, like other speech acts, also requires the above-mentioned maxims to be considered in order to maintain a harmonious conversation. In fact, it is difficult to express a refusal without violating the principles. People often utilize negotiation rather than direct refusal in their daily relationships, therefore, more subtle strategies may be required if the speaker is to convey the intended refusal without hurting the other's feelings.

Face

Ritual constraints on communication include not only ways of presenting "self" but also the ways in which we give face to others. "Face" is something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced and must be constantly attended to in an interaction with language (Brown and Levinson 1978). In everyday discourse, a speaker often defers to interlocutors by avoiding subtle and
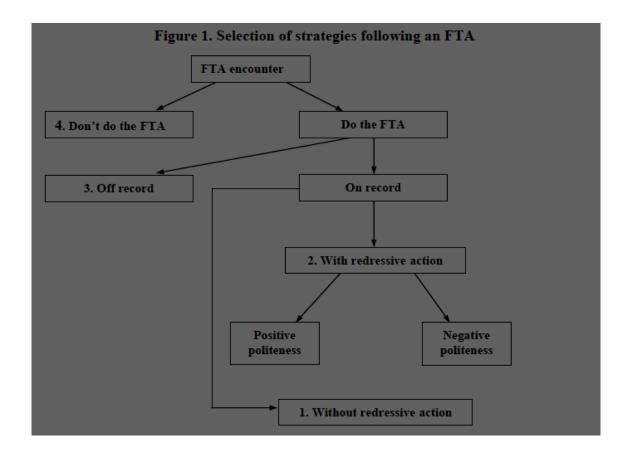
personal topics, a speaker may reassure his partners, and he may avoid open disagreement. If a speaker realizes that his messages are not clear to the listeners, he highlights important items and marks background information. When a speaker does not understand other persons, he gives non-verbal or non-threatening feedback to that effect. By doing so, a speaker is taking the "face" of both himself and of the hearers' into account.

According to Goffman (1967), there may be several reasons why people want to save their face. They may have become attached to the value on which this face has been built, they may be enjoying the results and the power that their face has created, or they may be nursing higher social aspirations for which they will need this face. Goffman also defines "face work", the way in which people maintain their face. This is done by presenting a consistent image to other people. In addition, one can gain or lose face by improving or spoiling this image. The better that image, the more likely one will be appreciated. People also have to make sure that in the efforts to keep their own face, they do not in any way damage the others' face.

Face-Threatening Act

In daily communication, people may give a threat to another individual's self-image, or create a "face-threatening act" (FTA). These acts impede the freedom of actions (negative face), and the wish that one's wants be desired by others (positive face) – by either the speaker, or the addressee, or both. Requests potentially threaten the addressee's face because they may restrict the addressee's freedom to act according to his/her will. Refusals, on the other hand, may threaten the addressee's positive face because they may imply that what he/she says is not favoured by the speaker. In an attempt to avoid FTAs, interlocutors use specific strategies to minimize the threat according to a rational assessment of the face risk to participants.

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The following figure shows strategies that are chosen when a speaker does an FTA to a listener. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), the lower the number preceding the strategies, the higher chance of face threat.

Figure 1. Selection of strategies following an FTA

FTA encounter

4. Don't do the FTA

Do the FTA

3. Off record

On record

2. With redressive action

Positive politeness

Negative politeness

1. Without redressive action

Notes on the example of refusal speech acts:

1. Without redressive action: means direct refusals, such as "*I refuse*".
2. On record (with redressive action): means to refuse explicitly with or without politeness strategy.
3. Off record: means not to refuse explicitly but give a listener a hint so that he or she can infer that the speaker means a refusal.
4. Don't do the FTA: means giving up refusing.

Politeness Theory

Early work on politeness by Goffman (1967) describes politeness as the appreciation an individual shows to another through avoidance or presentation of rituals. If a speaker wants to succeed in communication, the message must be conveyed in a clear manner. Leech (1983) sees politeness as forms of behaviour aimed at creating and maintaining harmonious interaction. He also considers the Politeness Principle as part of the principles for interpersonal rhetorics. His maxims for the Politeness Principle are as follows (Leech 1983):

- **Tact maxim**: *Minimize cost to other. Maximize benefit to other*.

- **Generosity maxim**: *Minimize benefit to self. Maximize cost to self.*

- **Approbation maxim**: *Minimize dispraise of other. Maximize dispraise of self.*

- **Modesty maxim**: *Minimize praise of self. Maximize praise of other.*

- **Agreement maxim**: *Minimize disagreement between self and other. Maximize agreement between self and other.*

- **Sympathy maxim**: *Minimize antipathy between self and other. Maximize sympathy between self and other.*

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness, as a form of behaviour, allows communication to take place between potentially aggressive partners. They set out to develop a model of politeness which will have validity across cultures. The common factor in Leech's (1983), and Brown and Levinson's (1987) approaches is that they claim, explicitly or implicitly, the universality of their principles for linguistic politeness. The general idea is to understand various strategies for interactive behaviours based on the fact that people engage in rational behaviours to achieve the satisfaction of certain wants.

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Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Transfer

The influence of the first language (L1) in cross-cultural communication (pragmatic transfer) is often evident when native procedures and linguistic means of speech act performance are transferred to interlanguage communication. Transfer occurs in two ways: 1) negative transfer or "interference" occurs where the two languages do not share the same language system, resulting in the production of errors; and 2) positive transfer or "facilitation", where the two languages share the same language system and the target form is correctly transferred (Gass and Selinker 1994). Pragmatic error or failure occurs where speech act strategies are inappropriately transferred from the L1 to L2 (Thomas 1983). Thus, cross-cultural study focuses on negative transfer because this is a source of misunderstanding or miscommunication. Most people in Indonesia experience such kind of transfer when they speak in English because they come from different cultural backgrounds and they speak different vernaculars. Their native systems, as Trosborg (1995) says, may often interfere negatively their English because they tend overgeneralize, simplify or reduce their sociolinguistic or sociopragmatic interlanguage knowledge.

The effect of negative transfer may be much more serious than an error at the syntactic or phonological level, because it can be interpreted as a representation of personality by the speaker (Gass and Selinker 1994; Richard 1980). In other words, if a non-native speaker uses the target language correctly in terms of phonetics, vocabulary and grammar, but manipulates it improperly in terms of social norms, a native interlocutor might think that he or she is not polite.

Factors Affecting Directness and Indirectness in Human Interaction

There are many socio-cultural factors affecting the *directness-indirectness* of utterances. Those factors, which may affect the choice of directness and indirectness

in communication, are as follows:

- *Age*: the old tend to be more indirect than the young.
- *Sex:* females prefer indirect expression.
- *Residence*: the rural population tends to use more indirectness than the urban.
- *Mood*: while angry, people tend to use more indirectness.
- *Occupation:* those who study social sciences tend to use more indirectness than those who study natural sciences.
- *Personality*: the extroverted tend to use more directness than the introverted.
- *Topic*: while referring to a sensitive topic, a taboo, people usually opt for indirectness.
- *Place*: when at home, people tend to use more directness than when they are elsewhere.
- *Communicative environment/setting:* when in an informal climate, people tend to express themselves in a direct way.
- *Social distance*: those who have closer relations tend to talk in a more direct way.
- *Time pressure:* when in a hurry, people are likely to use direct expressions.
- *Position:* when in a superior position, people tend to use more directness to their inferiors.

These factors help to determine the strategies as well as the number of semantic formulae used when speakers perform the act of refusing. A semantic formula may consist of a word, a phrase, or a sentence which meets a given semantic criterion or strategy. A semantic formula is described as the means by which a particular speech act is accomplished, in terms of the primary content of an utterance, such as a reason, an explanation, or an alternative (Fraser, 1981).

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Social Distance, Social Status, and Gender

Social distance is one of the factors which determines politeness behaviours (Leech 1983; Brown and Levinson 1987). The notion of social distance refers to the consideration of the roles people are taking in relation to one another in a particular situation as well as how well they know each other. This means the degree of intimacy between interlocutors. Brown and Levinson (1987) claim that politeness increases the social distance. On the other hand, there is very little solidarity establishing speech behaviour among strangers and intimates because of the relative preexisting familiarity of their relationship, whereas the negotiation of relationships is more likely to happen among friends.

The role of social status in communication involves the ability to recognize each other's social position (Leech 1983; Brown and Levinson 1987). People with high social status are more prone to receive deferential behaviour, including linguistic deference and negative politeness. Thus those with lower social status are inclined to avoid offending those with higher status and show more respect to them.

Gender and speech behaviour are also seen as two interwoven, interrelated variables. In other words, speech behaviours depend on the gender relationship between interlocutors. Thus refusing people of either the same or the opposite gender requires different linguistic patterns.

Thus, when a researcher wants to conduct a study on the act of refusing requests, he should include social distance (intimate, acquaintance, stranger); social status (low, high, equal); and gender (same gender, opposite gender). The working hypothesis, based on the literature on communication and speech acts, may relate to such variables because of their central roles in the choice of strategies used by speakers.
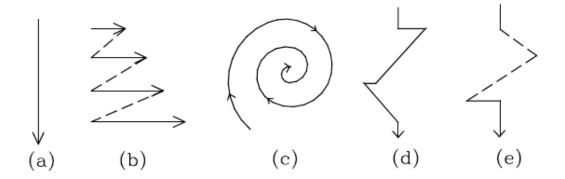
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Directness vs. Indirectness

In his study of 700 essays written by overseas students in the United States, Kaplan (1972) proposes 4 discourse structures that contrast with English hierarchy (Figure a). He concentrates mainly on writing and restricts his study to paragraphs in order to find out what he calls "cultural thought patterns":

- Parallel constructions, with the first idea completed in the second part (Figure b),
- Circularity, with the topic looked at from different tangents (Figure c),
- Freedom to digress and to introduce "extraneous" material (Figure d),
- Similar to (3), but with different lengths, and parenthetical amplifications of subordinate elements (Figure e).

They are respectively illustrated by the following diagrams:

Figure 2: Types of Kaplan's diagrams

(a)   (b)   (c)   (d)   (e)

Kaplan claims that each diagram represents a certain language or a group of languages. He identifies his discourse types with genetic language types, respectively.

- Figure a. English.
- Figure b. Semitic.

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- Figure c. Oriental.
- Figure d. Roman.
- Figure e. Russian.

In his diagrams, people from English-speaking countries often use direct expressions and thought patterns, and Oriental people in general and Indonesian in particular, seem to prefer roundabout and indirect patterns. Although Kaplan himself does not now subscribe narrowly to his model, it remains influential in the second language teaching and learning environment.

Speech Act Realization in Refusals

Refusal means the speech act of saying "*no*" (Wierzbicka 1987), expressing the addressee's non-acceptance, declining of or disagreeing with a request, invitation, suggestion or offer. More clearly, refusing means, essentially, saying '*no, I will not do it*' by the hearer in response to the speaker's utterance, in which the speaker has conveyed to the hearer that the speaker wants the hearer to do something and that the speaker expects the hearer to do it. Refusing can be seen as a move that challenges the pragmatic presuppositions of the preceding utterance. This FTA leads to a tendency on the part of the speaker to make use of certain strategies such as indirectness and polite expressions in order to avoid conflict (Brown and Levinson 1987). Thus, the refusal speech act realization is a major cross-cultural 'sticking point' for many non-native speakers including Indonesian learners leaning English.

In terms of pragmatics, requests and refusals are automatic sequences in the structure of the conversation which are called adjacency pair. Adjacency pair is the term used for certain consecutive speech turns which are closely related. They can be described as automatic sequences consisting of a first part and a second part produced by two successive speakers such that the second utterance is identified as related to the first as an expected follow-up. Having uttered the first part, the speaker immediately expects his/her conversational partner to produce a second part of the

same pair. The most common adjacency pairs are greeting-greeting, thanking-response, request-refusal/compliance, apology-acceptance, and question-answer. Managing adjacency pairs successfully is part of conversational competence. By producing an adjacently positioned second part, speakers can show that they can understand what the first speakers aim at and that they are willing to go along with that. The interlocutors can also assert their failure to understand, or disagreement. Otherwise, the first speakers may think that they misunderstand.

When a researcher focuses on the adjacency pair of request-refusal, he should consider that refusing is an FTA, and therefore, demands special attention from the speakers so that the message can be conveyed in a socially acceptable manner. While requests are pre-event acts, refusals are post-event acts. In everyday life, it is not easy to refuse. If a speaker should give a flat refusal, it may be interpreted as more than just the refusal itself. In contrast, it can create a feeling of discomfort in both the speaker who delivers the request and the hearer who refuse the request.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it could be stated here that the speech act of refusals is a complicated discussion. An Indonesian learner who learns English must know much about complicated pragmatic and linguistic theories in order to easily recognize the speech acts of refusals. Those are speech act theory, conversational principles, politeness theory, thought patterns and factors affecting human interaction.

An Indonesian learner who learns English may undergo difficulties in refusing requests because they come from different cultural backgrounds and they speak their vernaculars. Therefore, any efforts made in order to conduct a research on refusals of requests should be based on such theories as stated in this article.

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