

## A STUDY OF REFUSAL IN PROFESSIONAL DISCOURSE

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**Abstrak.** Penelitian ini membahas tentang ‘*refusal*’ (penolakan) dalam wacana profesional, khususnya tentang ungkapan penolakan dalam situasi-situasi di tempat kerja. Menyatakan penolakan atau mengatakan ‘tidak’ atas suatu undangan ataupun tawaran tidak selalu sesederhana yang diperkirakan, melainkan bahwa ketika seseorang hendak menolak suatu tawaran ataupun undangan, ada beberapa alternative pengungkapan dalam bahasa yang dapat dipilihnya dengan mempertimbangkan berbagai aspek sosial budaya yang hidup dalam masyarakat pengguna suatu bahasa. Penelitian ini membahas strategi-strategi yang dipilih oleh seseorang dalam situasi kerja ketika hendak menyatakan penolakan. Kerangka teori dalam penelitian ini dibentuk dari pendekatan pragmatik dan beberapa penelitian sebelumnya seperti Kana (1982), Beebe dan Takashi (1985) dan Kartomiharjo (1994) yang meneliti tentang berbagai bentuk pengungkapan penolakan dalam bahasa Inggris, Jawa dan bahasa Indonesia dalam situasi kelas ataupun percakapan pada umumnya. Beberapa faktor social seperti umur, kelas sosial, status dan jenis kelamin subjek dan lawan bicara menjadi pertimbangan dalam meneliti faktor-faktor sosial yang mempengaruhi pilihan strategi penolakan yang dijadikan variable dalam daftar pertanyaan atau kuesioner (*questionnaire*) yang disebarakan kepada subyek penelitian. Subyek penelitian adalah 35 orang karyawan PT Surya Sinar Berlian. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pilihan strategi penolakan bervariasi yang terutama dipengaruhi oleh status social responden. Hal ini tampaknya terutama disebabkan oleh karena tingkatan status karyawan dalam perusahaan yang berbeda-beda.

**Kata kunci:** pragmatics, refusals, refusal strategies, social factors, social dimensions

### Introduction

Studies in pragmatic aspects of language use in the society have increased with the increasing need to understand the mechanism of social interaction. Proponents in pragmatics such as Searle (1976), Leech (1983) and Levinson (1983) have laid important foundations of pragmatic studies of language. Daily routines such as thanking, greeting, inviting and even refusing to an invitation or offer have been widely studied in different languages and cultures (Brown and Levinson, 1989; Wolfson, 1989). Refusing to an invitation is a normal behavior that one may not have even thought that such a language behavior is involving a complex mechanism of selecting among possible variants of language forms and considering factors that affect the selection. Brown and Levinson (1989) state that refusal is one form of ‘face threatening acts’ (FTAs). When someone invites a person, s/he wishes that his or her invitation is accepted and appreciated. On the other hand, the person being invited has to consider the inviter’s sincerity and good intention before deciding to turn down the invitation. If he refuses, he will threaten the inviter’s positive face—his or her public self-image to maintain approval from others (1989:61). Thus, to minimize the risk of losing face in the part of the inviter, he has to choose the best strategies to refuse the invitation. The choice for the best strategy(-ies) will be related to politeness, i.e. positive politeness is needed to lower the threat to the positive face of the addressee.

Being linguistically polite means speaking to people appropriately. Holmes (1992) states, that being polite is a complicated business in any language. In order to speak politely, one should understand the social values—that is, some unwritten rules that

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should be understood in a relationship, such as how to behave politely. Stubbs (1983) notes that various social factors determine the speaker's use of language. People adapt their speech with the consideration of the person they are talking to and the point behind the talk. Coates (1986) observes that speakers who differ in terms of age, social class, status, and sex, will also differ in their choice of speech, even when they talk in the same context. Thus a speaker may have different strategies in expressing refusal to different people based on what he or she think the best to maintain good social relationship with them.

A previous study on refusals made in English by non-native English students studying in the USA (Kana,1982) has shown that cultural backgrounds have influenced the choice of refusal strategies and forms. Kana constructs a formula of refusal content: (*apology/thanks*) + *Excuse* ± (*alternative*). The excuse element is the only essential part, with the alternative and apology/thanks are optional. Kana also found three styles of refusals: hesitation, emphasis and extra linguistic features.

Another study was conducted by Beebe and Takashi (1985), who investigate refusals in relation with pragmatic transfer in the speech of non-native English speakers. The refusals were made to four situations: refusal to request, invitation, offers and suggestion. The social factors were conditioned that the refusals has to be made to the addressees of higher, lower and equal status. The results show that the refusal strategies can be direct and indirect. The direct strategy includes (1) expressions of positive opinion (as in I'd like to"), (2) expression of regret ('I'm sorry') and (3) excuse, reason or explanation. The indirect strategies include (1) expression of a wish to be able to attend to the request, the statement of alternative, a condition for future or past acceptance, a promise for future acceptance, a statement of principle, a statement of philosophy, an attempt to dissuade the interlocutor, a criticism of the request, a request for empathy, a statement of letting the interlocutor off the hook, self-defense, an unspecific or definite reply, a display of lack of enthusiasm, and verbal and non-verbal avoidance such as silence or topic switch, a hedge, or a joke. Another finding is that status plays a significant role in the strategy choices.

The third study was Kartomihardjo's (1994) study on the linguistic forms of rejection to an invitation, request, and an offer used in various social interactions in East Java. From the questionnaires distributed to subjects with various social backgrounds in Malang, he found seven types of rejection to responses with the consideration to the respondents' status: (1) the use of blunt "No" (2) the use of reason, (3) the use of conditional statement; (4) the use of proposal or choices; (5) the use of "thank you" followed by a comment, reason or something else; (6) the use of a comment, and (7)( the use of non-verbal gestures. The selection of these strategies was influenced by social status such as position, rank, service, economy, fame and seniority. Of the seven strategies, the indirect strategies are more frequently used by the respondents. The direct rejection such as "No" may be heard as too rough, less polite, too ignorant and indifferent of others. However, while the definite "No" may be expected in formal encounters in offices, the respondents usually add statement of apology, comment or other kinds of excuses.

This study focuses on the refusal strategies used in workplace situation. The questions are formulated as follows: (1) What kind of refusal strategies are used by the employees of PT Surya SinarBerlian Surabaya in workplace situation?, and (2) What social variables or factors influence the choice of their refusal strategies?

For the purpose of the study, previous findings on social factors are considered in constructing the instrument of study and refusal strategies found in previous studies are also adopted as the possible forms of refusals to be chosen by the respondents. The study is expected to give more insights on the refusal strategies in formal professional situation such as work place situation, and generally to the study of language in actual use.

## Method

The study is designed to be qualitative, in which description, explanation, classification and analysis of the data are conducted. The respondents were 35 employees of PT Surya SinarBerlian Surabaya, comprising of 16 male and 19 female respondents. A questionnaire was designed with 36 situational questions considering social factors as variables such as sex, age and status of the respondents. The situational questions were designed as natural as possible that the respondents would find it easy to imagine being in such situations. Each question contains five options for answer which represents the social factors being examined. The questionnaires were distributed to the respondents on their convenient time and they were given assistance when they did not understand the questions.

## Result

The analysis of the kinds and frequency of use of refusal strategies may be presented briefly in Table 1.

No	Refusal Strategies	Total	$\Sigma$ %
1.	Reason	264	21
2.	No	105	8.3
3.	Thanks + reason	415	33
4.	Condition/Choice	251	20
5.	Alternative	223	17.7

Table 1 Kinds and frequency of refusal strategies

Table 1 shows that *Thanks + reason* is the most frequently used strategy to refuse an invitation or offer. The result shows that one-third of the respondents chose this strategy. It means that 'thanks' is a polite response and appreciation for the offer and giving reasons is considered as the best way to refuse the offer.

The second is *Reason*, meaning that they often refuse an invitation by giving reasons indicating that they cannot accept the invitation for they have to do other things. It is also an effective way to refuse the offer eventhough it is not preceded with 'thanks'.

The third strategy, *Condition or Choice*, was selected when the respondents refuse the invitation with alternative choice for possible acceptance in the future. One-fifth of the respondents chose this strategy, indicating that the respondents could have accepted the offer but giving a choice to the addressee such as alternative time or under certain condition.

The fourth strategy, *Alternative*, means that the respondents were given freedom to write their own answer they consider more appropriate. Sometimes they add with apology or sorry in their answer. The least frequently used strategy, saying 'No' is rarely

used, and almost non-occurring when the respondents had to refuse older person. This shows that that saying 'No' directly is not considered as an appropriate and polite choice for refusal, while the other four strategies and considered more polite alternatives.

The social factors strongly influenced the refusal strategies used by the respondents. In general, the most influential factor is *social status*. This may show that when refusing, one will consider whether he refuses an offer from his superior, subordinate or his workmates equal in position with him. The second factor is *social distance*, followed by *age* and *sex*. These factors may not influence independently, but may combine to affect the respondents' strategy choice that influences to closer or distant respondents, but it does not give much effect to their strategy choice.

## Discussion

Items numbers 1,3 and 5 in the questionnaire are situated with a younger addresser in different sex, socially close, who made a refusal to an older addressee who was higher, equal and lower in status than the addresser respectively. When refusing to someone higher in status, the most frequently chosen strategy is apparently 'thanks + reason.' The same results also come with addressee of equal social status. With addressee of lower status, the choice among the four strategies (except for 'no') is more or less equal.

Items numbers 2,4 and 6 deal with similar situation with numbers 1, 3 and 5 above but now with socially distant factor. The result shows that 'thanks + reason' is again the most frequently chosen strategy when refusing to someone higher of equal in status with the addresser. When refusing to one lower in status, the 'condition + choice' seems to be a more preferred strategy. In all items, saying 'no' is again the lowest choice strategy.

Items number 7, 9, 11 and 19 deal with younger addresser making refusal to older addressee of the same sex, socially close and different social status, whether they are socially higher, equal or lower in status. The results show that 'thanks + reason' strategy is used most frequently in the four situations, while the other strategies are far lower in frequency.

Items numbers 8, 10, 12 and 20 deal with the same situations as above but with participants socially distant. As predicted, 'thanks + reason' strategy is used most frequently in situations 8, 10 and 20, while situation 12 shows 'condition/choice' and 'alternative' as having equal frequency. This shows that refusal expressions to a colleague of lower social status are more varied than the other situations.

Items numbers 13, 15, 17 are situations where the addresser refuses to a colleague of similar age, socially close, but different in sex and social status. The strategies being chosen are more varied, including 'thanks + reason,' 'alternative' and 'reason.' The same age factor seems to give more freedom for the addressee to express their refusal. Similar results are found for items 14, 16, and 18. Still, among the choices, blunt 'no' strategy is rarely the choice, except for situation 18, where saying 'no' is chosen by 6 respondents.

Items numbers 21 and 23 deal with addresser of similar age, same sex, socially close but different social status. The results for both male and female respondents also show variations of strategy, including 'thanks + reason', 'condition/choice', 'reason,

and 'alternative'. Again, addresser of the same sex seems to be more relaxed in refusing to an offer.

Items numbers 22 and 24 are similar to the situations in 21 and 23 but with socially distant relation. The strategy used by the female respondents are almost similar, 'thanks + reason', or 'alternative'; while the male respondents show more varied answers, 'thanks + reason', 'condition/choice', 'reason', and 'alternative'.

Items number 26, 27 and 29 are situations with same age and social distance, but of different sex and social status. The results show that the answers by both female and male respondents are varied, ranging from 'thanks + reason', 'condition/choice', and 'reason.' In situation 27 where male respondents responds to female addressee, the 'alternative' strategy seems to be most proper.

Items numbers 25, 28 and 30 are situations where older addresser who are socially distant and of different sex and social status. The results show that 'thanks + reason' strategy is of the highest choice. While situations 31, 33 and 35, where the respondents are close socially and of the same sex, the 'reason' strategy is of the highest score. In contrast, in items numbers 32, 34 and 36 where the same variables are similar age (older), same sex, but the social status and distance are different, the results also show that 'thanks + reason' strategy is of the highest choice. The results show that where distance variable is different, the respondents seem to prefer appreciating the offer first and then followed with reason for refusing it.

## Conclusion

The analysis of refusal strategies in workplace situations as shown above can be summarized as follows. There are five most frequently used refusal strategies ordered from highest to lowest: 'thanks + reason', 'condition/choice', 'alternative,' 'reason and 'No'. The social factors that contribute to the strategy choices are *social status* as the most influential factor, followed by *social distance*, *age*, and finally *sex*. This finding shows that in professional workplace situations, and thus in professional discourse, sex and age may not be determining factors, in comparison to the position of the respondents in the job and interpersonal relationship between them.

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