

Issuing a Refusal: How Female Saudi Speakers of Arabic Say No

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the refusal strategies used by Saudi female speakers of Arabic. More specifically, the study aims at exploring the most frequently used refusal strategies by those speakers and how directness might have an effect on that use. A modified version in Arabic of a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) that was originally developed and used by Beebe et al. (1990) is used to elicit the data. The written questionnaire consists of nine situations. The initiating acts are three requests, three invitations and three offers which were designed to elicit refusals. The situations specify the context and the social status of interlocutors. The data is analyzed using a modified version of a classification scheme of refusal strategies developed by Beebe et al. (1990). The analysis focuses on the semantic formulas used for each situation and the frequency of each refusal strategy. The results reveal that the order of the semantic formulas in the responses of the participants differed across the initiating acts and the status differences. 'Excuse/Reason', an indirect refusal strategy, is used the most by the participants in their refusals. The excuses/reasons that the participants give tend to be lacking detail and of an uncontrollable nature. 'Negative Ability' is another frequently used strategy. Although a direct strategy, the participants still show their awareness of the need to lessen the threat that their refusal poses on the interlocutor by using other indirect strategies and adjuncts to accompany the direct one. The participants used more indirect refusal strategies than direct which might indicate that the participants are trying to mitigate their refusals by being less direct.

Key words: Speech Acts, Refusals, Politeness, Direct, Indirect, Refusal Strategies, Semantic Formulas, Face-Threatening Acts

INTRODUCTION

A Refusal is an act by which a speaker "denies to engage in an action proposed by the interlocutor" (Chen, Ye, and Zhang, 1995, p. 121). Refusals are particularly problematic due to their nature. There is a significant difference between saying a blunt 'no' and expressing regret or offering reasons for a refusal. Although the speech act of refusal is universal; seen across cultures and with different languages, its form differs according to several factors. Social distance, gender, age, and social relations all play a role in the issuing of a refusal. This makes refusals problematic even for speakers of the same language. A flat 'No' might be acceptable in some situations but might be seen as impolite in others. A speaker issuing a refusal is aware of the threat to the face of the hearer and hence would usually resort to certain strategies to mitigate the effect of that threat on the hearer.

A speaker would refuse an initiating act that is issued by an interlocutor. Thus, the refusal is not an initiating act, as opposed to acts like requests, offers, invitations, and suggestions. Actually, this speech act is the result of a request, order, suggestion, or advice. Refusals may require more planning than other speech acts due to their nature. It is not just

the matter of issuing the act; other factors contribute to the forming of the refusal. The speaker should consider other socio-pragmatic and social factors before uttering the refusal.

Many studies have been done investigating the speech act of refusal. Many of these studies have approached the topic from a cross-cultural perspective (Nelson, Carson, Al-Batal & El-Bakary, 2001, Al-Kahtani, 2005, Nguyen, 2006). These studies shed light on how speakers of different languages issue a refusal. They have found that certain cultures have an effect on forming refusals, particularly on how direct/indirect these refusals are. Other studies have investigated the effect L1 has on the refusals issued using L2 and the existence of pragmatic transfer in the refusals used (Abdul Sattar, Che Lah, & Raja Sulciman, 2011, Abed, 2011, Gass & Houck, 1999). In their findings, pragmatic transfer did occur in some instances but many factors play a role in the presence of such transfer such as the level of proficiency in L2 and the mode of instruction, among others.

Refusals issued by females are rarely a main focus in the majority of the studies done on refusal strategies. Many studies either touch on the subject or have females as one group when gender is a variable to examine the differences

between the strategies used by males and females (Abed, 2011; Beckers, 1999; Nelson, Al-Batal & El-Bakary, 2002; Yamagashira, 2001). These studies do not specifically examine how females issue their refusals or what factors might affect those instances.

This study investigates the refusal strategies used in the Saudi culture. More specifically, the study investigates the most frequent semantic formulas used in issuing those refusals. It is hoped that this study will shed light on some of the commonly used strategies used by females in the Saudi society in addition to how indirectness might have an impact on their choice of refusal strategies. There seems to be a lack of studies on refusals used specifically by females. This study hopes to fill that gap and contribute to the literature.

The study is conducted through the use of a questionnaire that elicits refusals on the part of the participants. The participants are to answer DCT questionnaire in which they refuse requests, offers, and invitations. These refusals are then analyzed through examining the semantic formulas that the respondents use to issue their refusals. Directness/indirectness will also be examined.

It aims at answering the following research question:

1. What are the most frequent semantic formulas used by Saudi females when refusing a request, an invitation, and an offer?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Speech Act of Refusal

Speech act theory, originally introduced by Austin, was developed by Searle and discussed in many of his works (Searle, 1969, 1971, 1979). Speech act theory has received a great deal of interest by researchers due to the nature of speech acts. According to Searle (1969), speech acts are the basic components of communication. Thus, the study of these acts is necessary to shed light on how to issue such acts, how to form them and the rules governing their use in a specific language or culture. In fact, some have built taxonomies, conditions, and rules that are used when dealing with these speech acts (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969, 1971, 1979; Mey, 2001; Leech, 1980).

Gass and Selinker (2001) state that "All languages have a means of performing speech acts and presumably speech acts themselves are universal, yet the 'form' used in specific speech acts varies from culture to culture" (p. 288). Speech acts occur in every language but the circumstances in which they are issued and the form used to issue them differ from one language to another. These differences are a result of some cultural and linguistic dissimilarities between languages. Searle and Vandervken (1985), on the other hand, define the speech act of refusal as follows: "the negative counterparts to acceptances and consentings are rejections and refusals. Just as one can accept offers, applications, and invitations, so each of these can be refused or rejected" (p. 195).

According to Al-Shalawi (1997), the study of refusal strategies is significant because they are culture specific, that is, they vary from one culture to another. In addition, refusals are issued using different forms and contents according

to the initiating act which can be a request, an offer, etc. Another important reason for studying refusals is that they usually call for the use of many politeness strategies and are affected by extralinguistic factors such as status, social distance and personal beliefs (p. 6).

A classification of refusal strategies

Many elements play a role in the identification of a refusal in an utterance. The form, the semantic content, the surface illocutionary force, and the situation in which the refusal is made are some of these elements that help interpret a refusal. The nature of the speech act of refusal as a face-threatening act complicates the identification of refusals. "Silence" can even be considered as a refusal in some situations (Gass et al. pp. 9-10). According to Gass et al. the best-known and most used scheme for analyzing refusals is the classification devised by Beebe et al. (1990, ps. 72-73). This system was first introduced in Beebe and Cummings (1985). Still, the most cited classification was the one presented by Beebe et al. in their 1990 analysis of pragmatic transfer in refusals by Japanese and Americans.

The classification scheme they presented was based on semantic formulas; the expressions that are used to perform the speech act of refusal by the speaker. The scheme is divided into three categories; 1) Direct, 2) Indirect, 3) Adjuncts. Each of these is then divided into subcategories according to the semantic formulas used to refuse. While direct and indirect refusals are the semantic formulas used to express the refusal, adjuncts are the expressions that are used with a refusal but are not considered as refusals on their own.

Modified versions of the scheme have been used by the majority of the studies done on refusal strategies. Some researchers have omitted some of the sub-categories in the taxonomy according to the data in their studies (Al-Eryani, 2007; Al-Kahtani, 1997; Felix-Brasdefer, 2002; Morkus, 2009; Nelson, Carson, Al-Batal & El-Bakary, 2001; Yamagashira, 2001).

Refusals & Politeness

Refusals are face-threatening acts in that there is a need to use some type of politeness strategies to mitigate the refusal. Goffman (1967) states that a speaker must maintain face in any type of interaction with others. In addition to maintaining face, a speaker must "take into consideration his place in the social world beyond that interaction" (p. 7). According to Brown and Levinson (1978) some speech acts "intrinsically threaten face". These acts "by their nature run contrary to the face-wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker" (p. 70). These acts are known as 'face threatening acts' (FTA). By this rational, the speech act of refusal is a face-threatening act since it threatens both speaker and hearer.

Brown and Levinson (1978) state that speakers use politeness strategies in such cases to 'mitigate' face threats. A speaker issuing the refusal would resort to these politeness strategies to lessen the effect on the requester and eliminate any face threats. These politeness strategies are found in all languages and cultures but they differ in their usage and form.

Brown and Levinson (1978) built on Goffman's (1967) notion of 'face'. They define face as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself, consisting in two related aspects. These aspects are 'negative face' and 'positive face'. They define them as (p. 67):

negative face: the want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others.

positive face: the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others.

Languages have different concepts and one important concept that is seen throughout languages is *politeness* (Lakoff, 1972). Brown and Levinson (1978) state that there are three sociological factors speakers would consider when engaged in conversations. These are the 'social distance' (D) of 'speaker' (S) and 'hearer' (H) (a symmetric relation), the relative 'power' (P) of S and H (an asymmetric relation), and the absolute 'ranking' (R) of impositions in the particular culture (p. 79).

Social status is an important factor in politeness. It has been a significant factor in many studies done on speech acts, more specifically, refusal strategies (Al-Aryani, 2010; Al-Kahtani, 2005; Beckers, 1999; Beebe et al. 1990; Felix-Brasdefer 2002; Morkus, 2009; Nelson et al., 2002;; Nguyen, 2006; Nelson et al., 2001; Yamagashira, 2001). Hence, it will be a factor that will be examined in the present study.

Brown and Levinson (1978) put forward some strategies that could be used with FTA. Positive politeness strategies include noticing, attending to hearer interests, wants, needs and goods, exaggerating interest, approval, and sympathy with hearer, intensifying interest to hearer, using in-group identity markers, seeking agreement, or avoiding disagreement (p. 107). Negative politeness strategies include being conventionally indirect, questioning or hedging, being pessimistic, apologizing, or stating the FTA as a general rule (p. 136).

Empirical Studies

The majority of the studies done on the speech act of refusal approach refusals cross-culturally. In addition, many studies check for the existence of pragmatic transfer in the refusals issued by subjects learning a foreign language, mostly English. In the majority of the studies, the data was collected via a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) which was originally devised by Beebe et al. (1990) (Beckers (1999), Amarien (1997), Hong (2011), Yamagashira (2001), Sadeghi and Savojbolaghchilar (2011), Abdul Sattar, Che Lah and Raja Suleiman (2011), Abdul Sattar et al (2010), Nelson et al. (2001), Umale (2011), Al-Kahtani (2005), Al-Shalawi (1997), Al-Eryani (2007), Abed (2011). In other studies role plays were used for collecting the data (Morkus (2009), Felix-Brasdefer (2002).

The initiating acts included requests, offers, invitations and suggestions. The situations were usually designed around a number of variables that include social status, social distance and gender. The semantic formulas produced by the participants in their refusals were examined according to their order, frequency and content. A classification scheme of refusal strategies was used to analyze the semantic

formulas according to their directness and/or indirectness. The scheme was devised by Beebe et al. in their study and modified versions of this scheme were later to be used by many studies conducted on refusal strategy realizations in different cultures and with different languages.

The studies that investigated the presence of pragmatics transfer when the refusals were issued in L2 found some evidence of transfer, especially in the frequency and content of the refusal strategies (Beebe et al. (1990), Felix-Brasdefer (2002), Amarien (1997), Hong (2011), Yamagashira (2001), Sadeghi and Savojbolaghchilar (2011), Al-Eryani (2007), Felix-Brasdefer (2002), Abed (2011) . In addition, studies that examined the cross-cultural difference when issuing a refusal have found some differences in how speakers of different languages refuse different initiating acts (Beckers (1999), Nelson et al. (2001), Umale (2011), Al-Shalawi (1997) while other studies focused on one language to examine the most frequently used refusal strategies used (Abdul Sattar, Che Lah and Raja Suleiman (2011), Abdul Sattar et al (2010).

There is a lack of studies done on the refusal strategies used by females. In some of the studies above gender was a factor that was investigated (Abed 2011, Beckers 1999). A study conducted by Nguyen (2006) addresses the issue of gender through the analysis of the choice of direct and indirect refusals. Nguyen (1998), as cited in Nguyen (2006), states that "one of the factors that affect the choice of being direct or indirect in an utterance is sex where females tend to favour indirect expressions." Kunjara (2001), in her study of women and politeness, stated that "politeness can be an expression of goodwill and non intrusive behavior" (p. 50). She further notes that people attempt to soften the effects of their face-threatening acts by using a variety of politeness strategies in communication. Amarien (1997) found that women used more 'elaborate explanations' to excuse their refusals as opposed to men who used 'short expressions' in their indirect refusals. In his study Abed (2011) stated that females were more 'sensitive' to higher status than males due to females' use of more refusal adjuncts than males in their refusals to higher status interlocutors.

From the above studies, the following observations might be concluded:

1. Women tend to employ more politeness strategies in their refusals.
2. Women are more likely to use more explanations and statements of regret in their refusals.
3. Women tend to be more sensitive to the interlocutor's status.
4. Women tend to consider the feelings of the interlocutors when issuing the refusal

Saudi Arabia: A High-context Culture

Like most Arab cultures, Saudi Arabia is viewed as a high-context culture. Gudykunst et al. states that "members of high-context cultures tend to be collectivistic" (p. 183, 1996). Being a member of such a culture, a person is inclined to put the interest of the group before that of the individual. Al-Shalawi notes that in such cultures 'in-group'

interest has a greater value and carries more importance than ‘individual interest’ (p. 57). Harmony among group members is considered as the highest goal of individuals. Hence, Saudi speakers would probably tend to put the interests and wants of the group before that of their own. This means that a Saudi speaker refusing a request for example would resort to a number of politeness strategies to mitigate the effect of the refusal in an attempt to maintain social harmony.

According to Gudykunst et al., these cultures “rely heavily on contextual cues” (p. 181). These contextual cues include age, gender, social distance, and status which is examined in the present study. Consequently, their utterances and responses would be affected by these factors. Speakers in such cultures would adhere to the impact that these cues might have on their speech. Hence, a Saudi speaker turning down an offer would probably take these ‘cues’ into consideration as he/she utters that refusal.

In addition, Ting-Toomey (1988) (as cited in Gudykunst et al. 1996) argues that “high context communication predominates in collectivistic cultures” (p.36). One predominant feature of such communication is avoidance of “direct confrontation”. Speakers would accordingly go for a more “indirect mode” of communication when confronted by a conflict (Gudykunst et al.). They maintain that such indirectness in verbal communication is valued in such cultures. This indirectness is seen in the tendency of speakers of collectivistic cultures to use certain strategies to maintain in-group harmony.

Another significant feature is the tendency to avoid factual or detailed expressions (Gudykunst et al). Al-Shalawi states that Saudis tend to give little information and vague expressions in their refusals. One reason behind this tendency is that in such high-context cultures, ‘details’ are seen as a personal matter. In addition, Ting-Toomey (1988), as cited in Al-Shalawi, notes that “High context communication depends on the context, so very little information is explicitly presented in the message” (p. 37).

Morkus’ (2009) analysis of other studies done in the Arab culture revealed the following findings (p. 70):

1. Tendency to use indirect refusal strategies especially when refusing an interlocutor of a higher status
2. Tendency to use more direct refusal strategies in equal status situations
3. Frequency of religious reference, especially invoking the name of God
4. Tendency towards giving vague or unspecified reasons and explanations for refusals

METHODOLOGY

Participants of the Study

The study examines the refusals issued by Saudi female native speakers of Arabic. The participants of the study are 45 Saudi female BA students studying at King Saud University. They are between the ages of 19 – 25 and students of the Department of Social Studies at the College of Arts. They have no prior knowledge in linguistics or pragmatics to avoid any bias in their responses.

Instrument of Data Collection

A modified version of a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) that was used by Al-Shalawi (1997) and originally developed and used by Beebe et al. (1990) was used to elicit the data. Al-Shalawi used both a modified English and Arabic versions of the one designed by Beebe et al. In the present study, the Arabic version is used since the aim of the study is to focus on Arabic. Furthermore, the version used in the present study was modified to better suit female speakers of Arabic.

This method of data collection was originally designed by Blum Kulka (1982). It is well established in the field and was used by the majority of the studies in the literature (Al-Shalawi, 1997; Al-Kahtani, 2005; Nelson et al., 2002; Amarien, 1997; Al-Eryani, 2010; Hong, 2011).

The DCT is a written questionnaire that consists of situations in which the background, setting, social distance (close – distant), social status (higher – lower – equal) are provided. After the relevant information is provided in this part of the questionnaire, a dialogue is presented which is followed by a blank. In it, the participant is expected to write down his/her response according to the initiating act/dialogue. The respondents in such questionnaires are encouraged to write down what they think they would say in a similar situation. In DCTs of this type the amount of the contribution made by the respondent is not specified or limited. These are known as open-ended DCTs (Beebe & Cummings, 1996).

In the present study, the written questionnaire consisted of nine situations. The initiating acts are three requests, three invitations and three offers. The questionnaire was prepared to elicit refusals and administered in Arabic. The situations specified the context and the interlocutors. This was followed by an incomplete dialogue. The participants were asked to complete the dialogue in the space provided. The participants were required to write the responses Arabic.

The DCT was administered on campus on 45 participants enrolled in the Social Studies BA program at the College of Arts, King Saud University. The questionnaire was given to the participants in the department. This was done to better control the distribution and collection of the questionnaire. The participants were given 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire. They were encouraged to use the same refusals as if they were refusing a similar situation in their daily lives. They were encouraged to use the language they use every day.

Procedure

The data is analyzed using a modified version of classification scheme of refusal strategies developed by Beebe et al. (1990). This taxonomy consists of three components: direct refusal strategies, indirect refusal strategies, and adjuncts to refusals.

First, the responses written by the participants are coded into a sequence of semantic formulas. Al-Shalawi (1997) states that these semantic formulas are used as the basic

units of analysis since all speech acts are issued via semantic formulas. In an utterance made by a participant, the primary content of that utterance is the semantic formula, i.e. the unit of analysis. These semantic formulas could be, as in the case of refusals, a reason, an alternative, an expression of regret or an explanation which are seen as the head act of the utterance.

Some of the refusals issued by some of the participants in the present study are coded as in Tables 1 and Table 2.

The semantic formulas used in the coding of these samples from the responses of the participants examples were the ones formulated by Beebe et al. (1990).

After the coding of the utterances into semantic formulas was done, the data was analyzed quantitatively following the method used by Beebe et al. (1990). First, the order of the semantic formulas used in each situation was examined. This meant that the refusal in Table 3, [negative ability] was used first and [excuse] was second. On the other hand, the refusal in Table 4 had [negative ability] as its first formula, [excuse] as its second, and [future acceptance] as its third.

In addition to the order of semantic formulas used in each refusal, the total number of semantic formulas used by the participants in each situation was calculated. Then, the percentage of each semantic formula was calculated.

Table 1. Semantic formulas used in a refusal

	Order of semantic formulas	
	1	2
Utterance	/Mā aqdar/ I can't	/Li'anī mashghūlah ba'ad/ Because i'm busy too
Semantic formula	Negative ability	Excuse

Table 2. Semantic formulas used in a refusal

	Order of semantic formulas		
	1	2	3
Utterance	/Mā aqdar/ I cannot	/Mashghūlah alhīn/ I'm busy now	/T'ālī waqt thānī/ Come at another time
Semantic formula	Negative ability	Excuse	Future acceptance

Table 3. Excuse/reason across initiating acts

Semantic formula	Initiating act					
	Request		Invitation		Offer	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Excuse/reason	111	31%	118	34%	61	18.82%

Table 4. Negative ability across initiating acts

Semantic formula	Initiating act					
	Request		Invitation		Offer	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Negative ability	58	16.71%	65	18.95%	34	10.49%

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Frequency of Semantic Formulas

In this section, the frequency of the semantic formulas is presented. The most frequent semantic formulas used with each initiating act (requests, invitations and offers) will be discussed. This section is divided according to the most frequent semantic formulas used by the participants.

Excuse/Reason

'Excuse/Reason', an indirect refusal strategy Beebe et al. (1990) classification of refusal strategies, was the most frequently used semantic formula across all three initiating acts. These excuses/reasons differed in their content. Table 3 represents the frequency of this semantic formula across the initiating acts.

The participants tended to use 'Excuse/Reason' more than any of the other strategies. This refusal strategy is used a total of 111 times in Requests. The use of Excuse/Reason to refuse here suggests that the participants try to lessen the effect of the refusal on the interlocutor; so as if to say that if it were not for this reason, the participant would have accepted the request. This strategy is considered as the most common strategy in a number of the studies done on refusal strategies (Abdul Sattar et al., 2010, 2011; Alshalawi, 1997; Umale, 2011; among others.)

According to Alshalawi, Saudi Arabia is considered a high-context culture. In such cultures, speakers tend to resort to vague expressions. Speakers give less information and appear to explain matters with as few details as possible. Due to this tendency, it is observed that some of the excuses/reasons given by the participants in the present study are vague and un-detailed. The participants used expressions such as "/warāy ashghāl/ I have other things to do" and "/msta'jlah alhīn/-I'm in a hurry now" to express their refusal.

In addition, the excuses used by the participants tend to be 'uncontrollable'. These include excuses such as family and health related issues. The excuses/reasons they use here include: "/ana batla' 'nd bintī maw'id/-I'm leaving my daughter has an appointment" and "/li'anī tal'ah lilbayt alhīn/- because I'm leaving for home now". Alshalawi explains these as being uncontrollable in the sense that the speakers do not usually express their "real inclination and internal desires straightforward" because they do not view them as good reasons when expressing their refusals (p.44).

When the initiating act is an Invitation, the participants use 'Excuse/Reason' 118 times. As was mentioned above, this strategy is found to be a frequently used strategy in some of the studies done on refusal strategies. Beebe et al. report that the excuses that are typically given by the Japanese participants in their study tend to lack details and are of a more general nature. This is also the case with the Saudi respondents in Al-Shalawi's study and The Iraqi respondents in Abdul Sattar's et al. study. The tendency to use such general and uncontrollable excuses/reasons could be attributed to the nature of Eastern cultures.

In the present study, the participants use excuses that involve family such as "/ahlī mā yiwafqūn/-My parents would

say no” and “/al-yūm biyjūn khālātī/- My aunts are coming today”. They also used ones that lack details and are of a vague nature such as “/’ndī ba’ḍ al-ashghal-I have some things to do” and “/bs ’ndī maw’id muhim/-But I have an important appointment”.

When the participants refused an offer, they tended to use ‘Excuse/Reason’ more than any other formula. It is used 61 times. One observation here is that only when the offer is issued by higher and equal status interlocutors that the participants respond using an ‘Excuse/ Reason’ in their refusal which is used 44 times. When the interlocutor is lower, they never use an ‘Excuse/Reason’ to issue their refusal. This is due to the nature of the offer when the interlocutor is lower which is discussed below.

As mentioned above, the use of this particular formula suggests that the participants want to lessen the effect of their refusal on the interlocutor. The participants’ excuses/reasons tend to be vague and lacking detail. Some of the excuses used here are “/li’asbāb mu’ayanah ’ndī/-I have my reasons” and “/mā ’ajbnī/-I didn’t like it”. This again illustrates the points presented by Al-Shalawi and Abdul Sattar that Arab cultures are collectivistic and tend to see specific and detailed reasons as a personal matter that need not be discussed or presented as excuses. Thus, they tend to utter reasons that are of a more general nature.

Negative ability

‘Negative ability’, a direct refusal strategy, is another strategy used across all initiating acts. Although a direct strategy, it is usually accompanied by adjuncts or other indirect formulas to try to mitigate the effect of the refusal on the hearer. Table 4 represents the frequency of this semantic formula across the initiating acts.

A frequent strategy used with requests is ‘Negative Ability’; a direct refusal strategy. The participants expressed their refusal of requests using this strategy 58 times. Although participants were direct in the use of this strategy, it was usually mitigated by the use of other indirect strategies in the same refusal. This is done to help lessen the face threat on the interlocutor.

This strategy is also used by the participants with invitations and offers. It is used by the participants 65 times (18.95%) when the initiating act is an invitation while it is used 34 times (10.49) when it is an offer. Although a direct strategy, it is usually mitigated by the use of other indirect strategies in the refusal itself. One participant expresses her refusal by saying “/mā aqdar/-I can’t”, but still shows her awareness of the needs of the interlocutor’s face and attempts to lessen the effect of the refusal by using other indirect strategies in the same refusal. This is evident when she precedes this expression by “/anā āsfah/-I’m sorry” and follows it by “/’ndī ashghal-I have things to do” to mitigate her refusal.

Statement of regret/apology

Statement of regret/apology, an indirect refusal strategy, is another strategy used across all initiating acts. Table 5 represents the frequency of this semantic formula across the initiating acts.

‘Statement of Regret/Apology’ is another strategy that is used by the participants in the refusal of requests. The participants used this refusal strategy 52 times (14.95%). Using this strategy might suggest that the participants feel embarrassed for not complying with the request. According to Al-Shalawi, this is a characteristic of a collectivistic culture. The participants try to soften the effect of the refusal on the interlocutor. The participants in the present study use expressions such as: “/ma’lish astādḥah/- I’m sorry professor” and “/i’ dhrīnī ḥabībī/you’ll have to excuse me dear” to express their apology/regret for not fulfilling the wants of the interlocutor. Abdul Sattar et al. state that the use of this strategy “politely mitigates” the refusal.

The participants refuse invitations through the use of ‘Statement of Regret/ Apology’ 35 times (10.20%). An apology is seen as an act that attempts to “set things right” (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983, p. 20). The use of this strategy suggests that the participants aim at mitigating the refusal of the invitation. They express their regret of not being able to accept the invitation of the interlocutor which might be interpreted as a way of reducing the effect of the refusal itself on the interlocutor. Once an interlocutor hears an apology as a response to an invitation, he/she has put forward, a refusal of the invitation is expected. Some of the participants’ refusals include; “/āsfah/-I’m sorry” and “/ma’lish ḥabībī/- I’m sorry dear”.

When the initiating act was an offer, the participants used this strategy 16 times (4.93%). Some of the expressions used to express regret/apology include “/i’ dhrīnī/-You’ll have to excuse me”, “/āsfah/-I’m sorry” and “/ma’lish/- I’m sorry”. The use of such formula again suggests that the participants are aware of the need to mitigate their refusals.

Direct ‘No’

Direct ‘No’, a direct refusal strategy, is another strategy used across all initiating acts. Table 6 represents the frequency of this semantic formula across the initiating acts.

Direct ‘No’ is expressed in Arabic as “/lā/-No”. This direct refusal strategy is used by the participants to refuse both requests and invitations (6.05 %, 6.99 respectively). Nonetheless, the participant usually would follow a direct ‘No’

Table 5. Statement of regret/apology across initiating acts

Semantic formula	Initiating act					
	Request		Invitation		Offer	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Statement of regret/apology	52	14.95%	35	10.20%	16	4.93%

Table 6. Direct ‘no’ across initiating acts

Semantic formula	Initiating act					
	Request		Invitation		Offer	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Direct ‘No’	21	6.05	24	6.99	44	10.40%

with an explanation to their refusal such as an apology, an excuse or an alternative. Some of the responses of the participants that showcase such instances are: “/lā/-No /āsfah/-I’m sorry”, “/lā/-No /ndī ḍaḡḡt tadrīb/-I have back to back training” and “/lā/-No /al-afḍal tisa’līn ahl al-khibrah/-It’s better to ask someone with more experience”

Direct ‘No’ is also frequently used with offers, used 44 times (10.40%). It is interesting to see that it is with offers only that the participants opt for ‘No’ in the first position with all three situations. The status of the interlocutors might have had some effect on the frequency of the direct ‘No’. Some of the expression used to express this formula include “/lā ’ādī/-No, it’s ok”, “/mū mushkilah/-No problem” and “/ma’līsh yā Mirī/-Don’t worry about it Mary”.

Some studies found that Arab speakers rarely use a direct ‘No’ in their refusals and when it is used, they would avoid using it in the first position in their refusals (AlShalawi, 1997, Al-Eryani, 2007, Abdul Sattar, 2010, AlKahtani, 2005). On the other hand, Nelson, et al. (2002) stated that although it has been established in the literature of cross-cultural studies that Arab cultures favor indirect communication style when compared to Americans, the finding of their study reveal that “the frequency of direct and indirect refusal strategies used in Egypt and the US are approximately the same” (p. 52). It should be noted here that Nelson et al. used an oral and not a written version of the DCT.

Attempt to dissuade interlocutor

‘Attempt to Dissuade the Interlocutor’, an indirect refusal strategy, offers an interesting case as it is only used with offers and in one specific situation. Table 7 represents the frequency of this semantic formula across the initiating acts.

A formula that is used only when the interlocutor is lower is ‘Attempt to Dissuade Interlocutor (let interlocutor off the hook)’ which is used 44 times (10.40%) in the refusal of an offer. It is worth noting here that this formula only occurred in situation 9 (the housemaid situation). In Beebe et al, this is also the case (the cleaning lady situation) as the participants opted for this formula when they issued their refusals. This might indicate that the content of the semantic formula used in the initiating act might play a role in the semantic formulas used by speakers when uttering a refusal. This situation in particular had an apology as one speech act used by the maid in her utterance. Abdul Sattar came to the same conclusion, adding that other studies that did not include this situation had no occurrence of this semantic formula as in Felix-Brasdefer’s study (2002).

Table 7. Attempt to dissuade the interlocutor across initiating acts

Semantic formula	Initiating act					
	Request		Invitation		Offer	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Direct ‘No’	0	0%	0	0%	44	10.40%

Adjuncts

According to Beebe et al. (1990), ‘Adjunct’ are used with refusals but are not considered refusals on their own. These are seen as strategies used to mitigate the effect of the refusal on the hearer. They show the awareness of the speaker of the importance of maintaining the face of the interlocutors when issuing a refusal. These include: statement of positive opinion, statement of empathy, pause fillers and gratitude/appreciation. Table 8 represents the frequency of this semantic formula across the initiating acts.

‘Adjuncts’ are used 28 times (8.06%) when the initiating act is a request, 64 times (19.82%) when it is an invitation and 82 times (19.38%) when it is an offer. The participants use ‘Adjunct: Gratitude/Appreciation’ in instances such as “/shukran ’lā adda’wah/-Thanks for the invitation” and “/mashkūrah ḥabībī/-Thank you dear”, “/Allah yijzāk khayr/-May Allah reward you”, “/yisharifni inik ikhtartī/-I’m honored that you picked me” and “/aqadir i’jabik bishghlī wa ijtiḥādī/-I appreciate you admiring my work and effort”.

These show that the participants are aware of the needs of the interlocutor. They seem to realize the need to use some expressions, even if they do not directly convey a refusal, to minimize the possible threat to the face of the interlocutor. These ‘Adjuncts’ are found in other studies done to investigate refusals in Arabic (AlShalawi, 1997; Nelson et al., 2002 and Abdul Sattar et al., 2010, 2011, among others.)

Discussion

An investigation of the most frequently used semantic formulas by the participant suggests that across the initiating acts, situations and status differences, the participants used ‘Excuse/Reason’ the most. The excuses/reasons that the participants give tend to be lacking detail and of an uncontrollable nature. According to Al-Shalawi, Saudis usually provide excuses that are of a more general nature and that usually involve family.

In addition to ‘Excuse/Reason’, the participants used ‘Negative Ability’ and Direct ‘No’ in their refusals. Despite being ‘direct’ refusal strategies, they is usually accompanied by other ‘indirect’ refusal strategies. This suggests that the participants are trying to mitigate the refusal and lessen the threat on the interlocutor’s positive face. One of these ‘indirect’ refusal strategies is ‘Statement of Regret/Apology’ which is one of the most frequently used formulas by the participants. The participants express their apology/regret for not being able to accept an invitation, for example, which might indicate their awareness of the interlocutor’s need to be accepted and not refused.

‘Attempt to Dissuade Interlocutor: Let Interlocutor off the Hook’ is only used in situation 9, the housemaid situa-

Table 8. Adjuncts across initiating acts

Semantic formula	Initiating act					
	Request		Invitation		Offer	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Adjunct	28	8.06%	64	19.82%	82	19.38%

tion. As was mentioned above, the frequency of this particular strategy might suggest that the content of the initiating act might be a factor that affects the choice of the refusal. In addition, the use of 'Adjuncts' which are not refusal strategies on their own, suggests that the speakers try to lessen the effect of the refusal on the hearer.

The use of this number of indirect strategies and adjuncts might suggest that the participants care for the interlocutors' feelings and subsequently try to lessen the threat of the refusal on them. Kunjara states that women take into account the feelings of the people they are talking to. This indicates that women will opt for an indirect refusal and employ more politeness strategies in their refusals. In the present study, the participants used adjuncts like 'Statement of positive feeling' and 'Statement of empathy'. Although these are not seen as refusals, they suggest that the participants employ politeness strategies when issuing their refusal as a means of lessening the effect of the refusal on the interlocutor.

As a Muslim Community, some participants invoked the name of Allah in their refusals. Its use here is classified as an Adjunct since it does not express a refusal. Morkus' (2009) analyzed some studies done in the Arab culture and found that there is a tendency to use religious reference, especially invoking the name of Allah (God) in their refusals.

Invoking the name of Allah

The name of Allah is used in the present study by some of the participants. It is classified here as an 'Adjunct'. Being Muslims, the participants are expected to use some expressions and phrases that express their religion. Morkus' (2009) analyzed some studies done in the Arab culture and found that there is a tendency to use religious reference, especially invoking the name of Allah (God). Al-Shalawi states that Saudis usually use such expressions, "particularly when they express their thanks and gratitude to others" (p. 49).

The name of Allah sometimes appears alone right after another formula such as 'No' as in the expression "/lā wa Allāh/- No, I swear", 'Negative Ability/Willingness' such as "/mā atwaq' wa Allāh/-I don't think so" and "/māqdar wa Allāh/-I can't", 'Excuse/Reason' such as "/wa Allāh umī mā tirḍā arūḥ/- My mother wouldn't allow me to go" and "/wa Allāh mashghūlah/-I'm busy", and 'Wish' such as "/wa Allāh wdī/- I really wish I could" and "/wa Allāh yālīt/-I really wish I could". This might suggest that the participants try to lessen the effect of the refusal. The name of Allah is also used in some 'Gratitude/Appreciation' expressions such as "/Allāh yi'āfik/-Thank you", "/Allāh yijzāk khayr/-May Allah reward you). According to Morkus (2009) Arabs tend to invoke the name of Allah in their refusals. Their use to the name of Allah in such instances shows the influence of religion and their beliefs on the expressions they use in their everyday interaction.

CONCLUSION

Uttering a refusal is considered 'a sticking point' in any culture. They are culture specific in the sense that they are influenced by the norms of the culture and what is seen as

polite or acceptable under different circumstances. Would a flat 'No' be appropriate or should the speaker include other expressions to express the refusal? Many factors play a role in the issuing of a refusal. These include gender, age, status, and social distance. A person issuing a refusal means that he is posing a threat on the interlocutor's positive face. This threat might be mitigated through the use of more indirect refusals. The aim of this study is to investigate the refusal strategies used by Saudi females due to the lack of studies done solely on refusals issued by female speakers.

The study utilizes a DCT with nine situations, three requests, three invitations and three offers, that were designed to elicit refusals on the part of the participants. The data is analyzed using modified version of a taxonomy originally designed by Beebe et al. (1995). The taxonym is a categorizing of refusal strategies that include three subdivisions: Direct Refusals, Indirect Refusals and Adjuncts. This taxonomy has been used by the majority of the studies done on refusal strategies.

An investigation of the most frequently used semantic formulas by the participant suggests that across the initiating acts, situations and status differences, the participants used 'Excuse/Reason' the most. The excuses/reasons that the participants give tend to be vague and family related. In addition, the participants used 'Negative Ability' and Direct 'No' which are direct refusal strategies in their refusals. Other indirect refusals were used by the participants in addition to this direct strategy. This might indicate that the participants are trying to lessen the threat on the interlocutor face. According to Morkus' (2009), Muslim speakers tend use religious reference in their speech. This is the case in this study as some speakers invoked the name of Allah (God) in their refusals. These are subsequently put under adjuncts in the taxonomy as they do not constitute a refusal by themselves.

This study was conducted with the aim of providing insights into how Saudi females issue a refusal. The current study investigates the refusal strategies, whether direct or indirect, which are used by Saudi female university students. This study can contribute to the understanding of how Saudi females typically refuse a request, an invitation or an offer. It adds to the literature which is lacking in such studies done solely on females speakers of Arabic.

This study might also be used in cross-cultural investigation as it represents some of the strategies used by Saudi females in their refusals. Such awareness of existing differences between cultures in the performance of certain speech acts might help minimize any issues that might arise in cross-cultural communication. Furthermore, having not only cultural differences highlighted when compared to how speakers from other cultures refuse but also shedding some light on gender differences adds to the cross-cultural investigation. The current study focuses on female refusals, which adds another dimension to the investigation of refusals in general.

Throughout the process of carrying out and reporting this study, other areas of investigation became apparent. Some of these areas and questions that require further inquiry are listed below:

1. As the current study focuses on how Saudi females issue a refusal, other areas of investigation might focus on

gender and its effect on the refusal strategies used by males and females.

2. Further studies investigating other speech acts such as complementing and thanking might be performed.
3. Studies that examine other variables such as age differences or regional differences might be conducted.

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