Face-Threatening Aspect of Refusal Speech Acts: A Contrastive Study

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Abstract

Professionalism in communication is a matter of concern for speakers of all languages. Awareness about some features such as face-threatening property of refusal speech acts leads language users to apply some specific linguistic forms. Considering the significance of cultural and social variations in performing refusal speech acts and the importance of preserving "face", this study tried to find differences between native-Persian and English speakers. To collect the data, 60 native Persian and English speakers were asked to complete a two-phase questionnaire, a discourse completions test (DCT) and a self-report, including four different situations and Beebe's classification of refusals, was used. Great tendency toward using indirect forms between both Persian and English participants was taken as an indicator of noticeable consideration of face-preserving in refusals, although Persian speakers seemed more concerned about it. The differences between two groups of participants were inferred as cultural variations' reflection. Some implications for language teaching were discussed.

Key words: pragmatic competence, speech act, refusal, cultural variation

1. Introduction

It is a noteworthy fact that speaking a language is beyond making a number of grammatically correct sentences. Individuals can play a significant role to change the environment, using different utterances; as Austin (as cited in Thomas, 1995) noted, "people do not use language just to make statements about the world; they also use language to perform actions which affect or change the world in some way" (p. 25). Such definitions lead us to the noticeable term pragmatics which is defined by Crystal (1985 as cited in Allami & Naeimi 2011) as "the study of language from the point of view of users, specially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language have on other participants in the act of communication" (p. 67).

For the simple reason that well-formed grammatical sentences do not guarantee a proper communication (Hudson, 2000), the framework of speech acts as functions of language, is needed. Searle (1969) defines speech acts as minimal units of discourse and Cohen (1995) considers speech acts as basic and useful units of communication and interaction. Giving and responding to compliments, asking questions, apologizing, giving refusals are some examples of speech act. Nunan (2001) maintains that refusing is a complex speech act which speakers directly or indirectly say "no" to the request, offer or invitation of another person and is usually challenging for native speakers and non-native speakers. Although all speech acts require strategies, refusals often need indirect strategies due to face-threatening feature. The more direct the refusal, the more the threat to the person's face. Because of this risk, some degree of indirectness usually exists; the person who refuses may need to soften the face of the refusal (Brown & Levinson 1978, 1987). On the other hand, despite the universality of speech acts of all languages, speech acts vary from culture to culture; therefore, paying attention to the effect of specific cultures should be considered as a must in realization and interpretation of speech acts in different languages.

As a kind of cultural issue, it can be noted that refusal is a speech act, including a level of rudeness and discourtesy; therefore, performing inappropriate refusal strategies may harm the relationship between interlocutors. Thus, proper perception and production of refusals require a certain degree of cultural awareness (Hassani, Mardani & Hosseini, 2011). In addition, the degree of threat posed by the refusal to the face of both interlocutors is subject to cultural variation. Therefore, the threat that a refusal can impose to both the speaker's and the hearer's face, is of great importance. As another important point, refusal is a face-threatening act to the listener, because it is not well-matched with his or her expectation. Amongst authors who have reviewed the hearer status in this process, Eslami (2010), Brown and Levinson (1987) have mentioned that face of the hearer is more exposed to

damage than face of the speaker. Eslami (2010) believes in the inherent risk of offending someone at the time of refusing something. Moreover, another dimension has been mentioned thoroughly by some other authors (Barron, 2003; Salazar Campillo et al., 2009) about the possible damage that a refusal can cause to the hearer's positive and negative face. The danger that a refusal poses to the face of the speaker can be paid more attention to (Kathrin Siebold& Hannah Busch, 2015).

2. Literature Review

A considerable amount of literature has been published on refusal speech acts in different languages and some on face-threatening aspect. Numerous studies have attempted to explain the differences and similarities of speech acts and the level of directness and indirectness in refusing something in Persian and English. Kazemi Zadeh Gol (2013), for example, made a study on Iranian ESL learners who had been in the U.S. for at least one year and were to some extent familiar with the target language culture and native English speaking Americans. She found two groups very similar in the speech act categories they used. She also found that the perception and production of refusals as dual face-threatening acts in a second language was a complex task which requires acquisition of pragmatic competence of the target language at a higher degree than other speech acts.

Ghazanfari, Bonyadi, and Malekzade (2010) found that Persian speakers use excuses more frequently than English speakers, this can be interpreted as their high level of consideration towards face-threatening aspect of refusals; however, they apply strategies such as regret, non-performative statements and lack of enthusiasm less frequently than English speakers. Besides, they found some differences between the two languages with regard to refusal utterances and gender.

Vaezi (2011) attempted to investigate the similarities and differences in using the speech act of refusals between Persian learners of English as a foreign language with some Persian native speakers in Iran. Analysis of collected data through discourse completion questionnaire, interaction and role play, revealed the same formulaic pragmatic structures between two groups, but the researcher found Persian native speakers more thoughtful about annoyance aspect of refusals due to offering indirect reasons. On the other hand, Iranian EFL learners were more frank and more likely to refuse requests, suggestions, and invitations. Moreover, social distance and power were mentioned as effective factors in production of refusals among Persian native speakers.

More recently, Siebold and Hannah Busch (2014) tried to compare the culture-specific realization of different types of refusals in Spanish and

German and describe in detail the threat that a refusal poses for the positive and negative face of both interlocutors. Their study demonstrated a high tendency for indirect refusal strategies and for vague answers without a clear final outcome by Spanish speakers to manage the face threat, whereas German speakers place a higher value on more direct refusal strategies and explicit answers with a great level of pragmatic clarity, especially with regard to the final outcome of the conversation.

Using a discourse completion test and survey, Zhang (2012) attempted to investigate the relationship between the perception and production of face-threatening speech act of refusal by CFL (Chinese as foreign language) learners in both L1 English context and L2 Chinese context. The results showed, in certain situations, the refusals produced in L1 and L2 were pretty much identical; however, one that might be correct and appropriate in one context might not be necessarily correct in another culture. Moreover, the results indicated that the students' perception and production of refusals were situational and dependent upon individual situation rather than culture, although cultural awareness could not be ignored.

Tanck (2002) tried to identify the differences between native and non-native English speakers' production of the speech acts of refusal and complaint. The results showed that non-native speakers sometimes produce fewer components of the speech act sets of refusal than their native speaker counterparts. The quality of the components of the speech act sets produced by non-native speakers is sometimes less appropriate than those produced by native speakers.

The main purpose of this study is to find the level of English and Persian native speakers' consideration towards face-threatening aspect of refusal speech acts. In this regard, the research questions are:

1. Is there a considerable difference between English and Persian native speakers in using refusal speech acts with regard to face-threatening property of this type of speech act?
2. Considering this difference, how are English and Persian native speakers different in protecting their faces while using refusal speech acts?

According to above-mentioned research questions, research hypotheses are:

1. There is a noticeable difference between English and Persian native speakers in using refusal speech acts due to cultural differences in relation to face-threatening aspect.
2. Persian native speakers use more indirect strategies than English native speakers to protect their faces against the potential threat by refusal speech act.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

To collect the required data for the present experimental study, 60 participants were selected randomly. 30 native Persian speaking Iranians as Persian participants living in Iran and 30 native Persian speaking Iranian English teachers from a private English institute in Isfahan among males and females with high level of proficiency as English participants were asked to take part in this study. Of the 30 Persian participants, 18 were female and 12 were male, and they were aged between 20 and 49 years. However, among English participants, 22 were female and eight were male aged between 20 to 59 years. To obtain the most reliable results, Iranian English teachers were informed about being in the role of native English speakers to consider effective cultural and social factors which were expected to play a significant role.

3.2. Instrumentation and Data Collection

Based on the aim of the study which was comparing Persian and English native speakers' consideration of face-threatening aspect of refusals, a questionnaire containing two parts was adapted from Zhang (2012). After eliciting some basic information such as age and gender, a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was applied as the first part of the questionnaire. The design of the DCT reflects the four different situations (request, offer, invitation, and suggestion) that refusal may occur. Under these four different situations people need to perform face-threatening speech acts of refusal, four different scenarios were created, including refusal to a request, an offer, an invitation, and a suggestion. Accordingly, in the revised DCT, four scenarios were created for each of the situation. Since the relationship between speakers could be also a factor, four situations were created to reflect different hierarchical or equal relationship and distance between the speakers (between peers and friends, between students and professors, and friend's parents). Each prompt simulated a situation that could occur in daily life. As the second part of the questionnaire, since this study aims to investigate how the participants make decisions to perform certain speech acts of refusal in certain ways, this DCT is revised to incorporate the participants' self-report of their perception of the speech act of refusal, including factors of truthfulness, directness, clarity, effectiveness, that are grouped under the concept of "individualistic perception", and face-preserving and embarrassment avoiding, which were grouped under "collectivistic perception". In order to gather data from native Persian participants, the questionnaire was translated to Persian and its content validity was checked and confirmed by some language experts. Four situations used in this study are summarized here:
1. Refusal of invitation given by friend's parents,

2. Refusal of offer of help from a friend,

3. Refusal of a request from a peer friend, and

4. Refusal of a suggestion from a professor.

3.3. Data Analysis

To analyze the collected data through the DCT, it was attempted to choose an appropriate classification to categorize the data. Among available classifications, Classification of Refusals by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990) was selected, while in some cases the Classification of Illocutionary Acts by Searle (1976) was used to categorize and code data. According to Beebe et al (1990), refusals are divided into two main groups: direct refusals with two subdivisions as non-performatives and performative verbs, and indirect refusals containing various types such as statement of regret, wish, excuse, reason, explanation, statement of alternative, future acceptance, attempt to dissuade interlocutor, gratitude/appreciation, and so on. Data obtained from the first part of the questionnaire (DCT) were coded using Beebe classification. This classification was used for both English and Persian data. After categorizing and coding the data applying sum, mean, and percentage derived from statistical analysis procedure using SPSS 21 software, Persian and English data form each situation were compared to clarify the level of native Persian and English speakers' consideration toward face-threatening aspect of refusals. To analyze and compare Persian and English data in each situation derived from the second part of the questionnaire, which was about self-report of participants' perception of the speech act of refusal, statistical analysis procedure was used to get sum and mean.

4. Results and Discussion

To provide a more precise comparison between two groups of participants (Persian and English), first each group will be interpreted separately and then a subsequent comparison between two groups will be presented. In Tables 1 and 2, age and gender properties of Persian participants are shown.

Table 1
Age Range of the Pariticpants

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	20-29	14	46.7	46.7	46.7
	30-39	14	46.7	46.7	93.3
Valid	40-49	2	6.7	6.7	100.0
	Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Based on table 2, which is about Persian participants' gender distribution, most of the participants (60% with frequency of 18) are female.

Table 2
Gender of the Pariticpants

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Male	12	40.0	40.0	40.0
Valid	Female	18	60.0	60.0	100.0
	Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Using Beebe classification, the results of analyzing the components of this classification are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
DCT Data Analysis Results

	N	Sum	Mean
Performative	8	10.00	1.2500
Non-Performative	2	2.00	1.0000
Regret	22	28.00	1.2727
Wish	0		
Excuse	30	76.00	2.5333
Alternative	16	20.00	1.2500
Future Acceptance	10	10.00	1.0000
Dissuade	28	38.00	1.3571
Gratitude/Appreciation	10	10.00	1.0000
Valid N (listwise)	0		

Based on these results, it can be concluded that between direct refusals and indirect ones, Persian participants do not have a great tendency to use direct refusals. Although a considerable difference is not seen between two types of direct refusals, non-performative verbs seem less favorable among Persian participants. A noticeable tendency towards indirect refusals between Persian participants is derived. Among indirect forms, "excuse, reason, explanation" has the highest proportion with mean of 2.53. Other mostly used forms are attempts to dissuade interlocutor with mean of 1.35 and then statement of regret with mean of 1.27.

To analyze obtained data from the second part of the questionnaire which was about self-report of participants' perception of refusal speech acts, some relevant factors such as truthfulness, directness, clarity, and face-preserving were selected and the results are presented in Table 4. These results can be representations of some effective factors like the nature of situations and social distance.

Table 4
Self-Report Data Analysis Results

| | S1 | S2 | S3 | S4 |
	mean	mean	mean	mean
Truthfulness	4.7333	5.8000	4.7333	6.6000
Directness	5.0667	5.7333	5.4667	5.7333
Clarity	4.9333	5.5333	5.5333	6.0667
Face-preserving	6.2667	6.2667	4.7333	6.2667

As presented in Table, truthfulness in situation 4 with mean of 6.60 has the greatest amount of importance in comparison with other situations. Besides, it has the same position in all situations, especially in situations 2 and 4 with the mean of 5.73, but in situation 1 it seems less important with a mean of 5.06. Comparing the results from the first part of the questionnaire (DCT) and this part, an amount of noncooperation is inferable between real answers and self-report. Persian participants consider themselves direct but their answers in DCT shows a really low level of directness. It is apparent from Table 4 that clarity is more important in situation 4 than other situations (mean of 6.06). Talking about face-preserving factor which is one of the most relevant factors to the aim of this study, this table shows that Persian participants are concerned about this factor in most of the situations (situations 1, 2, and 4 with means of 6.26). This factor seems less important and effective in situation 3 with a mean of 4.73.

Tables 5 and 6 provide information about English participants' age and gender distributio

Table 5
Age of the Pariticpants

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	20-29	8	26.7	26.7	26.7
	30-39	16	53.3	53.3	80.0
Valid	40-49	2	6.7	6.7	86.7
	50-59	4	13.3	13.3	100.0
	Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Based on analyzing English coded data using Beebe classification, results are shown in table 7.

Comparing direct and indirect refusals, English participants showed a greater desire for indirect ones, although there is a considerable difference between English participants' use of performatives and non-performative verbs and using performatives seems more favorable between English participants which is to some extent different form Persian participants' use of this form. Between indirect refusals, "excuse, reason, explanation" is the most favorable

one with a mean of 2.46. Different from Persian results, after excuse, statement of alternative with mean of 1.75 is the next mostly used form, then regret with mean of 1.5 and then attempt to dissuade interlocutor with mean of 1.4.

To provide more precise results, factors the same as those in Persian part are selected form self-report part of the questionnaire. The results are illustrated in table 8.

Table 6
Gender of the Pariticpants

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Male	8	26.7	26.7	26.7
Valid	Female	22	73.3	73.3	100.0
	Total	30	100.0	100.0	

Table 7
DCT Data Analysis Results

	N	Sum	Mean
Performative	10	14.00	1.4000
Non-Performative	4	4.00	1.0000
Regret	20	30.00	1.5000
Wish	0		
Excuse	30	74.00	2.4667
Alternative	8	14.00	1.7500
Future Acceptance	8	8.00	1.0000
Dissuade	30	42.00	1.4000
Gratitude/Appreciation	4	4.00	1.0000
Valid N (listwise)	0		

Table 8
Self-report Data Analysis Results

	S1 mean	S2 mean	S3 mean	S4 mean
Truthfulness	5.3333	5.1333	4.5333	5.4000
Directness	4.8687	5.8667	5.4667	5.0000
Clarity	5.5333	6.1333	5.6000	5.6667
Face-preserving	5.5333	6.0000	5.2000	5.7333

Like Persian results, truthfulness seems to have the highest level of importance in situation 4 (mean of 5.40), although comparing Persian and English truthfulness means, this factor is considered more important for

Persian participants. Talking about directness, same as Persian findings, this factor is an important one in all situations (with slight mean differences), but it seems considerably important in situation 2 with mean of 5.86. This factor seems more noticeable for English participants rather than Persians. According to this table, clarity has the greatest level of significance in situation 2 with mean of 6.13 which is different from Persian result (situation 4). As shown in this table, to some extent similar to Persian results, face-preserving factor seems to have the most significance in situation 2 with mean of 6.0 and then in situation 4 with mean of 5.73, although this factor looks more important for Persian participants.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Considering pragmatic competence as an essential factor which makes speakers of language professional communicators, satisfying different functions of a language acquires proper use of various types of speech acts. Concerning "face" concept, some speech acts like refusals will need more attention to perform. This matter of fact will be of more importance when social factors are taken into consideration. When intra-social factors play a significant role, the importance of inter-social factors will be noticeable in contrastive studies such as the present study. The present study, focusing on face-threatening property of refusal speech acts, aimed to identify and analyze Persian and English differences. Returning to the questions posed at the beginning of this study, it is now possible to state that both Persian and English participants have a great consideration towards "face", in different levels based on nature of the situations and relevant social status, using indirect forms of refusals as face-preserving forms, although English participants are front-runners in slight amount of direct forms use. Addressing the first research question, according to the results, no considerable difference between native Persian speakers and English speakers in using refusals is observed, although slight differences can be inferred as signs of cultural variation. About the second research question, native Persian speakers' awareness of using indirect forms, in a higher level in comparison with English speakers, can be interpreted as their greater consideration towards face-preserving process.

The results of this research are to some extent consitent with the findings of some previous studies such as the one conducted by Kazemi Zade Gol (2013), who found Iranian ESL learners and native English speaking Americans very similar in the speech act categories used. Ghazanfari et al (2010) also found that Persian speakers tend to use excuses more frequently than English speakers. Although cultural specifications are important in this regard, using indirect forms of refusal can be mentioned as a common phenomenon between Persian and English cultures and Spanish culture as Siebold et al (2014) have stated.

Being aware of cultural differences which lead to different language uses can be regarded as a helpful hint in improving ESL, and specifically EFL learning and teaching procedures. Whereas EFL learners suffer from lack of exposure to authentic input, EFL teachers' role will be a matter of concern and a challenging task to raise students' awareness.

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