Politeness Strategies and Gender Differences in the Speech Act of Rejection among the Malays in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Men and women utilise language to serve various purposes. Making rejection falls as one of the functions through which gender differences in the language may be identified. Research seems to suggest that men and women construct and incorporate politeness differently while performing speech acts of rejection. Therefore, this study aims to identify the positive and the negative politeness strategies that both genders use in making a rejection and also to compare, to what extent politeness strategies of males differ from those of females in making rejection. This study employs the framework of Brown and Levinson’s Model of Politeness (1987) where it is realised through a set of questionnaire involving nine different situations and is formulated based on an oral Discourse Completion Task. The oral DCT is tested on 50 male and 50 female students of International Islamic University Malaysia. As a whole, males use more positive and negative politeness strategies than females when making rejections. While in a broader context, both genders are generally explanatory and apologetic when making rejections. Therefore, this study is able to suggest better ways for society members in the future on how to make appropriate rejections to each other.

Keywords: Politeness, Gender, Speech Act, Malays

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

Language plays a crucial role in human life and is regarded as indispensable tool of communication. Interestingly, men and women have been observed to have their own ways of using language to serve various purposes by applying different politeness strategies while performing speech acts such as complaining, requesting, offering and so on. Thus, this study further examines the following questions:

   1. What are the positive politeness strategies that males/females use in making a rejection?
   2. What are the negative politeness strategies that males/females use in making a rejection?
   3. To what extent do politeness strategies of males differ from those of females in making rejection

1.2 Literature Review

The terms ‘refusal’ and ‘rejection’ are used interchangeably in the literature to refer to negative responses or feedback in communication. Searle and Vandervken (1985) define the speech act of refusal as “the negative counterpart to acceptance and consenting are rejection and refusal” (p. 195). In other words, rejection or refusal can be a response to “an offer, request, invitation and suggestion” (Raja Rozina et al., 2011, p. 70). The art of making a rejection ‘properly’ would require linguistic and pragmatic knowledge since rejecting something can in many cases be perceived as impolite.

Since rejection or refusal is known to vary across cultures due to different social beliefs and values, individuals are encouraged to “make an attempt, initial dealings with the other culture to adhere to and respect the other system” (DeVito, 2002, p. 72). Thus, it is vital for society members to understand it and be
exposed to its different forms so that it can minimise the rate of misunderstanding that people may have while rejecting particular requests.

To have a better grasp of politeness strategies and the speech act of rejection, it is very important to understand the concept of face and how it relates to Face Threatening Acts (FTAs). For Goffman (1967), face is “a positive social value that a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular context” (p. 306). As stated by Brown and Levinson (1987) (cited in O’Keeffe et al., 2011), politeness is referred as “a complex system for softening face-threatening behavior” (p. 59). Thus, FTAs refer to those instances during which a person’s positive and negative face needs are threatened (O’Keeffe et al., 2011).

Several studies have been conducted to investigate how rejection is performed by speakers from different language backgrounds and settings. Chen (1996) investigated rejections or refusals of requests, invitations, offers and suggestions among American Chinese speakers of English. Nguyen (2006) focuses on similar and different refusals of requests between Australians and Vietnamese who are native speakers and learners of English, respectively. In a review of these two studies, Salasiah Che Lah et al. (2011) claim that they reflect the importance of studying the speech act of refusals and conclude that it “is governed by a systematic set of community-specific rules” (p. 72).

Meanwhile, very few studies on rejection have been conducted in Malaysia. Raja Rozina et al. (2011) undertook a study of rejection strategies among Malay university students. The results show that the Malays are indirect and prefer to apologise when rejecting particular requests. Besides, the study discovers that “apology [regret] and explanation or excuse, were the semantic formulas most frequently used by the participants and occurred in responses” (p. 77) to FTAs.

Another study conducted by Maryam Farnia and Wu (2012) on Malaysian university students’ refusal to invitation among the Malays and the Chinese was in line with a previous study done by Raja Rozina, Salasiah Che Lah and Hiba Qusay (2011). The result suggests that most frequent strategies used to refuse invitations are “expressions of excuses, reasons or explanation, statement of regret and expressions of negative ability or willingness” (p. 170).

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research primarily employs the framework of Brown and Levinson’s Model of Politeness (1987) to identify the positive and negative politeness strategies used by males and females in making rejection, while the categorisations for each politeness strategies were adapted from Srisuruk’s (2011) study as in the following figure.

![Figure 1: Samples of Politeness Strategies in Language from Srisuruk (2011)]

2.1 Participants

To fulfil this research, 100 participants from International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) were selected which consisted of 50 males and 50 females and ranging from 20 to 26 years old.
2.2 Instrument

All participants were required to undergo the oral Discourse Completion Task (DCT) which consisted of nine rejection situations and the post-interview session consisting six questions without time limit. Meanwhile, the questionnaires were made to verify the clarity and familiarity of the nine DCT questions which were then tested on the participants. The following table shows the descriptions of rejection situations.

Table 1: Rejection Situations

| Addressor   | Addressee      | Situations                                                                 |
|-------------|----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The eldest sibling | Younger sister | A request for a company to friend’s birthday party.                          |
| Senior      | Male junior    | A request to attend Annual Grand Dinner.                                     |
| Tutor       | Female student | A request for extra and private tutoring session.                            |
| Bestfriend  | Bestfriend (M/F) | An invitation of best friend’s wedding.                                    |
| Room mate   | Roommate (M/F) | A request to join a trip to Malacca.                                        |
| Colleague   | Male colleague | An invitation to a birthday party.                                           |
| Student     | Professor (M/F) | A request to find research participants.                                    |
| Child       | Mother         | A request for a company to do grocery shopping.                             |
| Worker      | Male boss      | A request to do a part-time work during weekend.                            |

3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Table 1: Frequency of leading positive politeness strategies used by males and females in rejecting

| Positive Politeness Strategies and Total Frequency (N)/ Frequency Percentages (%) | Males | Females |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|---------|
| Give (or ask for) reasons                                                       | 385   | 45.2    |
| Use in-group identity markers                                                   | 195   | 22.9    |
|                                                                                | 381   | 46.2    |
|                                                                                | 123   | 14.9    |

Table 1 shows the first two leading positive politeness strategies which dominated by the male group. This clearly reveals that the males preferred to give reasons and use identity markers while making rejections respectively at 45.2% and 22.9%.

Most of the males were very elaborative when making rejections as they did so indirectly and subtly. Most of them were observed to be cautious and mindful in using words when making rejections. The nine situations were arranged in different levels of social distance, social power and rank of imposition so as to see the overall responses showed by the participants. Regardless of the social variables, giving reasons appears to be the most prominent strategy for positive politeness for males. This result was consistent with the study by Salasiah, Raja Rozina and Abdul Sattar (2011) who studied refusal strategies in English among Malay male students. Their findings revealed that Malay male students were very indirect when making rejections through giving explanations and excuses since this strategy scored the highest for every level of social status with 41% (high status), 29% (equal status) and 36% (low status). Therefore, it can be said that the males are in a way more sensitive to their surroundings by not making direct rejections.

Likewise, female speakers also scored the highest in the category of giving or providing reasons (46.2%). Like the male speakers, the female speakers were observed to be very descriptive when making rejections. Almost every situation was provided with reasons and explanations. Similar to the males, some reasons were general and some, specific.

The second leading positive politeness strategy in this research is the use of identity markers. The use of identity markers in making rejections is to soften the face threatening acts as most hearers are usually offended by the rejections made. In this study, identity markers such as sister, brother or bro, dude, mate, friend, mother, Doctor, Professor and boss were frequently used for refusals.
As for males, it was found that the use of identity markers as the second most frequent positive politeness strategy at 22.9%. The function of identity markers as used by males was to politely address the other speaker. Most males addressed the hearer with addressee forms and there were very few of them who only used 'you' without indicating any particular identity markers when rejecting others.

Moving on to the female respondents, the use of identity markers became the third most-used positive politeness strategy when dealing with rejections with 14.9%. Similar to males, identity markers such as sister, mother and Prof were among the frequent markers used throughout rejection events. However, with 14.9% of the use of identity markers in this research, it implies that addressing persons with particular titles was not a primary concern for females since it was discovered that many were more concerned with strategies of giving (or asking) for reasons and making offers or promises.

Table 2: Frequency of leading negative politeness strategies used by males and females in rejecting

| Negative politeness strategies and total frequency (n)/percentages (%) | Males | Females |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|---------|
| Apologise                                                            | 296   | 299     |
| Hedge                                                               | 162   | 149     |

In term of negative politeness strategies, males and females obtained almost regular patterns for apologising when making rejections with the score of 45.8 % and 46.9%, respectively. With the slight difference between the two genders, the result implies that the act of saying sorry is a regular application when making rejections. Both genders were apologising in six out of nine rejection situations given. This pattern of use is similar to that found by Salasiah et al. (2011) in their study of refusal strategies by Malays in which they claim that apologising is “the frequent semantic formula” (p.9) used for refusals.

The post-interviews discovered that most males and females agreed that the act of apologising while making rejections is the ideal strategy to politely reject the hearers. This is because; the main role of apology is to express a form of regret by the speakers. Therefore, apologising is an indirect refusal, which lessens the impact of a rejection of a proposal (Salasiah et al., 2011).

The second leading negative politeness strategy is the use of hedges in rejections. Males dominated in the use of hedges in making rejections with 162 occurrences (25.1%) while female participants used 23.4% of hedges with 149 occurrences. The usual hedges used throughout the research is “I think...”. Since males used more hedges for rejections, this finding contradicts the previous claim by Lakoff (1973) that hedges are one of the features of ‘women’s language’, which reflected low confidence level and “women’s social insecurity, as well as their propensity to be more polite than men” (cited in Holmes, 1995, p.73).

Nevertheless, this study has proven that males use more hedges in their responses. The basic pattern produced by most participants is “I think I cannot do it” while the words “maybe” and “perhaps” were often also attached to them.

Table 3: Frequency of positive and negative politeness strategies that males and females used in making rejections

| Gender and politeness strategies | Positive Politeness (%) | Negative Politeness (%) |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Male                            | 50.8                    | 50.4                    |
| Female                          | 49.2                    | 49.6                    |

To compare the use of politeness strategies by male and female in rejections, the result shows that males scored higher for both politeness strategies rather than females. Table 4 presents that males lead 50.8% and 50.4% of both positive and negative politeness strategies respectively. In contrast, females performed with a slightly different from males at 49.2% for positive politeness strategies and 49.6% for negative politeness strategies. These numbers resemble several aspects of comparison in terms of applying politeness strategies in rejection by both genders.
a. Extension of Words and Addressee’s Forms

As compared to the females, the total number of responses reveals that the males used more words when making rejections. Even though female speakers are often perceived as tending to speak more politely than men (Brown, 1980), this study proved otherwise where male speakers are shown as the more dominant users of positive politeness strategies. Moreover, by looking at the number of those giving or asking for reasons, males unexpectedly produced a greater number of explanations when making rejections with 45.2% out of 852 responses. Therefore, this shows that male speakers do not straightforwardly or directly reject proposals from others since they tend to use extensive explanations when making rejections.

In terms of using identity markers, male speakers addressed the other parties with appropriate titles more directly. Unlike the males, the female speakers were observed to use mostly “you” and “I” pronouns when making rejections. It is believed that the use of identity markers while rejecting is to help make it sound polite and professional. However, this finding is at variance with Lakoff’s (1973) claim which states that women are perceived to use more polite form of address while men are more affirmative than women. The present study found that most males used identity markers more than females at an average of four out of nine situations per male participant. Unlike males, females used identity markers mostly for those closer to them while males likely did this due to professionalism.

b. Appreciation and Compensation

Women are seen as more sensitive to other people’s feelings than men (Holmes, 1995). However, this research discovered that men were more thoughtful by explaining things when rejecting proposals by people with different levels of social distance and social power.

Most of the male respondents agreed that making a rejection is not an easy task to do and it is very important to minimise any disappointment that may be felt by the persons who make the requests. Thus, apart from showing politeness in making rejections, most males believed that showing appreciation to the persons whose proposals are rejected is vital because it preserves the hearers’ trust in them. The appreciation was expressed through gratitude, compliments, wishes and prayers which were valuable to the hearers. The research found that 4.1% of the males expressed gratitude and give complimentary words more than the females did when making rejections.

As for compensation, it is undeniable that the female speakers preferred to compensate through making offers or promises more than the male ones. Nevertheless, most male speakers were observed to be fair to the other person whom they rejected by offering or promising something else as well. Maryam and Wu (2012) discovered that generally the Malays (males and females) make offers to “redress the threatening face of refusal to the superior with another event or gatherings” (p.167). Conversely in this research, instead of replacing it with another event, the female speakers were especially observed to compensate for their absences through time delays of fulfilling the requests at another time, promising to give a present or getting help from another person to replace the speakers.

c. Expression of Regrets and Providing Alternatives

Another aspect of comparison revealed that the males are generally found to be very apologetic and explanatory at the same time. Similarly, they frequently expressed their regret as well as gave reasons for not being able to fulfil the requests or invitations. To reflect Brown and Levinson’s (1987 as cited in Mills, 2003) notion of apology, it appears as a form of debt which must be composed by positive compensation for the sake of protecting the face of the hearers. Thus, it can be said that the male speakers regularly apologise and compensate through offering, promising or using reasons when making rejections.

In terms of providing alternatives, females are more likely to be the users of this strategy. The results discovered that 11.6% of females used this strategy in rejections. In this study, the females were observed to minimise the imposition of the hearers’ freedom by suggesting them another event or alternative. In spite of that, Brown and Levinson (1987 cited in Srisuruk, 2011) state that “the heart of negative politeness strategy is respect behavior” (p.152). Therefore, most female speakers preferred to give suggestions to the hearers since this strategy is the ideal way for them to lessen the negative impact on the hearers after making the rejections.

d. Uncertainty Responses

By testing rejection situations on all participants, it was discovered that the male speakers utilised more hedges than the female speakers.

In this study, most males would rather give reasons after inserting lexical hedges within their responses. The usual pattern for using this strategy is firstly the lexical phrases of “I think/don’t think + reasons”. Another
pattern would be “perhaps/maybe” + giving suggestions”. These two styles were more frequently used by the male speakers than the female speakers.

As the male speakers used more lexical hedges than the female ones, it shows that the former prefer to incorporate the expression of uncertainty in their responses when making rejections. This further suggests that most male speakers believed that it was essential to make the rejections sound more polite and gracious.

e. Direct and Indirect Rejections

Another aspect of comparing males and females in the way both genders manage rejection is direct and indirect strategy. A direct rejection is when the speakers straightforwardly reject the person without beating around the bush. The responses such as ‘No, I can’t’ or ‘I refuse to go’ can be classified as direct rejections. On the other hand, indirect rejection is rather made the speakers to be very verbose when rejecting people. In this study, the use of positive and negative politeness strategies is best to describe indirect rejections.

From the post-interviews, 83.3% male speakers indicate that they would make direct rejections while 73.3% female speakers would do the same. However, interestingly, the DCT results show that male speakers were more inclined to make indirect rejections than females, with the various uses of softening strategies such as giving extensive explanations, apologies, hedges and avoiding disagreements.

More generally, both genders did make use of a variety of strategies to minimise the impact of the rejections. Furthermore, it is very rare to discover both genders in doing single strategy when rejecting something.

4. CONCLUSION

The overall result reveals that males are the more dominant users of positive and negative politeness. In terms of positive politeness, the males were more elaborative and they paid more respect to people through explaining and expressing appreciation. Meanwhile, the females concentrated on expressing their sensitivity through noticing the hearers’ wants and making offers or promises. As for negative politeness, both genders were apologetic to the hearers. Yet, in terms of expressing uncertainty, the males used this strategy more frequently. Apart from that, both genders’ ways of rejecting were linguistically and pragmatically very indirect. In a general context, this study suggests that students may be taught to use the appropriate ways of rejecting with people of different levels of social distance and social power.

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