Exploring the Subtle Art of Saying 'No' from the Perspectives of Malay Culture

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ABSTRACT

Communication is a fundamental human need that enables interlocutors to achieve various communication goals, such as making requests, asking questions, offering compliments, or giving directions. It is widely recognized as essential for delivering messages in diverse forms. Without the use of language, communication within social interactions often lacks depth and significance. Employing language appropriately enhances the likelihood of successful communication. However, in the context of refusal, the language used must be carefully chosen and delivered with politeness to avoid misinterpretation. Failure to use language appropriately in such scenarios can lead to misunderstandings and potentially cause offense to the interlocutor. This paper aims to explore the refusal strategies employed in the speech act of refusal within the dominant cultural group in Malaysia—the Malays based on Refusal Taxonomies by Beebe et al. (1990) and to further understand the preference use of refusal strategies from the Malay culture's perspective using Hall's High-Low Context Culture theory (1976). Through the use of an Oral Discourse Completion Task (ODCT) and interviews, this study examines refusal strategies employed when declining invitations and investigates cultural preferences for these strategies within the Malay context. Sixteen Malay participants were selected for this study. The findings reveal that the Malays consistently employ indirect strategies when refusing, such as expressing negative willingness, apologizing, providing excuses, and conveying gratitude to the person being refused.

Keywords: Refusal; Malay; Culture; Invitation; Indirectness

INTRODUCTION

Doing refusal or rejection falls as one of the important speech acts in one's daily routines. This act emerges as a unique form of language use, where speakers navigate the intricacies of politeness and social interactions to successfully achieve their communication objectives [7]. This is due to the clear fact that refusal is a face threatening act which affects the interlocutor's face positively or negatively [23]. Refusals vary in different contexts such as refusals to invitations, offers and requests. Thus, to successfully undergo better communication, refusals should be done appropriately. According to [9], the delicate process of denying requests, invitations, or offers requires speakers to walk a careful line between asserting their individuality and maintaining relationship harmony with their conversation partners. This is more to preserve better relationships between interlocutors. The misinterpretation of manners when performing refusals can seriously tarnish the social relationship to one another. For instance, a sole single 'no' without explanation to refusal done is usually taken as rude or insensitive compared to refusals which are accompanied with lengthy reasons. Since refusals can easily offend the interlocutor's face, understanding the tactics used by speakers to reduce face-threatening actions is then crucial [20].

In Malaysia, upholding the virtue or 'budi' is important in Malay culture since it signifies an individual's adherence to specific regional traditions within the Malay-speaking world [22]. Malay culture is usually associated with values like high respect for elderly, indirectness and high tolerance to one another. From the perspective of Malay culture, it essentially includes the etiquette (adab) and attitude (akhlak) as the core elements to reflect on being in good virtue since it aligns with Islamic teachings [12]. For this matter, if

individuals fail to comply with practicing good acts or rather be insensitive when talking to others, they are then against the above-mentioned concepts, and hence to be taken as an impolite individual.

However, a big question raised here is whether it is fair to consider a person with direct refusals as being rude or impolite? Individually, one is different to one another in terms of manners of speaking which includes their non-verbal styles, demeanours, choice of words and attitudes. The popular notion always goes with those who are apologising and explaining the situations of not being able to accept one's invitation is rather better or much more polite than those who simply give a flat 'no'. Regardless of how one is behaving, it is crucial for individuals to stay respectful and avoid any inappropriate acts which can offend others verbally or non-verbally.

The present study then aimed to identify the preferred refusal strategies employed by the Malays in refusing invitations and also to have deeper insights on the perspective of the Malay culture in doing refusals from Hall's (1976) communication theory. This study also undertakes a comparative analysis of gendered refusal behaviour, looking at how males and females refuse to invitations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Past Studies: Refusals in the Malay Culture

Thus, in the context of Malay culture in Malaysia, refusals are typically expressed indirectly rather than stating 'no' explicitly ([9]; [16]; [4]). This is because refusing is a face threatening act which can risk offending the interlocutor's feelings. As [2] further mentioned, this can damage one's positive and negative face. Since Malaysians generally try their best to preserve their faces and avoid shame in their daily lives [17], hence refusal is usually done in indirect manners with greater politeness.

There have been some cross-cultural studies done to discuss and compare refusal strategies by Malay culture and other cultures. For instance, [15] conducted a comparative study on refusal between the Malay speakers of English (MSE) and Native speakers of English (NSE). The findings revealed that MSE reflects a collective culture which led them to be more indirect in doing refusals, while NSE is inclined to be individualistic in having more diect refusal strategies. Another study by [4] who did a cross-cultural study comparing Malays and Germans in doing refusals to invitation. It is evident to show that the Malays preferred using excuses, reasons, explanations, expressing regrets and conditional acceptance in their refusals compared to the Germans who opted for being more direct. The same refusal strategies especially using reasons and apologising are aligned with the studies by [9], [15], [16] and [4] which show the preference of using indirect refusal strategies by the Malays rather than providing a direct refusal to interlocutors. This condition can be explained from observing the common values kept in the Malay culture where "Malay society were regarded as the gentiles and has acquired three noble traits, namely, (1) good natured, well-mannered, and urbane, (2) polite, sensible and insightful in speech, and (3) wise and knowledgeable" [8]. Therefore, these traits are sufficient to well comprehend the reasons for the Malays' indirectness in doing refusals.

[16] did an intercultural study observing how higher education students from the three leading cultures (Malay, Chinese Indian) in Malaysia make refusals. Generally, there is no significant difference in terms of the choice of refusal strategies as all three groups prefer to be indirect through using reasons, excuses, justifications and also apologies especially when refusing to those in superior status. These findings are congruent with [4]'s study in which the use of indirect strategies can further avoid offending others. This is because, using a direct refusal can be regarded as an emotional offense for others and thus, having indirectness in refusals has been a norm for Malaysians to avoid other interlocutors.

Hall's (1976) High Context Culture Theory in Malay Cultural Practice

Malaysia is united not only by culture, patriotism, and government initiatives but also by a shared understanding of diverse faiths [24]. It is generally known for its multiculturalism with its leading cultures;

Malay, Chinese and Indian. Despite having differences in terms of belief and cultural practices, the members generally represent the uniqueness of Malaysia and are usually known to be indirect in social interaction.

For Malays, establishing relationships takes priority over conducting business [13]. This is aligned to the first feature of high-context communication where emotions and close relationships are among crucial elements [6]. Secondly, indirect style of conveying messages is often in high context communication where speakers take a longer route at saying things or simply beat around bushes in hope that the interlocutors can interpret and comprehend the messages [5]. Eventually, this raises the idea of instilling polite behaviour as the compulsory item added in Malay culture.

The Malay community generally values language politeness and good mannerism, ensuring that every word carries its own significance. This further explains the reasons the Malay culture prefers to be indirect in their communications since the high context communication significantly posits not to easily offend the interlocutor. This eventually leads to using a lot of softeners and hedges to ensure their words are appropriate enough to be used in interaction.

Regarding gender-based variations in refusal strategies, [9] conducted a comparative study of refusal responses to requests between Malay males and females. The study's findings demonstrated that females exhibited a greater propensity for indirect refusal strategies than their male counterparts, suggesting that indirectness is a prevalent, if not obligatory, characteristic of refusal behaviour among Malay females. In contrast, the study by [17] yielded findings that indicated females exhibited a greater tendency towards direct refusal strategies than their male counterparts.

This study then aims to investigate the significance of refusal strategies and their correlation with gender within a shared cultural context, specifically examining whether distinct disparities or similarities emerge.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Instruments

To achieve the research objectives outlined in this paper, a qualitative research design was adopted, utilizing two primary instruments: the Oral Discourse Completion Task (ODCT) and a semi-structured interview. The ODCT is commonly discovered in interlanguage studies, particularly in cross-cultural research involving comparisons between native and target languages, as it typically requires participants to respond spontaneously to given scenarios. This characteristic renders the ODCT an ideal instrument for this study because this study has set the six refusal scenarios to reflect common invitation situations encountered by university students. Participants were required to respond verbally by providing refusals to all six scenarios. Table 1 provides a summary of the refusal situations.

Table 1 Summary of Refusal Situations

Situations	Speaker's status	Hearer's status	Power	Distance
A wedding	Best friend	Best friend	E	C
A convocation	Senior	Junior	E	F
A society's club annual grand dinner	Senior	Junior	E	D
Research participant	Lecturer	Student	H	C
Academic talk	Lecturer	Student	H	F
Seminar	Programme coordinator	Student	H	D

(E= equal, H=higher, C=close, F=familiar, D=distant)

As for the semi-structured interview, it was composed of open-ended questions on getting in-depth insights of Malay culture's perspective at doing rejections. It was divided into several aspects looking at reasons for doing rejections and the relationship between politeness and culture. Semi-structured interview is then suitable for this study because it is adaptable, accessible, and understandable, and it can reveal crucial and frequently hidden aspects of human and organisational behaviour [19].

Participants and Research Execution

In conducting this study, 16 Malay participants, comprising 8 males and 8 females, were purposely selected from a private university in Malaysia. To qualify for participation, individuals were required to be between the ages of 19 and 25 and currently enrolled as active students at the university.

Prior to the data collection process, each participant was scheduled for individual appointments to facilitate the Oral Discourse Completion Task (ODCT) and subsequent interview sessions, both conducted in a face-to-face format. During the ODCT session, participants were instructed to respond verbally to invitations by providing refusals in six various contextual scenarios. They were permitted to use Bahasa Melayu, English, Mandarin, or Tamil. Throughout going through each situation, the participants were only required to elicit a single response in a one way of communication. This is because, the ODCT for this study did not require a common conversational style which is a two-ways communication due to the verbatim data only wants to obtain the refusal responses made.

Following the ODCT session, an interview was conducted without imposing a time constraint on the participants. The interview was divided into two sections. The first section was to further discover the reasons for refusal in terms of social status, social distance, rank of imposition or any other practical reasons. Meanwhile in section two, the questions were embedded on the perspectives of doing refusal in the context of the Malay culture itself. The entire session of ODCT and interview were then recorded using an audio tape for further reference of data analysis. According to Jamshed (2024), recording the interview is an ideal way to capture the data more effectively as it eases the researcher to have better focus at the elicited data. Once all verbatim data have been transcribed, the data were further analysed accordingly based on each research question. As for the first research question, the data was analysed by identifying refusal strategies using [1] refusal taxonomies (see Table 2 for the summary of Refusal Taxonomies). In the research question two, the data was studied by using Braun and Clark's thematic analysis (2006). The use of thematic analysis for this study is ideal as thematic analysis is a qualitative research strategy for organising and analysing complicated data sets in which the process involves identifying themes that can capture the narratives in data sets [3]. The complicated data sets here refer to complex verbatim data captured from the interview with the participants. Hence, using thematic analysis can ease the process and can gain a good quality of data analysis.

Table 2 Refusal Taxonomies (Beebe Et Al., 1990)

No.	Refusal Strategies
INDIRECT	
1.	Statement of regret
2.	Wish
3.	Excuse, reason, and explanation
4.	Statement of alternative
5.	Set condition for future or past acceptance
6.	Promise or future acceptance
7.	Statement of principle
8.	Statement of philosophy

9.	Attempt to dissuade interlocutors	
	i.	Threat or statement of negative consequences to the requester
	ii.	Guilt trip
	iii.	Criticize the request/requester (statement of negative feeling or opinion; insult/attack)
	iv.	Request for help, empathy, and assistance by dropping or holding the request
	v.	Let interlocutor off the hook
	vi.	Self-defense
10.	Acceptance that functions as a refusal	
	i.	Unspecific or indefinite reply
	ii.	Lack of enthusiasm
11.	Avoidance (Verbal)	
	i.	Topic switch
	ii.	Joke
	iii.	Repetition
	iv.	Postponement
	v.	Hedge
DIRECT		
1.	Using performative verbs	
2.	Non-performative statement	
	i.	No
	ii.	Negative willingness/ability
ADJUNCTS TO REFUSAL		
1.	Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement	
2.	Statement of empathy	
3.	Pause/fillers	
4.	Gratitude/Appreciation	

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 3 The Frequency of Refusal Strategies by The Malay Participants

Gender/Refusal strategies	Direct	Indirect	Adjuncts to rejection
Male	31	105	4
Female	26	109	29
Total	57	214	33

Table 3 indicates that participants employed a total of 304 refusal strategies. The majority of these were indirect refusal strategies, which accounted for the highest frequency at 214 instances. This was followed by direct refusal strategies, which were used 57 times, while adjunct-to-refusal strategies were the least frequently employed, with 33 occurrences.

To have a better understanding at specific refusal strategies preferred by the Malays, table 4 has summarised the significant refusal strategies used by the participants.

TABLE 4 Specific Refusal Strategies by The Malay Participants

Refusal strategies	Total strategies (frequency)	Percentage (%)
INDIRECT (Total=158)		
Statement of regret (S)	56	35.4
Excuse, reason, and explanation (E)	66	41.8
Avoidance- using hedges (AC)	36	22.8
DIRECT (Total=58)		
Using performative verbs (PV)	12	20.7
Negative willingness (NW)	46	79.3
ADJUNCT TO REFUSAL (Total=57)		
Gratitude (G)	57	100.0

Table 4 presents the summary of significant findings according to each category of refusal strategies. From the overall use of indirect strategies, there were three important strategies used by most of the participants. The leading refusal strategy was the use of excuse, reason and explanation (E) with the highest frequency which was 66 (41.8%). Such a strategy was captured through the common phrases such as 'this is because' and 'the reason why I cannot come'. Basically, any verbatim data which signified an explanation or a justification of not being able to fulfil the invitation falls under this category. Following explanation, the second preferred indirect strategy was the statement of regret (S) or simply apologising with 56 frequencies (35.4%). In this strategy, the common words discovered were 'sorry' and 'apologise' when turning down the invitations. Finally, using avoidance through hedges (AC) with 36 frequencies (22.8%) was another favored strategy to be used in making refusal. The usual phrases uttered were 'I think', 'I do not think', 'maybe' and 'perhaps'.

Meanwhile in practicing direct refusal strategies, there was no flat 'no' given by the participants. The strategies used for this category were using performative verbs (PV) and negative willingness (NW) with 12 frequencies (20.7%) and 46 frequencies (79.3%) respectively. The use of performative verbs in this study could be seen from the verb's 'reject', 'refuse' and 'turn down', while for expressing negative willingness, the phrases were 'I cannot come' and 'I cannot go'.

However, in the adjunct to refusal, the most common strategy found was only using gratitude with 57 frequencies. This was observed as a consistent pattern by the participants since they would express 'thank you' in the beginning of the responses before making refusals. The following table 5 provides some samples of refusal responses in different situations.

Table 5 The Frequency of Refusal Strategies by The Malay Participants

Participant	Responses	Situation
Malay Male 4 (MM4)	Sorry(S), I don't think(AC) I'll be able to come to your convocation because I'm not feeling very up for it (E) so very sorry (S). I don't think (AC)I'll come. I wish you all the best and congratulations on the convocation.	Refusing a junior's convocation invitation.
Malay Female 2 (MF2)	I actually thankful (G)for your invitation to your annual grand dinner for your club. However, if I go to that annual dinner, I actually know you like as a friend which I also don't know about the other club members so for me to attend the dinner for your club is actually not so appropriate because I'm not a part of your club (E). I'm not that active in club so I think (AC) I would reject (PV) like I would not come (NW) to the particular day.	Refusing an annual grand dinner's invitation from a junior.

Indirect Refusal in Malay Culture

To get better insights of doing refusal from the Malay culture's perspective, initially this can be first understood from the context of Hall's High-Low context of culture theory. According to [5], in high context culture, preserving interpersonal relationships is of utmost priority with trust serving as a foundation for business transactions. This means high context culture prioritises collectivism, valuing group harmony and consensus over individual accomplishments. As for the communication, it is often guided by intuition and emotions rather than strict reasoning while non-verbal cues such as tone, facial expressions, gestures, and social status carry significant meaning, sometimes outweighing spoken words. This concept aligns well to understanding how Malay culture practices these elements in their daily life routines.

For this matter in performing refusal, indirectness is always applied verbally through giving lengthy explanations, apologising and expressing gratitude. The common indirect refusal strategies which are using reasons and apologising are discovered to be aligned with some refusal studies ([15]; [9]; [4]; [16]). This is evident to show how the Malay culture is importantly rooted for appropriate manners when performing refusals through the concept of preserving one's face rather than embarrassing them through direct refusals. From the definition by [2], face literally means reputation. Hence, in the context of Malay culture, saving face is more towards avoiding ones to feel offended or emotionally attacked by the speakers. In Asia, face-saving is a crucial aspect to be observed [14].

Another significant discovery in this study is the frequent use of gratitude as a way of doing refusal by the Malay participants. Gratitude can be generally understood as expressing 'thank you' to interlocutors. Aligning to [5] high context theory, the Malay culture embraces the expression of gratitude often as an implicit way to turn down one's invitation, as well as to show appreciation. By doing these, it helps to preserve social harmony within interaction. This is due to the fact that gratitude helps people feel happier, enjoy good moments, and strengthen their relationships [21]. Moreover, using gratitude is regarded as a positive social virtue which is parallel to the Malay cultural practices of being deeply integrated with religious-based moral and ethical values, such as akhlak, budi, and budi-Islam [12]. Therefore, expressing gratitude is seen as one of the compulsory and important values to be included in making refusals.

Refusals and Gender

Table 6 The Frequency of Refusal Strategies by Malay Males and Females

Gender/ Refusal Strategies	Direct: Negative willingness (frequency)	Adjunct to refusal: Gratitude (frequency)	Indirect:	
			Apologise (frequency)	Excuses/Reason (frequency)
Male	29	3	33	33
Female	17	27	23	33

Table 6 presents a comparative analysis of significant findings concerning refusal strategies employed by Malay males and females in response to invitations. Regarding the direct expression of negative willingness, males demonstrated a higher frequency, with 29 occurrences, while females exhibited a slightly lower frequency of 17 occurrences. This observation contrasts with the findings of [17], which reported males to be more direct than females. Conversely, a substantial disparity was observed in the use of gratitude within refusals, with females demonstrating a preference, evidenced by 27 occurrences, compared to males, who recorded only 3 occurrences. Finally, in the utilization of indirect refusals through apologies and reasons/excuses, a marginal difference was noted in the use of apologies, with males recording 33 occurrences and females 23. However, both genders exhibited equivalent frequencies in the use of reasons or excuses. These findings are consistent with numerous studies, including those by [4], [9], [15], [16], and [17].

Sociolinguistic ally, gender exerts an influence on the selection of refusal strategies [2]. While the comparative analysis revealed relatively minor discrepancies in the overall usage of refusal strategies between males and females, the findings nonetheless illustrate distinct gender-based preferences in the execution of refusals.

CONCLUSIONS

This study highlights the necessity of understanding the Malay culture as a high-context culture with subtle communication and heavy reliance on indirectness, shared cultural understanding, and non-verbal cues. Particular mention here should be given to the Malay culture's refusal strategies, which consist of indirectness, apology, justification, and thanks, so as to guarantee social harmony and maintenance of relationship. Malaysians tend to avoid direct refusals and opt for courteous, non-confrontational refusals that spare the face of both the speaker and the hearer. By an examination of these cultural nuances, this study focuses on bringing about a clearer understanding of the Malay communication pattern that can promote greater cultural sensitivity. Through travel, commerce, and socializing, being in a position to observe these traditions means individuals are able to better communicate and less misunderstand. Ultimately, this is able to create a more civilized approach that can allow individuals of different backgrounds to have easier, more respectful contact while honoring the other's values.

Limitation Of the Study

The present study was only using some higher education students from one of the private universities in Malaysia as research sampling which made the data obtained to be only taken from one place. This is then made such data as the general representation of the whole research sampling rather than taking more from various institutions to make the data collected more rigorous.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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