

# Refusal Strategies in English used by Collectivism and Individualism

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**Abstract—** The refusal strategy is one of the most frequently used speech acts in our daily lives. People from different cultural backgrounds may employ different refusal strategies. The aim of this study is to find different refusal strategies used by people in collectivism and individualism cultures. The research instrument for this study was a modified version of a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) which was composed of 8 situations among 12 participants of 6 people from eastern cultures and 6 people from western cultures. All DCT responses were coded based on the classification of refusals as developed by Beebe, Al-Issa (1998), Weerachairattana and Wannaruk (2016). The coded data were analyzed in terms of frequency. The findings indicated that there was a slight difference in using direct refusal strategies between both cultures. Statements of excuse/reason/explanation, regret, and postponement were the most frequently used in collectivism cultures while statements of excuse/reason/explanation, regret, and self-defense were the most frequently used in individualism cultures. In addition, both collectivism cultures and individualism cultures preferred indirect refusal strategies. However, the percentage showed that the members of the collectivism cultures tended to save the hearers' faces and good relations more than individualism cultures when dealing with refusals.

**Keywords—** speech acts; refusal strategies; collectivism cultures; individualism cultures; direct strategies; indirect strategies

## I. BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Speech acts are communicative acts that convey an intended language function. Speech acts include functions such as requests, apologies, suggestions, commands, offers, and appropriate responses to those acts. There are difference forms of using languages and strategies in cross-cultural communication in each society. Therefore, cross-cultural refusal in communication with interlocutors from different cultures, perspectives, and notions is important and complicated. If a speaker refuses an interlocutor inappropriately, it may ruin their good relations. Thus, using a suitable refusal in each situation is necessary since it makes communication smooth and leads to

understanding between a speaker and an interlocutor from different cultures. Ongwuttiwat [1] stated that collectivism and individualism cultures are the factors which influence the ways to refuse. Thus, collectivism culture is a culture wherein people consider the importance of relationships and share the same thought or belief, especially found in eastern countries. So, they usually express their opinions or feelings indirectly. While individualism culture is a culture wherein people have a high level of independence and more easily express their thoughts and purposes freely and directly. They do not depend on other people, do not care about other people's perceptions, and can more easily be themselves. People in the United States of America and Australia are examples of individualism cultures while Thailand and Japan are examples of eastern countries with collectivism cultures. This means that members in these societies consider the importance of relationships. These societies share the same thoughts and beliefs for example the need for acceptance within the group. Collectivism and individualism cultures relate to communication, so people from an individualism society will communicate by using direct speech to express their desires while a collectivism society uses indirect speech to express their purposes [2]. From the factors mentioned above, it is found that eastern and western countries will use different refusal strategies because of different languages and cultures. It can be inferred that eastern people as a collectivism society may use indirect refusal strategies while western people as an individualism society prefer direct refusal strategies.

## Objectives

1. To investigate collectivism cultures use of indirect refusal strategies as compared to individualism cultures which prefer direct refusal strategies
2. To analyze the refusal strategies of eastern cultures and western cultures
3. To study the refusal strategies in speech acts of request, invitation, offer and suggestion for people of equal status in society.

*Research questions*

1. Are there any differences in the refusal strategies between collectivism cultures and individualism cultures?
2. If so, what are they?

*Scope of the study*

1. The researchers study is of the refusal strategies in speech acts of request, invitation, offer and suggestion.
2. The present study is limited to people of equal status in society.
3. The participants in this study are people from eastern countries who have collectivism cultures and people from western countries who have individualism cultures.
4. The instrument used in this study is the Discourse Completion Test (DCT).

*The significance of the study*

To help people understand cross-cultural values in order to adapt themselves to a situation when they meet people from different cultures by using refusal strategies appropriately.

*Definition of terms*

1. Speech act refers to any actions that is done through language.
2. Refusal strategy is a manner by which to reject the utterances of people when a speaker does not accept the invitations, offers, suggestions, or requests.
3. Speech acts are universal yet they vary from culture to culture. Every language has its own nature of speech acts [3]. In 2005, Al-Kahtani [4] states that different cultures realize speech acts in different ways. Speech acts can lead to conflict between speakers with refusals. This means that a refusal may cause negative feelings between interlocutors because people dislike being refused. Thus, the refusal is an art of communication which people should realize and understand in order to adapt in communication for the keeping of good relations and reducing the risks of negative feelings from other people. Moreover, forms of using languages and strategies in cross-cultural communication are different in each society. A refusal is a speech act by which a speaker “denies to engage in an action proposed by the interlocutor” [5]. The speech act of refusal has been identified as a “Major cross-cultural 'sticking point' for many non-native speakers” [6]. Refusal speech acts cannot occur separately without a precedent speech act. In other words, a speaker refuses when an interlocutor expresses the speech act of request, invitation, offer, or suggestion. These refusal speech acts show that a speaker does not agree with an interlocutor. The culture is seen to determine the beliefs, notions, and understandings of other people in the society. For example, expressing opinions or the feelings directly with other people in American culture is common, while other cultures consider that these behaviors are not appropriate. In Thai culture, a speaker usually

avoids refusing the request, invitation, or suggestion because the speaker will be blamed as cited in [7].

4. Collectivism is defined as a situation in which people feel they belong to larger in-groups or collectives which care for them in exchange for loyalty [8].

5. Individualism can be defined as a situation in which people are concerned with themselves and close family members only [8].

## II. INTRODUCTION

Yule [9] uses the term speech act to refer to the actions, which are performed via utterances. For example, when a boss says, “You are fired!” his/her words constitute the act of firing an employee. In this example, the boss is performing an act via utterance. It means the words can change someone’s status [10]. Language is full of implicit meanings. Sometimes when a speaker utters something, he/she does not just utter the utterance, but the speaker means something behind it. One can perform three speech acts simultaneously such as a locutionary act, an illocutionary act, and a perlocutionary act. A locutionary act has to do with the utterance of a sentence which determines sense and reference. An Illocutionary act deals with the naming of statements, offers, promises, etc. A perlocutionary act deals with the bringing about of effects on the audience by uttering the sentence [11]. Griffith [12] states that a speech act does not refer simply to the act of speaking, but also to the whole communicative situation including context of the utterance (including the situation in which the discourse occurs, the participants and any preceding verbal or physical interaction) and paralinguistic features which may contribute to the meaning of the interaction. As speech act of refusing in a foreign language is a complex task because it requires the acquisition of socio cultural values of the foreign language culture. Individualism and collectivism have been a chief disparity in the way of communicating among cultures [13]. Individualism is defined as a situation in which people are concerned with themselves and close family members only, while collectivism can be defined as a situation in which people feel they belong to larger in-groups or collectives which care for them in exchange for loyalty—and vice versa [8]. The difference can be expressed by the range of social “concern”, which refers to bonds and links with others [14]. Cross-cultural research often focuses on the differences between societies that stress individualism and societies that stress collectivism. Individualistic cultures emphasize promoting the individual’s and his/her immediate family’s self-interest, personal autonomy, privacy, self-realization, independence, individual decision making, an understanding of personal identity as the sum of attributes of the individual, and less concern about the needs and interests of others.

### III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Austin [15] stated that a speaker can act something through the utterance which she/he makes not only when performing a specific function to confirm the truth or untruth but it also when leading on to some actions. Austin [15] called this utterance "Performative utterance". For example: "I apologize..." "I advise you to do it." [15]. These utterances are not just the report of the truth, but they show some actions of a speaker that are either naming, apologizing, welcoming, or introducing. The action which a speaker performs through the utterance is one of the language functions which can be divided into 3 levels as follows: 1) Locutionary acts refer to a literal meaning of an utterance. 2) Illocutionary acts refer to an intended meaning of an utterance. 3) Perlocutionary acts are the actual effects of saying something. A linguistic philosopher who improves upon the concepts of Austin and has created his famous theory is [16]. He has divided the Illocutionary act into 5 categories: 1) Representatives (or Assertive) speech acts in which a speaker commits to the truth of the expressed statements (e.g., describing something). 2) Commissive speech acts in which a speaker commits to some future actions (e.g., promising, guaranteeing, and swearing). 3) Directives speech acts in which a speaker requests the hearer to perform a particular action (e.g., commanding, requesting). 4) Expressive speech acts by which a speaker expresses his/her feelings (e.g., thanking, apologizing, welcoming). 5) Declarations speech acts that change the reality in accord with the proposition of the declaration (e.g., nominating, resigning).

#### *Politeness and Face-Threatening Act (FTA)*

Politeness is a social phenomenon that can keep a good interpersonal relationship and a norm set by social conventions. Politeness strategies are created for saving the hearers' faces. "Face" in this study was defined by [17] as the "positive social value a person effectively claims for himself". Face can be saved or lost, and it can be threatened or conserved in interactions. The utterance or action which threatens a person's public self-image or face refers to a face-threatening act (FTA) by [18]. Face-threatening act (FTA) threatens the hearer's face by imposing some negative speech acts, such as request, order, anger, disagreement, and so forth. They pointed out that the strategies of saving face are the most polite in communicative activities.

#### *Related studies*

Klinnamhom et al [19] did a comparative study on refusal strategies between 100 Thai and 100 Chinese students. The data were collected by using a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) with three situations using two strategies: direct and indirect. The results demonstrated both Thai and Chinese students preferred direct strategies but some of them also used indirect strategies along with direct strategies. Canada, England, Thailand, and China do

not correlate with the concept. However, some results of the studies did not relate to the concept of collectivism and individualism. In 2017, Saad [20] investigated refusal strategies used by Malay ESL students and English native speakers when refusing a request. The study focused on the types and the contents of the strategies used by 12 Malay Speakers of English (MSE) and 12 Native Speakers of English (NSE) when refusing a request made by a higher social status interlocutor. The refusal strategies that they used were direct, indirect, and adjuncts. The findings showed that both groups shared many similarities of refusal strategies when refusing the higher social status of interlocutor's requests. However, the NSE tended to use more direct strategies than the MSE. The NSE participants presented western individualistic values while the MSE participants showed eastern group-oriented values. In the same year, Farenkia [21] conducted a study on refusal strategies in Canadian English. This study emphasized refusing invitations, offers and requests. There were 16 males and 16 females university students and they were native speakers of Canadian English. Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was employed in this study with nine situations. The data were classified into three types: direct refusals, indirect refusals, and adjuncts to refusals. The findings showed that most participants preferred indirect refusal strategies. The most common direct refusal strategy used to refuse invitations and requests was the expression of the inability to accept the invitations or requests, while the most common strategy for refusing offers was "No". The results also showed that expressions of willingness and expressions of gratitude were the most common adjuncts employed with direct and indirect refusal strategies. In addition, the degree of familiarity and power distance also had an impact on the distribution of the refusal strategies. In 2017, [1] studied how Thai speakers chose refusal strategies to refuse the requests from their Phakphuak "partisan" and the one who was not their Phakphuak "partisan." 100 participants were from Thammasart University. The instruments were the Discourse Completion Test with six situations. The findings showed that Phakphuak partisan" considerations influenced how Thai students chose linguistic strategies to refuse requests. The idea of the relationship of Phakphuak"partisan" in Thai society was borrowed from the concept of Phakphuak "partisan" in Thai : an interdependent view of self and collectivism. In 2018, Rahong [22] conducted a study on refusal strategies in English communication used by 15 Burmese and 15 American officers. The instrument was the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) adapted from [6]. There were 12 situations including speech acts of request, invitation, offer, and suggestion. The strategies used in this study were direct and indirect refusal strategies. The results revealed that the top three strategies which both groups used were reason, gratitude, and statement of regret; all examples of

indirect strategy. Burmese participants used indirect strategies in all speech acts and all of working social status. On the other hand, American participants used direct strategies in all speech acts and all of working social status. From the studies mentioned, there was no research study that focused on the differences of the refusal strategies used by collectivism and individualism cultures. Therefore, this study aims at investigating the refusal strategies used by collectivism and individualism cultures that are not based on social status, gender or age.

#### IV. PROCESS

This section will include details on the participants, the research instruments and data analysis.

##### Participants

There were 12 participants in this study. They were divided into 2 groups which were of 6 eastern people from collectivism cultures. 2 Thais, 2 Chinese and 2 Filipinos and 6 western people from individualism cultures. 2 British, 2 Americans, and 2 Australians. The participants were selected through a random sampling technique at Kasetsart University in Thailand.

##### Research instruments

The data of this study consists of written responses which were collected through the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) with different languages. Discourse Completion Test (DCT) is a popular instrument used to collect linguistic data in a short period of time and to analyze particular speech acts from a large number of participants. The DCT of the present study consists of eight social situations with only equal social status. The situations in the DCT consider refusal speech acts of requests, invitations, offers, and suggestions. Each speech act is divided into 2 situations and they are mixed in order to be natural and unambiguous. Social situations of the DCT are designed to be as practical as possible to both eastern and western cultures. Participants who are Thais, Chinese, and Filipinos are required to respond the DCT in Thai, Chinese, and Filipino language respectively. Participants who are British, Americans and Australians are required to respond the situations in the

DCT in English language. When they are answering the DCT, they have to assume that they are in the situations which are described in the DCT and they have to answer each question as they would do in real-life situations.

##### Data analysis

The refusal strategies conducted by [6] were used widely in most research in the field of refusal. In 2016, Weerachairattana [23] developed strategies from [6] and the additional adjuncts were expressions of good wishes. For example, "I hope you have a great party", and expression of surprise "Really?". The data in this study were analyzed based on the classification of refusal strategies established by [6, 23-24]. However,

it does not keep the refusal strategies of nonverbal communication in avoidance because the data were collected through written DCTs.

##### Frequency counts of semantic formulas

After instruments were collected from the participants, their refusal strategies were coded based on the classification by [6]. They responded to the situations which consisted of multiple strategies. For example, if participants refused a request by saying "Sorry, I can't lend you money right now." "I'm also short with my budget". It was coded as [statement of regret +[negative willingness/ ability]+[excuse/ reason/ explanation]. After coding all the strategies, the coded data were analyzed quantitatively. Frequency counts of the semantic formulas used in refusal speech act were calculated in order to investigate what strategies were used in both groups.

#### V. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results of using refusal strategies between collectivism and individualism cultures.

Table 1: The results of different refusal strategies between collectivism and individualism

	Collectivism		Individualism	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
<b>Direct</b>	10	5.74	13	10.49
<b>Indirect</b>	135	77.59	101	81.45
<b>Adjuncts of refusal</b>	29	16.67	10	8.06
<b>Total</b>	174	100.00	124	100.00

Table 1 shows that people who come from collectivism cultures prefer indirect strategies (77.59%) following by adjuncts of refusal (16.67%) and direct strategies (5.74%). For individualism cultures, the frequently that they use most is indirect strategies (81.45%), direct strategies (10.49%) and adjuncts of refusal (8.06%) respectively. Thus, both cultures prefer indirect refusal strategies.

Table 2: The use of direct refusal strategies between collectivism and individualism

	Collectivism		Individualism	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
<b>No</b>	4	40	4	30.8
<b>Negative willingness/ ability</b>	6	60	9	69.2
<b>Total</b>	10	100	13	100.0

As can be seen in Table 2, the percentage of saying "No" (40%) in collectivism cultures is less than negative willingness/ability (60%). For example, I can't attend your birthday. Similarly, individualism cultures prefer negative willingness/ability (69.2%). For example, I don't want to go. This is followed by saying "No" (30.8%). Thus, negative willingness/ability is the

most frequently used in direct refusal strategies by both cultures.

Table 3: The use of indirect refusal strategies between collectivism and individualism

	Collectivism		Individualism	
	Fre q.	%	Freq.	%
Statement of regret	27	20.00	16	15.84
Wish	1	0.74	0	0.00
Excuse/reason /explanation	68	50.38	51	50.50
Statement of alternative	4	2.96	3	2.97
Statement of principle	0	0.00	1	0.99
Criticize the request	1	0.74	0	0.00
Request for help/empathy /assistance	0	0.00	3	2.97
Self-defense	11	8.15	16	15.84
Lack of enthusiasm	2	1.48	0	0.00
Joke	2	1.48	0	0.00
Postpone	17	12.59	10	9.90
Hedge	2	1.48	1	0.99
<b>Total</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>100.00</b>

From this table, the most frequent use by collectivism cultures are indirect strategies: excuse/reason/ explanation. For example, "I have something else to do." is the most frequent strategy used by collectivism cultures (50.38%). The second most frequent strategy is the statement of regret. For example, apologies (20.00%).The third most frequent one is postponement. For example, "I will do it when I find the time and energy." (12.59%). The fourth one is self-defense ( 8.15%).This is followed by the statement of alternative suggestions (2.96%). However, a request for help/empathy/assistance and a statement of principle was not found in collectivism cultures. For individualism cultures, excuse/reason/explanation. For example, "I don't have enough money to give you." is the most frequent strategy (50.50%). The statement of regret, for example, "I'm so sorry" and self-defense, or example, "I am not that big are used equally as the second most frequent use" ( 15.84%). This is followed by postponement ( 9.90%), a statement of alternative suggestion (2.97%), a request for help/empathy/assistance (2.97%), a statement of principle (0.99%) and a hedge (0.99%) are used by individualism cultures respectively. Nevertheless, to criticize the request, show lack of enthusiasm, and to joke are not found in individualism cultures.

Table 4: The use of adjuncts of refusal between collectivism and individualism

	Collectivism		Individualism	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Statement of positive opinion /feeling or Agreement	3	10.34	2	20
Statement of empathy	1	3.45	1	10
Gratitude/a ppreciation	20	68.97	7	70
Expression	5	17.24	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 4 shows that the most frequently used of adjuncts in collectivism cultures is gratitude/appreciation. For example, " Thanks for your concern (68.97%)". This is followed by expressions of good wishes, for example, " Happy birthday" (17.24%). Statements of positive opinion/feeling or agreement, for example, "What a pity?" (10.34%. This is followed by the statement of empathy, for example, "I don't want to bother you too much" (3.45%). For individualism cultures, they use gratitude/appreciation the most, for example, "I appreciate it." (70%). This is followed by the statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement, for example, " I'd really love to but..." (20%), and the statement of empathy, for example, "I don't want to give you trouble" (10%). However, expressions of good wishes is not found in individualism cultures.

## VI. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The findings of this study revealed that the participants in both cultures preferred to refuse indirectly. The most frequent use of refusal strategy in both groups was an excuse/ reason/explanation. The second most frequent strategy was the statement of regret. Unlike the third most frequent strategy, collectivism cultures use postponement while individualism cultures use self-defense. For direct strategies, both collectivism and individualism cultures preferred negative willingness/ability. This is following by saying "No". Moreover, people who come from collectivism cultures preferred indirect strategies. Though both collectivism and individualism cultures used indirect strategies more than direct strategies, collectivism cultures showed a tendency to save the hearers' faces and maintain good relations more than individualism cultures. From this research, it was found that refusal strategies may not depend only on cultures, but also on individual characteristics. To obtain a more comprehensive picture of the use of refusal strategies used by collectivism and individualism, further studies may be conducted in each culture to get an insight into participants' characteristics in each culture.

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