

Refusals in Egyptian Arabic and American English

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Received 20 May 2012; received in revised form 29 May 2014; accepted 3 June 2014

Abstract

This study investigated how native speakers of Egyptian Arabic and native speakers of American English realized the speech act of refusal in equal and unequal status situations. Ten native speakers of Egyptian Arabic and 10 native speakers of American English participated in the study. Data were elicited using context-enhanced role plays consisting of six refusal situations eliciting refusals of requests and offers. Results showed marked quantitative and qualitative differences between the two groups. For example, the Egyptians produced more words and turns than their American counterparts. The Egyptians also tended to be particularly verbose and indirect when interacting with someone higher in status. Results also showed that while the Egyptians preferred family oriented reasons to support their refusals, the Americans tended to use personal reasons. With regard to the use of individual refusal strategies, the Americans showed a preference for expressions of regret and gratitude whereas the Egyptians tended to use religious expressions (e.g., invoking the name of God) and proverbs. Discourse-level differences were also observed and were found to be more pronounced in interactions with someone higher in status.

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Keywords: Egyptian Arabic; American English; Speech act; Refusal; Role play; Interactional data

1. Introduction

The term 'speech act' has been described as a minimal unit of discourse (Searle, 1969). Searle proposed a taxonomy of speech acts that included five categories: directives (e.g., requests, commands), commissives (e.g., promises, threats), representatives (e.g., assertions, claims), declaratives (e.g., declaring war), and expressives (e.g., apologies, thanks). The speech act of refusal, the focus of the present study, falls under the category of expressives.

Speech acts have been investigated in different languages and cultures over the past 30 years. The goal of investigating speech acts has been to understand how human communication is carried out through linguistic behavior, and to understand similarities and differences in how interactions are carried out in different languages and cultures (Olshtain and Blum-Kulka, 1985). Studying speech acts can also help identify the social and cultural norms and beliefs that govern speech act realization in a given speech community (Meier, 1995). In addition, findings from this research can be an important source of information for language teachers and curriculum designers (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996). Researchers have argued that teaching pragmatic aspects of language can minimize intercultural communication breakdowns and reduce cultural stereotyping (Meier, 1995).

Speech act studies fall under three main categories: Intralingual, cross-cultural, and learner-centered. Intralingual studies examine the realization of speech acts in a single language or culture, such as the investigation of compliments in

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Chinese (Yuan, 1998) or swearing in Arabic (Abdel-Jawad, 2000). Cross-cultural speech act studies, on the other hand, compare speech acts across a number of languages and cultures, such as comparing refusals in American English and German (Beckers, 1999) or apologizing in Korean and Australian English (Kim, 2008). Learner-centered studies examine how language learners realize speech acts in different languages and cultures. For example, Tamanaha (2003) examined the realization of the speech acts of apology and complaint by American learners of Japanese and compared the learners' productions to those of native speakers of Japanese and native speakers of American English. The present study falls under the category of cross-cultural speech act studies and it examined the realization of the speech act of refusal in Egyptian Arabic and American English.

1.1. Speech act of refusal

The speech act of refusal is realized when a speaker “denies to engage in an action proposed by the interlocutor” (Chen et al., 1995:121). A refusal is different from other speech acts in that it is not initiated by the speaker; rather it is a response to an initiating act such as an offer or request (Gass and Houck, 1999). It has also been noted that the form and content of the refusal vary depending on the initiating act (Keshavarz et al., 2006). Refusals have also been described as involving greater complexity than other speech acts since they do not allow for extensive planning on the part of the refuser, hence making the possibilities for a response broader (Gass and Houck, 1999).

The speech act of refusal has also been referred to as a face-threatening act (Brown and Levinson, 1987); hence it requires extended negotiation and the use of indirect strategies to minimize the offense to the hearer's face (Beebe et al., 1990). A refusal is also a high-risk speech act since failure to refuse appropriately might jeopardize the personal relations between the speakers (Allami and Naeimi, 2011; Kwon, 2003). More importantly, this speech act has been reported in the literature as having a high potential for causing misunderstanding and miscommunication in interactions between native speakers of Arabic and native speakers of American English (Al-Issa, 1998; Al-Shalawi, 1997; Stevens, 1993). For these reasons, this speech act has been selected to be the focus of the present study.

1.2. Purpose and research questions

This study investigated how native speakers of Egyptian Arabic and native speakers of American English realized refusals at the discourse level in equal and unequal status situations. The study aimed to answer the following questions:

- (1) How do Egyptian and American refusals differ with regard to the amount of language produced (i.e., number of words, number of turns, and average turn length)?
- (2) Do Egyptians and Americans use direct and indirect strategies differently in equal and unequal status situations?
- (3) Do Egyptians and Americans use individual refusal strategies differently in equal and unequal status situations?
- (4) Do Egyptians and Americans use different excuses in support of their refusals?
- (5) Do Egyptians and Americans exhibit different discourse-level patterns in their refusals?

2. Literature review

2.1. Refusal studies

A number of refusal studies have been conducted over the past few years to examine the realization of refusals in different languages and cultures. For example, Beckers (1999) investigated the speech act of refusal in American English and German. Findings from her study showed that Americans varied their refusal strategies according to interlocutor's status whereas Germans varied them according to social distance between interlocutors. She also found German refusals to be less direct than American refusals. Henstock (2003) examined refusals in Japanese and American English and found that Japanese speakers used negative politeness strategies when interacting with someone higher in status, but used “blunt” and friendly language to their equals and juniors. Americans, on the other hand, used negative politeness strategies in both equal and unequal status situations.

In another major study Beebe et al. (1990) examined American and Japanese refusals and found Japanese refusals to be less direct in interactions with someone higher in status while American refusals did not exhibit this tendency. Also, Japanese excuses, used in support of refusal, were found to be vaguer and less specific than American excuses. In another study, Keshavarz et al. (2006) examined refusals in American English and Iranian Persian and found the Iranian participants to be more sensitive to the status of their interlocutor than their American counterparts. For example, the Iranians exhibited variation in the frequency and type of politeness strategies based on the status of their interlocutor while

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