

REFUSAL STRATEGIES IN CANADIAN ENGLISH: A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT: *The present study is a quantitative analysis of refusal strategies in Canadian English. Some 32 university students and native speakers of Canadian English were randomly selected for the study. A written questionnaire, in form of Discourse Completion Task, was used to elicit refusals from the participants. The overall findings suggest that the participants use direct refusals, indirect refusals and adjuncts to refusals to decline invitations, offers, and requests. It was found that the respondents mostly prefer indirect refusals. Statistical differences also emerge with respect to the use of direct refusals, indirect refusals, and adjuncts to refusals when declining offers, invitations and requests. The analysis also reveals preferences with respect to realization types of the three major pragmatic strategies. The most common direct refusal strategy employed to decline invitations and requests is the expression of inability to accept the invitations or requests, while “no” is the most preferred direct strategy to refuse offers. The findings also suggest that the respondents make different choices regarding the three most frequently used indirect strategies to decline invitations, offers, and requests. The results also show that expressions of willingness and expressions of gratitude are the most common adjuncts employed with direct and indirect refusals. Finally, the analysis reveals that factors such as degree of familiarity and power distance also have an impact on the distribution of the refusal strategies. The limitations of the study’s findings are highlighted, and directions for future research outlined.*

KEYWORDS: Refusal Strategies, Regional Variation, Canadian English

INTRODUCTION

This study investigates refusals in Canadian English. There are numerous studies on refusals in different languages in general and different regional varieties of English in particular. The present study is one of the first attempts to examine refusals in Canadian English and it adds to the growing body of research on speech acts in varieties of English. Focus here is on a quantitative account of invitation refusals, offer refusals, and request refusals produced by a group of undergraduate university students and native speakers of Canadian English. The data were collected through a written questionnaire consisting of many situations. The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical background. The methodology is outlined in section 3. The findings are presented and discussed in Section 4. The paper concludes with remarks and perspectives for future research.

Theoretical background

A refusal is a negative response to such initial speech acts as requests, invitations, offers, suggestions, by which a speaker expresses their will not “to engage in an action proposed by the interlocutor” (Chen et al. 1995: 121). A refusal is a type of dispreferred response (cf. Félix-Brasdefer, 2008a), as it is not conform to the hearer’s expectations in a given situation. A refusal maximizes disagreement instead of minimizing it. As such, a refusal represents a high

degree of threat to the hearer's face and to social harmony. Empirical studies have found that refusals can be realized directly or indirectly and that there is a general trend to combine direct and indirect refusals with supportive acts. While the choice of these strategies vary across languages and cultures, other factors such as the type of initial act (invitation, request, offer, suggestion), the degree of familiarity between the interlocutors, social status, social norms, etc. play an important role in the choice and combinations of refusal realization patterns.

Refusals have been examined from many different perspectives (cf. Félix-Brasdefer 2008b for a discussion of studies on refusals). Studies focusing on individual languages and comparing two or more languages/cultures have been carried out extensively. There is also a growing body of research on refusals on regional varieties of the same language. These studies compare refusal patterns in regional varieties of pluricentric languages such as Spanish (cf. Félix-Brasdefer 2008a), Chinese (cf. Ren, 2015), French (cf. Mulo Farenkia 2018), English (cf. Anchimbe, 2015), etc. There is, to the best of my knowledge, no study on refusals in Canadian English. The present study attempts to fill this research gap by scrutinizing the distribution of refusal strategies found in the examples collected for the study.

METHOD

Informants and instrument

The examples used in this study were provided by 32 University students, 16 females and 16 males, aged between 18 and 23, and native speakers of Canadian English. The data were collected by means of a Discourse Completion Task questionnaire (see Blum-Kulka et al. 1989) consisting of many different situations in which the participants had to construct dialogues in which they were asked to realize a range of different speech acts. Nine of these situations elicited refusals, the focus of the present study. The situations were described thus:

Scenarios employed to elicit invitation refusals

- 1) Situation 1 (Birthday party): Your friend invites you to a birthday party. But you cannot attend. You say to him/her:
- 2) Situation 2 (Drink after class): A classmate invites you to a drink after class. But you cannot accept the invitation. You say to him/her.
- 3) Situation 3 (Colleague's talk): Your professor invites you to a colleague's talk. But you are unable to attend. You say to him/her.

Scenarios employed to elicit offer refusals

- 1) Situation 1 (Financial help). You have some financial problems lately. One of your friends offers to lend you some money that you can pay back when you can. You decline the offer, saying:
- 2) Situation 2 (Ride). While you are waiting for the bus, a car stops in front of you. The driver (you do not know him/her) offers you a ride home. You decline the offer, saying:
- 3) Situation 3 (Full-time job). You have been working part-time in a company for the past 7 months. Your boss has been very pleased with your work and has decided to offer

you a full-time job and a much better pay with the same company but in another city. You cannot accept the offer. What do you say to your boss?

Scenarios employed to elicit request refusals

- 1) Situation 1 (Note). One of your classmates who generally misses classes asks if you can lend him/her the notes of the classes s/he has missed. You don't want to give him/her your notes. You say to him/her:
- 2) Situation 2 (Mobile phone). While you are going to class, a student you are meeting for the first time asks you if s/he can use your mobile phone to make an urgent phone call. You refuse, saying:
- 3) Situation 3 (Conference). Your professor asks you to help him/her organize a conference, but you can't because you are very busy. You tell him/her:

Data Analysis

The 32 informants provided 283 refusal utterances, namely 95 invitation refusals, 95 offer refusals, and 93 request refusals. In these examples, refusals appear either as single speech acts or as speech acts sets made up of several different acts. The examples collected were segmented in semantic formulas and classified according to Beebe et al.'s (1990) categorization: the semantic formulas found in the data were classified into three categories: direct refusals, indirect refusals, and adjuncts to refusals. Direct refusals and indirect refusals are the head acts or main strategies used to refuse invitations, offers and request independently of other elements of the conversational turn. Adjuncts to refusals are expressions that "usually accompany refusals but cannot stand as a refusal on their own" (Shishavan & Sharifian 2013: 816).

Direct refusals are realized through expressions like "no", expressions employed to indicate inability to accept invitations, offers or requests like "I can't", "I am unable to make it", "I won't be able to make it", "I don't think I can make it", "I am unable to attend", "I won't be able to accept the offer", "I cannot accept". Also attested are expressions of unwillingness to accept the invitation, request or offer like "I don't want to", etc. They can be employed alone or in combination with other expressions. Indirect refusals appear in the form of different speech acts. They appear either alone or in combination with other realization strategies. The indirect refusals attested in the data play different pragmatic roles. In most cases, they are employed to mitigate the negative effect of the refusals on the interlocutor's face and the relationship between speaker and hearer. The indirect refusals found include acts such as reasons/explanations, statements of alternatives, apologies or regrets, promises or postponements, etc. Adjuncts to refusals can either mitigate or aggravate the effect of direct refusals and indirect refusals. Different speech acts are used in the examples as adjuncts to refusals. They include expressions of gratitude, expressions of willingness, expressions of positive opinions, etc. The present study focuses on the frequencies of direct refusals, indirect refusals and adjuncts to refusals in the data. The following section presents the results of the quantitative analysis of invitation refusals (section 4.1), offer refusals (section 4.2), and request refusals (section 4.3).

FINDINGS

Invitation Refusals

Overall Distribution

Table 1 summarizes the distribution of the three main invitation refusal strategies attested in the data. As can be seen here, the respondents mostly prefer indirect refusals: this strategy accounts for 62.7% of all invitation refusal strategies. Direct refusals represent 52 tokens, i.e. 22% of all responses, while adjuncts to refusals are attested 36 times, thus accounting for 15.3% of the data.

Table 1. Overall distribution of invitation refusals strategies

Main refusal strategies	Friend (S1)	Classmate (S2)	Professor (S3)	Total
Direct refusals	15	17	20	52 (22%)
Indirect refusals	55	57	36	148 (62.7%)
Adjuncts to refusals	13	7	16	36 (15.3%)
Total	83	81	72	236 (100%)

The findings also shows that the distribution of the three strategies is not the same across the three situations. As can be seen in Table 1, direct refusals are mostly used when declining a professor's invitation. Indirect refusals are almost equally used when declining a friend's invitation to a party (S1) and when refusing a classmate's invitation to a drink after class (S2). Adjuncts to refusals appear almost with the same frequency in the friend (S1) and the professor (S3) situations. Let us now look at the frequencies and situational distribution of the realization patterns of direct invitation refusals.

Direct Strategies

There are two realization types of direct refusals in the data. These are "no" and "inability". Their frequencies and situational distribution are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Types of direct refusal strategies

Direct strategies	Friend (S1)	Classmate (S2)	Professor (S3)	Total
No	0	1	1	2 (3.8%)
Inability	15	16	19	50 (96.2%)
Total	15	17	20	52 (100%)

Table 2 shows that the vast majority of the respondents evoke their inability to accept the invitations made (96.2%). This strategy is slightly more preferred in the professor situation (S3, 19/50) than in the classmate (S2, 16/50) and the friend (S1, 15/50) situation. The "no" strategy does not appear in the friend situation.

Indirect Strategies

The participants produced 148 indirect refusals. The types of speech acts employed to refuse invitations indirectly, their frequencies and situational distribution are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Types of indirect refusal strategies

Indirect strategies	Friend (S1)	Classmate (S2)	Professor (S3)	Total
Reason/Explanation	24	15	17	56 (37.9%)
Apology/Regret	25	16	13	54 (36.5%)
Alternative	4	18	5	27 (18.3%)
Promise	1	8	0	9 (6.1%)
Conditional acceptance	1	0	0	1 (0.6%)
Request	0	0	1	1 (0.6%)
Total	55	57	36	148 (100%)

As seen in Table 3, the respondents used six different types of speech acts to refuse invitations indirectly. They are *reason/explanation*; *apology/regret*; *alternative*; *promise*; *conditional acceptance*, and *request*. The two most frequent speech acts used are explanations and apologies, they respectively account for 37.9% and 36.5% of all indirect refusals. Statements of alternative are the third most common indirect refusals, with 18.3%, followed by promises (6.1%). The other two speech acts, namely conditional acceptance and request, have very low frequencies.

With respect to situational distribution, it is worth mentioning that while the three most frequent indirect strategies appear in all situations, albeit with differences in numbers, the other three indirect strategies are limited to certain situations. Explanations, are most frequently employed when declining invitations from friends (S1, 24 tokens of 56). This is also the case with apologies (25 occurrences of 54). Statements of alternatives are mostly used when the participants decline classmates' invitations to a drink after class (S2, 18/27). Promises are most commonly used in the classmate situation (S2, 8/9).

Adjuncts to Refusals

The participants used 36 adjuncts to refusals. Table 4 summarizes the frequencies of the types of adjuncts found in the data.

Table 4. Types of adjuncts to refusals

Adjunct strategies	Friend (S1)	Classmate (S2)	Professor (S3)	Total
Willingness	7	2	6	15 (41.7%)
Gratitude	2	5	5	12 (33.3%)
Good wish	4	0	0	4 (11.1%)
Positive opinion	0	0	5	5 (13.9%)
Total	13	7	16	36 (100%)

Table 4 indicates that the two most preferred adjuncts are expressions of willingness (41.7%) and expressions of gratitude (33.3%). Expressions of positive opinion (13.9%) and good wishes (11.1%) are employed with relatively much lower frequencies. Looking at the situational distribution of the adjuncts, we observe that expressions of willingness are most frequently used in the friend (S1: 7/15) situation and the professor (S3: 6/15) situation. Meanwhile, expressions of gratitude are equally distributed in the classmate and the professor situations. Positive opinion, the third adjunct in the data, appears only in the professor situation, while good wish, the fourth adjunct, occurs only in the friend situation. In the next section, I will present the strategies used by the respondents to decline offers.

Offer Refusals

Overall Distribution

The first aspect to consider is the overall distribution of the three main strategies employed by the respondents to decline offers. Table 5 presents the frequencies of the three main strategies and their distribution across the situations. As can be seen in Table 5, indirect refusals (38.6%) and adjuncts to refusals (38.2%) are equally distributed in the corpus, while direct refusals account for 23.2% of all strategies.

Table 5. Overall distribution of offer refusals strategies

Strategies	Friend (S1)	Stranger (S2)	Boss (S3)	Total
Direct refusals	23	17	16	56 (23.2%)
Indirect refusals	28	35	30	93 (38.6%)
Adjuncts to refusals	32	30	30	92 (38.2%)
Total	83	82	76	241 (100%)

The situational distribution of these strategies is also noteworthy. While direct refusals are most frequently used when declining offers from friends, indirect refusals are most common in the stranger situation, whereas adjuncts almost have the same number across the three situations.

Direct Offer Refusal Strategies

There are three realization types of direct offer refusals. These are “no”, “inability”, and “unwillingness”. Their frequencies are summarized in Table 6. It shows that the participants mostly use “no” (48.2%), while expressions of inability to accept the offer rank second with 44.6%. The third realization type, “unwillingness”, has a relatively lower frequency (7.2%). Overall, there are more direct strategies in the friend situation (50%) than in the stranger (17/56) and the boss (16/56) situations. The strategy “no” is employed only in the stranger (17/27) and friend (10/27) situations. The “inability” strategy occurs only in the boss (15/25) and the friend (10/25) situations. Expressions of unwillingness are used in the friend (3/4) and the boss (1/4) situations.

Table 6. Types of direct offer refusal strategies

Direct strategies	Friend (S1)	Stranger (S2)	Boss (S3)	Total
No	10	17	0	27 (48.2%)
Inability	10	0	15	25 (44.6%)
Unwillingness	3	0	1	4 (7.2%)
Total	23	17	16	56 (100%)

Indirect offer refusal strategies

The results reveal that the participants use different types of speech acts to refuse offers indirectly. The types and distribution of the attested indirect offer refusal strategies are presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Types and frequency of indirect refusal strategies

Indirect strategies	Friend (S1)	Stranger (S2)	Boss (S3)	Total
Reason/Explanation	3	18	20	41 (44%)
Dissuasion	13	10	0	23 (24.7%)
Principle	10	2	0	12 (12.9%)
Moralizing	1	0	0	1 (1.1%)
Alternative /suggestion	1	0	3	4 (4.4%)
Apology/Regret	0	4	7	11 (11.8%)
Preference	0	1	0	1 (1.1%)
Total	28	35	30	93 (100%)

We can see that the participants made use of seven different speech acts, namely *reason/explanation*, *dissuasion*, *principle*, *moralizing*, *alternative*, *apology/regret*, and *preference*. The most frequently used indirect offer refusal strategy is reason/explanation. It accounts for 41 tokens (44%) of all indirect strategies. The second most common indirect strategy is dissuasion (24.7%), principle is the third most frequent indirect strategy (12.9%) and apology/regret is the fourth most common strategy (11.8%). The other three indirect strategies have very low frequencies. The distribution of the indirect strategies across the three situations is not the same. As indicated in Table 7, reason/explanation, the most preferred indirect strategy, appears in the three situations, albeit with different frequencies. This strategy is mostly employed in the boss (20/41) and the stranger (18/41) situations. Dissuasion, the second most frequent indirect strategy, is used only in the friend and the stranger situations. This is also the case with the third most common strategy, principle: of the 12 examples of principles attested, there 10 tokens in the friend situation and 2 occurrences in the stranger situation. Of the 11 instances of apologies/regrets found in the data, there are 7 tokens in the boss and 4 occurrences in the stranger situations. The participants used one suggestion of alternative in the friend situation and 3 instances of this indirect strategy in the boss situation. There is one example of moralizing in the friend situation and one expression of preference in the stranger situation.

Adjuncts to Refusals

Overall, 92 adjuncts to refusals were found in the data. Their types and distribution are summarized in Table 8 below.

Table 8. Types and frequency of adjuncts to refusals

Adjunct strategies	Friend (S1)	Stranger (S2)	Boss (S3)	Total
Gratitude	31	30	24	85 (92.4%)
Willingness	1	0	3	4 (4.3%)
Positive opinion	0	0	3	3 (3.3%)
Total	32	30	30	92 (100%)

Table 8 shows that the participants use three different types of adjuncts to refusals, namely expressions of gratitude, expressions of willingness, and expressions of positive opinion. Expressions of gratitude are by far, the most frequently employed adjuncts. They account for 92.4% of the data and they appear much more in the friend (31/85) and stranger (30/85) situations. Expressions of willingness are attested four times, with 3 tokens in the boss and one example in the friend situations. The three expressions of positive opinion are found in the boss situation. The focus of the next section is on request refusal strategies.

Request Refusals

Overall distribution of strategies

Table 9 presents the frequencies of the three main strategies and their distribution across the situations.

Table 9. Overall distribution of request refusal strategies

Strategies	Friend (S1)	Stranger (S2)	Professor (S3)	Total
Direct refusals	9	2	12	23 (10.5%)
Indirect refusals	57	59	60	176 (80.5%)
Adjuncts to refusals	1	0	19	20 (9%)
Total	67	61	91	219 (100%)

As can be seen in Table 9, indirect refusals, which account for 80.5%, are by far the most frequently employed strategies, followed by direct refusals (10.5%) and adjuncts to refusals (9%). With respect to situational distribution, Table 9 shows that indirect refusals are almost equally distributed across the three situations. By contrast, direct refusals mostly appear in the professor (12/23) and the friend (9/23) situations. Of the 20 adjuncts to refusals attested, 19 are found in the professor situation, and only one token is identified in the friend situation.

Direct request refusal strategies

The results regarding the distribution of direct strategies are presented in Table 10.

Table 10. Types and frequency of direct strategies

Direct strategies	Friend (S1)	Stranger (S2)	Professor (S3)	Total
No	5	1	0	6 (26%)
inability	4	1	12	17 (74%)
Total	9	2	12	23(100%)

It can be seen that the respondents used two realization types of direct refusals, namely “no”, which accounts for 26% of direct refusals and “expressions of inability”, which account for 74% of direct refusals. While the realization type “no” mostly appear in the friend situation, “expressions of inability” are most frequently used when declining requests from professors.

Indirect request refusal strategies

The analysis reveals that the participants produced 176 indirect refusals, using seven different speech acts. The speech acts employed are *reason/explanation*, *apology/regret*, *alternative*, *advice/reproach*, *promise/postponement*, and *principle*. Their distribution is presented in Table 11.

Table 11. Types and frequency of indirect strategies

Indirect strategies	Friend (S1)	Stranger (S2)	Professor (S3)	Total
Explanation/reason	24	25	35	84 (47.7%)
Apology/Regret	16	22	19	57 (32.4%)
Alternative	7	6	4	17 (9.7%)
Advice/Reproach	7	0	0	7 (4%)
Promise/Postponement	2	0	2	4 (2.2%)
Principle	1	6	0	7 (4%)
Total	57	59	60	176 (100%)

The most preferred indirect strategy consists in given reasons or explanations and this strategy accounts for 47.7% of all indirect refusals. The second most frequently employed indirect refusals are apologies or regrets: they represent 32.4% of indirect strategies. Suggestions of alternatives are the third most common strategies used to decline requests, they account for 9.7% of indirect refusals. The remaining speech acts have lower frequencies than those of the speech acts already mentioned: while advice/reproach and principle respectively represent 4% of the data, promise/postponement is realized only three times (2.2%).

In terms of situational distribution, Table 11 indicates that of the 176 indirect request refusals identified, there are 60 examples in the professor situation, 59 occurrences in the stranger situation, and 57 tokens in the friend situation. The most frequently used indirect strategies, reasons or explanations, mostly appear in the professor situation (35/84). They are equally distributed in the other two situations. Apologies and regrets, the second most common indirect strategies, are slightly much more used in the stranger (22/57) than in the professor (19/57)

situation. Of the 17 instances of suggestions found in the corpus, there are seven tokens in the friend, 6 examples in the stranger, and 4 occurrences in the professor situations. Advice/reproach occurs only in the friend situation, while the 4 tokens of promise/postponement are equally distributed in the friend and professor situations. Finally, the expression of principle is mostly used in the stranger situation.

Adjuncts to Refusals

There are 20 adjuncts employed to support request refusals. Table 12 present the types of adjuncts employed and their frequencies.

Table 12. Types and frequency of adjunct strategies

Adjunct strategies	Friend (S1)	Stranger (S2)	Professor (S3)	Total
Willingness	0	0	12	12(60%)
Thanks/Appreciation	0	0	6	6 (30%)
Question	0	0	1	1 (5%)
Leave-taking	1	0	0	1 (5%)
Total	1	0	19	20 (100%)

The respondents employed four different types of speech acts as adjuncts to refusals, namely 'expressions of willingness', 'expressions of gratitude/appreciation', 'question', and 'leave-taking'. Expressions of willingness are, with 60%, the most preferred adjuncts to refusals and they all appear in the professor situation. The second most common adjuncts are expressions of gratitude or appreciation, they are all found in the professor situation. There is one question in the professor situation and one occurrence of leave-taking in the friend situation. Overall, 95% of all adjuncts to refusals occur in the professor situation.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to analyse the frequencies and situational distributions of strategies employed by the participants to refuse invitations, offers, and requests. Overall, the respondents use direct refusals, indirect refusals and adjuncts to refusals in the production of refusal utterances. The findings reveal that the participants mostly prefer indirect refusals. Of the 696 individual occurrences attested in the corpus, there are 131 (18.8%) direct refusals, 417 (60%) indirect refusals, and 148 (21.2%) adjuncts to refusals. The analysis reveals statistical differences regarding the use of direct refusals when reacting to offers, invitations and requests. Of the 131 tokens of direct refusals attested in the data, the participants use 56 (42.7%) examples to decline offers, 52 (39.7%) examples to refuse invitations and only 23 (17.6%) tokens to decline offers.

The findings also suggest that indirect refusals mostly occur when the participants decline requests. Of the 417 indirect refusals found in the data, there are 176 (42.2%) examples employed to decline requests, 148 (35.5%) instances used to refuse invitations, and 93 (22.3%) tokens used to decline offers. The results concerning the use of adjuncts show that the respondents mostly prefer to use adjuncts when declining offers. Of the 148 adjuncts attested

in the corpus, 92 (62.2%) tokens appear with offer refusals, 36 (24.3%) adjuncts are used with invitation refusals, and 20 (13.5%) instances are found with request refusals.

The analysis also reveals some preferences with respect to the realization types of the three major pragmatic strategies. The most common direct refusal strategy employed to decline invitations and requests is the expression of inability, whereas “no” is the most preferred direct strategy to refuse offers. Regarding indirect refusals, the results show that the three most frequently used indirect strategies to decline invitations are reasons, apologies and statements of alternatives, that reasons, dissuasions, statements of principles are predominantly used to refuse offers indirectly. Finally, reasons, apologies, and statements of alternatives are the three most used indirect strategies to decline requests.

It was also found that expressions of willingness and expressions of gratitude are the most common adjuncts employed with invitation refusals, that expressions of gratitude are by far the most preferred adjuncts used with offer refusals, while expressions of willingness are the adjuncts most frequently associated with request refusals. Finally, the analysis seems to demonstrate that factors such as degree of familiarity and power distance also have an impact on the choices of the refusal strategies.

It is clear that the limitations of the present study are primarily due to the nature of the empirical material used in the analysis. It was based on written questionnaire data provided by a very small group of participants and it focused on few situations. It is likely that the strategies documented in the corpus used here do not cover all refusal strategies in Canadian English. Also, the analysis focused on only quantitative aspects of the refusal patterns identified in the corpus. Needless to say that the scope of the analyses carried out here must be extended. In the next phase of our study, we plan to examine the linguistic realization patterns of the refusal strategies found in the corpus and to explore the way in which the types of initial acts (invitations, requests, offers), degree of familiarity and power distance between the interlocutors impact on the choices of refusal patterns. These aspects will contribute to a better understanding of the refusal speech behaviour of Canadian English speakers and lay an important foundation for comparative studies.

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