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### Cross-cultural pragmatics of refusal to invitation among Malays and Germans

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#### Abstract

This present study on cross-cultural pragmatics aims to investigate the pragmatic behaviours through the refusal speech act uttered by the Malay and German native speakers when receiving invitations from different levels of interlocutors. In this particular study, 15 native speakers of Malay and 15 native speakers of German were asked to refuse invitations made by an interlocutor. The study employed methodology from the combination of the refusal taxonomies proposed by Beebe *et al.*, (1990) and Al-Issa (2003). The data was then collected via a Discourse Completion Test (DCT). The results showed that both Malays and Germans used several similar strategies when refusing invitations; however, both cultures also exhibited differences in term of the type and frequency of refusal strategies employed in each situation. This study is esteemed to not only contribute to the widened corpus of cross-cultural refusal behaviour's literature, yet it is also counted to the literature on pragmatic behaviour specifically between Malays and Germans' language and culture.

Keywords: speech act, invitation, refusal strategies, semantic formula, cross-cultural pragmatics

*Pragmatik lintas budaya dalam Penolakan Undangan Antara Orang Melayu dan Jerman*

#### Abstrak

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji tingkah laku pragmatik melalui kata tindak tutur penolakan yang diucapkan oleh penutur bahasa Melayu dan Jerman apabila menerima jemputan dari pelbagai peringkat penutur. Seramai 15 penutur ibunda bahasa Melayu dan 15 penutur ibunda Bahasa Jerman telah diminta untuk menolak jemputan yang diajukan oleh seorang penutur dalam kajian ini. Seterusnya, kajian ini menggunakan kaedah Penyempurnaan Wacana (KPW) oleh Beebe *et al.* (1990) sebagai metedologi kajian untuk memperoleh data. Data kemudiannya dianalisis dan dikodkan mengikut taksonomi gabungan strategi penolakan oleh Beebe *et al.* (1990) dan Al-Issa (2003). Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa penutur bahasa Melayu dan Jerman dari kelas sosial yang sama lazimnya menggunakan strategi yang hampir sama apabila melakukan penolakan tetapi berbeza dari aspek kekerapan dan jenis lakuan budaya. Kajian ini diharapkan dapat menyumbang kepada peningkatan ilmu pengetahuan terhadap korpus kajian rentas budaya terutama yang berkaitan dengan bahasa dan budaya Melayu dan Jerman.

Kata kunci: tindak tutur, jemputan, strategi penolakan, formula semantik, pragmatik rentas budaya

## 1. Introduction

In the cross-cultural communication discourse, the difference in language use and cultural behaviour has been accepted as one of the factor that influences the speech act utterances. Romaine (2000) mentions that language carries culture and culture is the substance of language; so both are inseparable. Various studies on cross-cultural and inter-cultural studies have supported that society from different cultural groups draw different pragmatic norms when using speech acts (Beebe & Takahashi 1989; Beebe *et al.* 1990; Clyne 1994; Cordella 1991; Félix-Brasdefer 2008b; Gass & Neu 1996; Neumann 1995; Wierzbicka 1985, 2003). The diversity can be interpreted in many ways as the people of speech community tend to associate forms with meaning according to their level of understanding. Nevertheless, this diversity could lead to communication breakdown or pragmatic failure if the cultural beliefs and values could not be interpreted appropriately. This particular study cross-cultural study therefore aims to investigate the choices of refusal strategy among Malay and German native speakers.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1 Defining refusals

A refusal is a type of speech act that signifies a type of undesired response Félix-Brasdefer (2009). Refusal is a speaker's act of expressing a negative reply to another initial, previously uttered speech act, such as an offer, a request, an invitation, or a suggestion Siebold & Busch (2015, p. 53). Refusal is considered to be a complex speech act because it requires an interlocutor to respond with a negative response towards the offer, request suggestion and invitation given Abdul Sattar *et al.*, (2012, p. 70). Refusal serves as the counterparts to acceptance and consent as it involves negative notion of reluctance or unwillingness by the speaker Searle & Vanderveken (1985, p. 195). Ramos (1991) states that some language speakers find it challenging to say 'no' to some cultures because the manner of uttering 'no' could be more important than the answer 'no' itself. Tannen (1984, p. 191-194) in addition, opines that factors such as how to achieve proper communication such as how to talk, what to say, pacing and pausing, listenership, intonation, familiarity, indirectness, cohesion and coherence might culminate in communication breakdown due to the lack of pragmatic awareness among speakers. This lack of awareness may contribute to stereotyping allegations and misunderstanding. In general, the utterances of meaning shift from one culture to another and therefore, the intended meaning of refusal should be interpreted accordingly depending on the cultural practices of the community (Kasper & Schmidt, 1996; Sharifian, 2011; Sharifian & Jamarani, 2011). Therefore, regardless of the language in which the refusal is communicated, the refusal is always regarded as a frustrating and undesired response. Thus, refusal is regarded as a complex type of speech act as it sometimes requires the adequate pragmatic competency, cultural norm awareness, long sequencing negotiation and strategies manoeuvres as well as the cooperative agreements by which the refuser believes to be pragmatically appropriate to reach the mutual understanding in the non-compliant act that has been agreed upon between both interlocutors (Gass & Houck, 1999; Félix-Brasdefer, 2006).

### 2.2 The concept of 'face-saving' and refusal among Malays and Germans

The concept of 'face' was suggested by Brown and Levinson in 1978 and it was regarded as Face Threatening Act (FTA). It carries the meaning of "shame" or "water-drop interface". Brown and Levinson (1978, p. 71-73) distinguishes face into two categories; positive face and negative face. The positive face refers to the interlocutor's self-desire to be accepted or appreciated by others while the negative face refers to the interlocutor's personal rights to act without being forced or inflicted by other interlocutors. Due to the possible threat to not only the faces of both interlocutors, the nature of making a refusal may also affect personal relationships and become a source of conflict, especially when the conversation involves someone that is very important to the refuser. In Malaysian culture, the act of saying a straight 'no' as a refusal could be taken as an emotional offense due to Malaysians' Collective norm to avoid embarrassing others, especially when the said person is someone with a high social status or the elderly. Rahman & Yusof (2017, p. 373) explains that Malay society in the present day still practices politeness by exercising indirect speech acts in daily conversation because Malays believe that, by making an indirect speech act, the face between speakers can be preserved. Asmah (2007) in addition,

characterizes Malays' face-saving concept as more than just 'protecting one's or others' face'. Face saving plays a significant role that is not limited to the time in which the interaction happens. Saad, Bidin and Shabdin (2018, p. 105) further add, apart from personal reputation such as family and education background that entail the interlocutor's face, a person's good name and dignity will be at stake if a person does not save face. Therefore, in Malay culture, the society is reminded to be discreet when interacting with other people, as per the old Malay saying which goes "*Ibarat menarik rambut dalam tepung. Rambut jangan putus, tepung jangan berselerak*". That is, one must be wise in solving issues and should treat both sides fairly. Malays value indirectness as a way to maintain the good relationship between interlocutors in society. In contrast, in German society, the German culture has long been regarded as a *low context* culture. In other words, messages are expressed explicitly and clearly and not transmitted implicitly Schroll-Machl (2013, p. 169). German speakers seem to appreciate having the unequivocal end to a conversation and are uncomfortable with ambiguous outcomes. The German way of communicating is closely tied to their cultural beliefs where the ideal is to give a great deal of honesty and clarity. Hence, Germans greatly value directness and clarity Siebold & Busch, (2015, p. 66). Siebold and Busch (2015, p. 66) further reveal that German manifest communicative pattern and face work characteristic of the "western individual-orientation" such as higher tendency to employ direct refusal, the lack of affinity in their explanations and the need of pragmatic clarity that renders the refusal outcome. Nonetheless, the Germans in the current study were found to employ appreciative expressions as part of presenting a positive face. This practice can be regarded as a linguistics practice that is not usually practiced in traditional German culture.

### 2.3 Previous Literature on the Speech Act of Refusal

Refusal speech acts have received much attention in the literature with the emergence of new refusal theories from well-known linguists (Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990; Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1990; Liao and Breshnahan, 1996; Gass & Houck 1999; Nelson et al., 2002). These studies have inspired further, more recent studies involving various disciplines, languages, and speech acts. In regard to the languages used in the current study, the researchers' focus was to introduce the Malay language to an area that has seen few studies on the language. Some refusals studies have been done among Malays alone and Malay and other languages (Abarghoui, 2012; Al-Shboul, Maros & Yasin, 2012; Asmali, 2013; Kathir, 2015; Nikmehr, 2014; Raman, 2016; Sattar, Salasiah & Raja Rozina, 2011; Yusniza, Faizah & Nasariah, 2011). Ismail (2017) conducted a cross-cultural study between Malay and Spanish native speakers. The study concluded that Malay speakers tend to initiate refusal by apologizing and then giving an excuse, whereas Spanish speakers employ non-performative statements and then give an excuse. In terms of directedness, the Spanish were found to make more direct refusals and employed various types of refusals in contrast to the Malays. This study also observed that when a speaker employs a more direct approach when refusing, he or she tends to use more strategies to mitigate the threat to the interlocutor, as well as to maintain the face of the refuser and the interlocutor. In addition, the Malays were found to be more apologetic for not being able to fulfil the invitation whereas the Spanish were more focused on showing they were flattered to receive the invitation. Although similarities and differences can be found between the above study and the current one, the frequency and content of refusal differs from one language speaker to another. Rahman (2017), in addition, conducted a study on refusal speech acts on the younger Malay generation. The study found that the young Malay generation still practise politeness via an indirect refusal strategy. They express the notion of regret by apologizing for the 'offence' they have committed. In addition, the vagueness and directedness in their refusal carry the intention to 'save face' and not to offend the interlocutor's feeling.

In regard to the studies done on German refusals, a considerable amount of research has been focused on exploring the Germans' manner of refusal. One of the most prominent studies is that of Beckers (1999). Beckers (1999, p. 109-115) provided comparative descriptions of German refusals in contrast to Americans. According to the study, Germans varied their refusal strategies according to social distance rather than status. Germans were also found to employ more gratitude and politeness, with fewer types of refusal strategies than Americans. Also, Germans employed less direct strategies but still provided explanations rather than acting on personal inclination. This case affirms that Germans tend to be more vague than Americans and sometimes use a third party to explain their refusal, while Americans rely on personal decisions for explanations. Although German is seen as a culture that practices direct

speech, this study has shown that when comparing Germans and Americans, certain degrees of directness must be considered. Directness exists in any culture, but some cultures tend to be more direct than others. Siebold and Busch (2015) conducted a contrastive study on the culture-specific realization of refusals between German and Spanish people. The contrastive study found that Spanish speakers produced vague answers without a clear outcome and had a higher tendency to employ indirect strategies more than the Germans. The Germans, on the other hand, valued direct refusal strategies more than the Spanish, so they provided explicit answers with a great level of clarity when they refused.

### **3. Methodology**

This is an empirical study on Malays' and Germans' options of refusal strategies. This study adopted qualitative methods with simple calculation to obtain data analysis. The data was obtained from a separate DCT situations which required the respondents to respond (refuse) to three invitation situations. All refusal responses were then gathered, transcribed, coded and analysed for this study. The main objective of this study was to obtain pragmatic values from the options of refusals made by Malay Native Speakers (henceforth MNS) and German Native Speakers (henceforth GNS).

#### **3.1 Research Question**

This present study aimed to answer following research question: How do Malay Native Speakers and German Native Speakers differ in the types and contents of refusal strategies when refusing interlocutors in invitation situations?

#### **3.2 Subjects**

The respondents of this study were taken from two language groups: Malay Native Speakers (henceforth MNS) and German Native Speakers (henceforth GNS). The respondents consisted of 15 Malaysians and 15 Germans currently working in a professional setting in the state of Selangor and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. All participants were between 20 and 60 years old. The gender factor was kept constant for both languages speakers, as gender factors are not discussed in this study.

#### **3.3 Sample**

This study employed purposive sampling as a method. This method has been commonly employed in speech acts studies (Al Kahtani, 2006; Al Khatib, 2006; Nguyen, 2006; Félix-Brasdefer, 2008b; Lim, 2000; Al-Issa, 2003; Khadijah, 1993; Chen, 1996; Nor Hashimah, 1994, Margalef-Boada, 1993, & Ramos, 1991) mainly due to fact, such method can provide much needed information required for the study.

#### **3.4 Coding**

There are two types of coding used in this study; sample coding and data coding. To ensure confidentiality of the respondents and to identify cross-cultural references, each respondent was coded as a sample based on his or her native language. For example, the first Malay in the purposive sample is coded M1, the second respondent is coded M2, M3 is designated for the third Malay participant and so on. Similarly, for German speakers, the respondents are coded D1, D2, D3, and so on. 'M' in the respondent code refers to a Malay (*Melayu*) speaker while 'D' refers to a German (*Deutsch*) speaker.

#### **3.5 Informed Consent and Demographic Survey**

It is ethically and legally necessary to obtain consent from the respondent before conducting the study. In the first section of the form, participants were informed in written form about the basic information of this study to induce voluntary participation by the respondents. Secondly after the respondent have given their consent, a demographic survey information sheet was administrated for the respondents to

fill in. The questions on the demographic information such as age, gender, occupation, language proficiency and education level of the respondents were administered in this study.

### 3.6 Instrument

The data gathered from this study was obtained using the research instrument known as the Discourse Completion Task (henceforth DCT). A modified version of combined Discourse Completion Task by Beebe *et al.*, (1990, p. 72-73) and Al-Issa (2003, p. 599-600) suggested by Raman (2016, p. 22-23) was used as the instrument for this study (see Appendix 1 for the full description of the combined refusal taxonomy). Raman (2016, p. 21) opines that both refusal taxonomies are complementary and so both would be more accurate at describing both groups' pragmatic behaviour, as some of the terms were left out in Beebe *et al.*'s (1990, p. 72-73) initial taxonomy. A recorded oral session was conducted after the written consent was obtained and the demographic survey was administered. The respondents were asked to verbally respond with a negative reply to an open-end DCT according to their perception and cognitive processing when refusing to an invitation. The DCT situations and questions were adapted from Beebe *et al.*, (1990, p. 69-72) study. All three situations were structurally designed to represent three social levels (lower, equal and higher towards the refuser) that can be encountered in real-life situation. The three situations employed in this study involve the obvious relationship status and social distance between the two interlocutors. The said situations are shown in Table 1 below:

**Table 1: Discourse Completion Test (DCT) situations used for the study**

Situations	Social Distance	Social Power*
S1 Boss's invitation to a farewell party	Distance / Formal	Higher
S2 Neighbour's invitation to a business seminar	Close / Informal	Equal
S3 House maid's invitation to a birthday party	Close / Informal	Lower

\* Social Power refers to the refuser's status towards the interlocutor.

Situation 1 (henceforth S1) is an invitation situation from a higher interlocutor to attend a farewell party. In S1, the respondents (refusers) were asked to refuse an invitation made by a higher status interlocutor (boss) than the refuser (staff). The refuser was informed that he/she has been knowing and worked with the interlocutor for five years. The interlocutor has invited the refuser to attend her farewell party and everyone in the company will attend as well (refer to appendices). Situation 2 (henceforth S2) is an invitation situation from an equal interlocutor to attend a business seminar. In S2, respondents (refusers) from both groups were asked to refuse an invitation made by an equal status interlocutor (neighbour) than the refuser (neighbour). The refuser was informed that although he/she currently has a steady job, this business seminar promises a great deal of profit (refer to the Appendices). Situation 3 (henceforth S3) is an invitation situation from a lower interlocutor to attend her daughter birthday party celebration. In S3, respondents (refusers) from both groups were asked to refuse an invitation made by a lower status interlocutor (housemaid) than the refuser (house owner). The refuser was informed that he/she has just returned home from work when the housemaid invited him/her to the event although this was communicated via short notice (refer to the Appendices).

### 4. Results and Discussions

Results were analysed based on types, frequency and percentage distribution of refusal strategies used as well as the effects of interlocutors' status and relationship distance between refusers and the interlocutors.

#### 4.1 Overall Distribution

As an overall result, the MNS and GNS had employed a total of 605 refusal strategies in all three situations throughout the study when refusing the invitations. From this overall number, the MNS used refusal strategies a total of 302 times; direct 34 times, indirect refusal 172 times, and adjuncts to refusal 96 times. The GNS on the other hand employed refusal strategies 303 times; direct refusals 40 times, indirect refusals 165 times, and adjuncts to refusal 98 times. Therefore, the GNS used almost similar amount (just one strategy was characterized as different) of refusal strategies when refusing their interlocutors' invitation compared to the MNS but nonetheless the frequency in semantic formulas used by both speakers varies from one another. All semantic formulas for the responses uttered by the Malay speakers in this study were analysed according to the combination taxonomy of Beebe *et al.*, (1990, p. 72-73 and Al-Issa 2003, p. 599-600). The overall refusal strategies that were used in this study are summarised in the Table 2 as below:

**Table 2: Overall frequency distribution for refusal strategies used by MNS and GNS.**

Refusal Strategy	MNS		GNS	
	F	(%)	F	(%)
Direct	34	11.26	40	13.20
Indirect	172	56.95	165	54.46
Adjuncts	96	31.79	98	32.34
<b>Total</b>	<b>302</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>303</b>	<b>100</b>

#### 4.2 Pragmatic Strategies that Comprise the Speech Act of Refusal

Within the combined taxonomy of (Beebe *et al.*, 1990, p. 72-73 and Al-Issa 2003, p. 599-600), there are three main categories of pragmatic strategies that comprises the speech act of refusal namely direct refusal, indirect refusal and adjuncts to refusal. The detailed pragmatic strategies used in this study are summarised in Table 3 below:

**Table 3: Total frequency distribution for refusal strategies used by MNS and GNS in all 3 situations**

Refusal Strategy	S1		S2		S3	
	MNS	GNS	MNS	GNS	MNS	GNS
Direct	9 (8.82%)	15 (13.76%)	16 (15.53%)	11 (12.94%)	9 (9.28%)	14 (12.84%)
Indirect	55 (53.92%)	59 (54.13%)	59 (57.28%)	46 (54.12%)	58 (59.79%)	60 (55.05%)
Adjuncts	38 (37.26%)	35 (32.11%)	28 (27.19%)	28 (32.94%)	30 (30.93%)	35 (32.11%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>102</b> (100%)	<b>109</b> (100%)	<b>103</b> (100%)	<b>85</b> (100%)	<b>97</b> (100%)	<b>109</b> (100%)

##### 4.2.1 Direct Refusal

Based on the analysis gathered from this study, overall MNS and GNS were found using only 3 types of direct refusal strategies. From this amount, GNS used all 3 types of direct strategies 40 times to refuse invitations. While MNS used only 2 types of direct strategies for 34 times. Table 4 below shows most preferred direct strategies used by MNS and GNS:

**Table 4: Overall frequency distribution for direct strategies used by MNS and GNS.**

Refusal Strategy	MNS		GNS	
	F	%	F	%
Performative	1	2.94	6	15
No	-	-	7	17.5
Negative willingness / ability	33	97.06	27	67.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100</b>

When making a direct refusal, the GNS was found to use [Negative willingness/ability] the most, at 27 times (67.5%), followed by [No] 7 times (17.5%) and [Performative] 6 times (15%). The MNS, on the other hand, used mostly [Negative willingness/ability] 33 time (2.94%) and [Performative] was found used only once (2.94%) throughout this study. The [Performative] strategy used in this study was found in S1 where the interlocutor holds higher power and formal relationship status towards the refuser. Performative strategy is more polite and seems suitable to be used towards someone whom the refuser tries to maintain politeness and possess a distance relationship. This analysis can be seen used by GNS and MNS mostly in S1. The example of excerpts 1, 2 and 3 obtained from the respondents are as below:

Excerpt 1: [Performative] strategy in Malay

- (1) *Tapi uhh kalau boleh saya nak menolak, tapi saya cubalah untuk tak kecil hati puan ..*  
 I wish I could decline, but I try not to disappoint you ...  
 (Respondent M 12, S1)

Excerpts 2 and 3: [Performative] strategy in German

- (2) *Vielen Dank für die Einladung, ich muss jedoch dankend ablehnen ...*  
 Thank you very much for the invitation, but I have to decline thankfully ...  
 (Respondent D 5, S1)
- (3) *... aber ich lehne die Einladung dankend ab*  
 ... but I thankfully decline the invitation.  
 (Respondent D 5, S3)

Only the GNS used the direct strategy [No] while none of the MNS used this strategy. In Malay culture, the word “No” is often used in open-end or yes/no question, therefore no example from the direct strategy [No] can be found being used by MNS in this study. GNS on the other hand exhibited a significant use of direct strategy [No].

Excerpts 4 and 5: [No] strategy in German

- (4) *Ne, mach ich nicht, Multi-Level-Marketing ist nicht mein Ding.*  
 No, I'm not, multi-level marketing is not my thing.  
 (Respondent D 14, S2)
- (5) *Ja, also da muss ich sofort sagen: Nein, ich halte von diesen Multi-Level überhaupt garnichts*  
 Yes, so I have to say right away: No, I think nothing of this multi-level at all.  
 (Respondent D 14, S2)

The most preferred direct strategy in this study is [Negative willingness / ability]. MNS exhibited highest frequency use of this particular strategy in contrast to GNS. MNS use this particular strategy the most as this strategy connotes the actionable word to respond. Unlike the Yes/No question in the Malay language, an invitation requires actionable words to show the speaker's ability to fulfil that invitation, while the German language shares a similar function to that of English (4) and (5). Some example of excerpts from the DCT are as follows:

Excerpts 6 and 7: [Negative willingness/ability] strategy in Malay

- (6) *Oh saya tak minatlah benda-benda macam tu ...*  
 Oh, I don't have any interest on things like that ...

(Respondent M 7, S2)

(7) *Minta maaf, saya tak dapat hadir...*

Sorry I could not attend on that day ...

(Respondent M 7, S1)

Excerpts 8 and 9: [Negative willingness/ability] strategy in German

(8) ... *diese Gelegenheiten viel zu oft kommen und ich wirklich kein Interesse daran habe...*

... these opportunities come far too often and I really have no interest in participating,

(Respondent D 8, S2)

(9) ... *nur leider kann ich nicht kommen...*

... but unfortunately, I can't come ...

(Respondent D 7, S3)

#### 4.2.2 Indirect Refusal

Based on the analysis gathered from this study, altogether MNS and GNS used a total of 22 types of indirect refusal. From this total amount, MNS used 21 types of indirect strategies for 172 times to refuse invitations. Table 5 shows the frequency distribution for the most preferred indirect strategies by MNS and GNS.

The three most employed refusal strategies that the MNS preferred in this study were [Excuse, reason, explanation] 62 times (36.05%), [Statement of regret] 18 times (10.46%) and [Conditional acceptance] also 18 times (10.46%). GNS on the other hand used a total of 18 types of indirect strategies with 165 times of refusing invitations. The three most used refusal strategies that the GNS preferred in this study were [Excuse, reason, explanation] for 87 times (52.73%), [Statement of regret] for 19 times (11.52%) and followed by 4 strategies; [I can do X instead of Y], [Statement of principle], [Repetition of part of a request] and [Return favour] which all used 7 times (4.24%). The indirect strategies [Wish], [Future or past acceptance], [Conditional acceptance], [Promise for future acceptance], [Guilt trip], [Criticise the request/requester, (statement of negative feeling or opinion); insult/attack], [Request for help, empathy, and assistance by dropping or holding the situation], [Let interlocutor off the hook], [Self-defence], [Reprimand], [Unspecific or indefinite reply], [Lack of enthusiasm], [Hesitation], [Postponement], [Hedging], and [Request for information] were also found to be used by the MNS and GNS respondents and were categorised under others in Table 5.

**Table 5: Overall frequency distribution for indirect strategies used by MNS and GNS.**

Refusal Strategy	MNS		GNS	
	F	(%)	F	(%)
Excuse, reason, explanation	62	36.05	87	52.73
Statement of regret	18	10.46	19	11.52
Conditional acceptance	18	10.46	3	1.82
I can do X instead of Y	6	3.49	7	4.24
Statement of principle	1	0.58	7	4.24
Repetition of part of a request	4	2.33	7	4.24
Return favour	11	6.40	7	4.24
Others	52	30.23	28	16.97
<b>Total</b>	<b>172</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>100</b>

The strategy [Excuse, reason, and explanation] was the most preferred indirect strategy by MNS for 62 times (36.05) and GNS for 87 times (52.73%). This strategy in particular can be seen as effort of the speaker to make the interlocutor understand why refusal is being made. Within this particular strategy, this study has identified several reasons that have been used for [Excuse, reason, explanation]. Table 6 below summaries the excuses, reasons and explanations used by MNS and GNS:



**Table 6: Reasons for the strategy [Excuse, reason, explanation] used by MNS and GNS.**

[Excuse, reason, explanation]	MNS				GNS			
	S1	S2	S3	TF*	S1	S2	S3	TF*
Prior arrangement								
- Family / Friends	4	1	3	<b>8</b>	5	-	4	<b>9</b>
- Personal	2	1	4	<b>7</b>	6	-	3	<b>9</b>
- Event	2	-	1	<b>3</b>	-	-	1	<b>1</b>
- Medical	1	-	1	<b>2</b>	-	-	-	-
- Work related	-	-	1	<b>1</b>	-	-	-	-
Attending sick relative	1	-	-	<b>1</b>	1	-	-	<b>1</b>
Time constrain	1	3	1	<b>5</b>	2	1	3	<b>6</b>
Satisfied with current job	-	1	-	<b>1</b>	-	5	-	<b>5</b>
No interest	-	3	-	<b>3</b>	-	2	-	<b>2</b>
Bound to work	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	<b>1</b>
Feelings involvement								
- Sad	2	-	-	<b>2</b>	1	-	-	<b>1</b>
- Hesitant	-	2	-	<b>2</b>	-	4	-	<b>4</b>
- Negative	-	2	-	<b>2</b>	-	2	2	<b>4</b>
- Past experience	-	2	-	<b>2</b>	-	-	-	-

\*TF = Total frequency

Overall, to refuse invitations, the MNS used ‘having a prior arrangement’ as [Excuse, reason, explanation] in 21 out of the 45 cases. From this frequency, ‘family or friends’ were used the most apart from ‘personal matters’, ‘going to an event’, ‘having a medical appointment’ and ‘work-related issues’. In a culture where saving face in a society is seen as important, the MNS used ‘having a prior arrangement’ more than the GNS in an effort to gain the interlocutor’s understanding and acceptance. Nonetheless, as a comparison shown in this particular study, the data in Table 6 indicates that the GNS used ‘family or friends’ for [Excuse, reason, explanation] slightly more frequently than the MNS.

Excerpts 9 and 10: [Excuse, reason, explanation] strategy in Malay

(9) ... *sebab pada hari yang tarikh yang sama tu saya kena balik kampung. Ada urusan keluarga sikit ...*

... because I have to go back to my home town on the same day. I have some family matter to attend ...

(Respondent M 2, S3)

(10) ... *sebab saya kena tengok jadual suami saya*

... because I need to see my husband’s schedule

(Respondent M 9, S1)

GNS on the other hand, used ‘having prior engagement’ a total of 19 times out of 45 cases. From this frequency, ‘arrangement with family or friends’ and ‘personal matter’ being used the most apart from ‘going to event’. Here (excerpt 11), the German respondent showed the notion of concealing their specific intention when mentioning the personal matter. Hofstede *et al.* (2010) in cultural comparison between Malays and Germans, shows that Germans have a higher individualistic character than Malays. Therefore, concealing your reason is acceptable in German culture to exhibit one’s privacy right.

Excerpts 11 and 12: [Excuse, reason, explanation] strategy in German

(9) ... *meine Frau und ich sind bereits außerhalb eingeladen zu einer Hochzeit, also wir können leider nicht ...*

my wife and I are already invited to a wedding, so unfortunately, we can't ...

(Respondent D 9, S3)

(11) *Ich hab mich jetzt grad super gefreut, aber diesen Sonntag habe ich leider schon was vor und das kann ich überhaupt nicht verschieben...*

I'm really glad, but unfortunately, I have something planned for this Sunday and I can't postpone it at all...

(Respondent D 3, S3)

The [Statement of regret] strategy was found to be second most preferred as indirect strategy by both GNS and MNS (and conditional acceptance). Although there was not a large frequency difference between the MNS and the GNS, this study found it interesting that GNS employed more apologetic expressions compared to Malays.

Excerpts 12 and 13: [Statement of regret] strategy in Malay

(10) *Petang memang tak boleh, saya ada hal. Minta maaf ehh.*

Definitely cannot this evening, I have some matter. I'm sorry.

(Respondent M 6, S2)

(11) *Alamak, ya Allah minta maaf sangat boss.*

Oh dear. Oh Allah, I'm so sorry boss.

(Respondent M 1, S1)

Excerpts 12 and 13: [Statement of regret] strategy in German

(12) *Es tut mir sehr leid, aber ich kann an diesem Tag leider nicht teilnehmen.*

I'm very sorry, but unfortunately, I can't attend this day.

(Respondent D 2, S3)

(13) *... da bin ich leider nicht interessiert, tut mir leid.*

... I'm not interested in it, I'm sorry.

(Respondent D 10, S2)

### 4.2.3 Adjuncts to Refusal

An adjunct is one of the three main pragmatic components in the refusal taxonomy Beebe *et al.*, (1990). It is considered as the indirect speech act, but separated as a category on its own because it cannot function as a refusal on its own and usually be accompanied by other strategy components. The results of total frequency of adjuncts to refusal used by MNS and GNS in this study are summarised in Table 7 as below:

**Table 7: Frequency distribution for Adjuncts to Refusal strategy by MNS and GNS.**

Adjuncts to Refusal	MNS					GNS				
	S1	S2	S3	F	%	S1	S2	S3	F	%
Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement	4	7	9	20	20.83	14	11	11	36	36.73
Statement of empathy	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	1.02
Pause fillers	14	13	13	40	41.67	13	9	17	39	39.80
Gratitude/appreciation	2	1	3	6	6.25	6	6	5	17	17.35
Removal of negativity	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	2	2.04
Define relation	18	7	5	30	31.25	-	1	2	3	3.06
<b>Total Frequency (F) and Percentage (%)</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>98</b>	<b>100</b>

The combined taxonomy of Beebe *et al.*, ([28] p. 72-73 and Al-Issa [57], p. 599-600), has suggested six refusal taxonomy strategies. They are [Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement], [Statement of empathy], [Pause fillers], and [Gratitude/appreciation], [Removal of Negativity], and [Define relation]. All six strategies were used in this study. According to the data, GNS used all of the six types of adjuncts to refusal for 98 times. While MNS on the other hand used 5 types of adjunct strategies when refuse to invitations for 96 times. It is found that MNS used [Pause Fillers] the most as their options of adjuncts to refusal for 40 times (41.67%) followed by [Define relation] 30 times (31.25%). GNS also

preferred to use [Pause Fillers] the most as their choice of adjuncts to refusal for 39 times (39.80%) followed by [Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement] as their second choice of most preferred adjuncts to refusal strategy. Altogether, only a slight difference was noted for both language speakers in terms of total frequency use, but the frequency of each adjunct strategy used varied.

[Pause fillers] play quite an important role in refusal-making strategies. Pause fillers are sometimes used to express refuser's feelings such as empathy, surprise and the state of thinking. Levinson ([59], p. 333) points out several structural characteristic features of these responses, such as elements of delay (i.e. intentional pauses), preambles in the form of discourse markers (i.e. well, uhm), justifications, expressions of doubt or apologies as forms of non-preferred types of second-turn forms of refusals. The strategy elements (14) and (15) may indicate that the refuser is thinking of the best strategy to refuse the interlocutor, as this would mitigate the refuser's negativity and soften the stress of refusal that has been made.

Excerpt 14: [Pause fillers] strategy in Malay

- (14) *Umm saya tak dapat tu. Sebab saya ada jemputan khas hari itu.*  
Umm, I can't do that, because I have special invitation on that day.  
(Respondent M 14, S1)

Excerpt 15: [Pause fillers] strategy in German

- (15) *Ooh, jetzt am Freitag? Mmh, ich muss da meinen Kalender mal zuerst checken ...*  
Ooh, now on Friday? Mmh, I have to check my calendar first ...  
(Respondent D 10, S10)

The [Define relation] was found to be the second most preferred by MNS for 30 times (31.25%) as in contrast to GNS for only 3 times (3.06%). Based on Table 7, there is a significant difference in the frequency use of this particular strategy. In Malay culture, it is common for the speakers to use this strategy to address interlocutors, especially higher social status interlocutors as a sign of respect when interacting with them. In this study, MNS was found using [Define relation] the most, when refusing their boss in the invitation to a farewell party. In addition, the MNS frequency use for [Define relation] was also found decreasing for S2 and S3, indicating the level of respecting and also declining as the interlocutor's status getting lower. GNS on the other hand was found not using [Define relation] in S1, but later was found being using it in S2 and S3.

Excerpts 16 and 17: [Define relation] strategy in Malay

- (16) *Minta maaf lah bos, sebab saya ada hal keluarga penting nak kena pergi.*  
Sorry boss, because I have family urgency to attend.  
(Respondent M 7, S1)  
(17) *Hana kau betul ke kau confident yakin dengan benda ni?*  
Hana are you really confident with this kind of stuff?  
(Respondent M 8, S2)

Excerpt 18: [Define relation] strategy in German

- (18) *Vielen Dank Herr Schmidt für dieses wahnsinning tolle Angebot.*  
Thank you Mr. Schmidt for this crazy great offer.  
(Respondent D 5, S2)

GNS was found using the [Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement] strategy as the second most after the [Pause fillers]. In comparison between both language speakers, GNS employed highest frequency of this strategy towards a higher interlocutor in S1 and decreasing in frequency in S2 and S3. [Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement] is a strategy which was used by the speaker to mitigate possible negativity towards refusal that has been or going to be made. Example (16) and (17) show [Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement] made by MNS and GNS obtained in this study.

Excerpts 19 and 20: [Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement] strategy in Malay

- (19) *Macam mana pun semoga majlis boss berjalan dengan lancar lah.*

Anyway, I wish that your party goes well.

(Respondent M 11, S2)

- (20) *Macam menarik je mendengar, tapi nanti dululah Man.*

That sounds interesting, but I need to hold the thoughts.

(Respondent M 1, S2)

Excerpts 21 and 21: [Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement] strategy in German

- (21) *Das ist ne schöne Idee, Abschied zu feiern ...*

This is a nice idea to celebrate farewell ...

(Respondent D 2, S1)

- (22) *Ja, ein sehr lukratives Angebot, aber wirklich überhaupt nichts für mich.*

Yes, a very lucrative offer, but really not at all for me.

(Respondent D 1, S2)

## Other Findings Related to Semantics Formulas

### The use of religious semantics

In Malay culture, it is very common to encounter responses with religious expression. In Malaysia, Islam is the official religion of the Malay Federation. The term 'Malay' by definition means "a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay customs..." Hassan (2007, p. 294). Hassan (2007, p. 249) explains that this definition is problematic from a social point of view because there are indeed Malays in the region who are not Muslims and who also live in Indonesia and the Philippines. Nevertheless, in the Malaysian context, at least, the definition reflects how closely Islam is integrated with the Malay identity and cultural practice, and with the way Malays perceive themselves. It has long been a cultural practice that Arabic expressions are used in daily speech acts to represent the Islamic practice within the culture, including in the act of declining. The MNS were found to use the Arabic expression '*in shaa Allah*' (if God wills it) often as a refusal to mitigate promising words. The GNS, on the other hand, used religious expression to express the notion of surprise and it therefore is categorised under the [Pause fillers] strategy, which is different than the MNS. An example of religious semantics used by MNS and GNS in this study are as below:

Excerpts 23 and 24: The use of religious semantics in Malay

- (23) *In shaa Allah boss, kalau free saya datang.*

On God's will, if I am available I will come.

(Respondent M 5, S1)

- (24) *In shaa Allah boss, saya tak berani janji lagi*

On God's will boss, I'm afraid can't promise anything yet

(Respondent M 6, S1)

Excerpt 25: The use of religious semantics in German

- (25) *Freitagabend? Oh Gott, da hab ich jetzt schon voll was reingeplant...*

Friday evening? Oh God, I've got something planned...

(Respondent D 3, S1)

## 5. Conclusions

From the overall findings on the comparison of MNS and GNS refusals to invitations, a slight frequency difference was found (refer to Tables 2 and 3 above) but a larger difference was noted in the type of refusal strategy applied. Both groups preferred to employ indirect strategies more than direct. In this particular study, GNS employed direct strategy for 40 times (13.20%). In contrast, MNS employed direct strategy for 34 times (11.26%). Therefore, this study concludes that GNS are more direct than MNS but not in all situations. With regards to the choice of indirect strategy, this study concludes that, in all three refusal to invitation situations, MNS employed indirect strategy for 172 times (56.95%) whereas

GNS employed for 165 times (54.46%). MNS preferred [Excuse, reason, explanation], [Statement of regret] and [Conditional acceptance] as their most employed indirect refusal strategies, whereas GNS preferred [Excuse, reason, explanation], [Statement of regret], and ([I can do X instead of Y], [Statement of principle], [Repetition of part of a request] and [Return favour]) as their most preferred indirect refusal strategies. In relation to indirect strategy, this study also give a deeper look into reasons for [Excuse, reason, explanation] as it is the most preferred indirect strategies among MNS and GNS (refer to Table 6). As the overall result, 'having prior arrangement' recorded the highest reason for employing [Excuse, reason, explanation]. Within this particular strategy, 'having prior arrangement with family or friend' and 'personal arrangement' have been two most preferred reasons for both MNS and GNS [Excuse, reason, explanation] strategy.

For the final component in pragmatic refusal taxonomy suggested by Beebe *et al.* (1990) is adjuncts to refusal. For this particular strategy, overall GNS employed a slightly higher frequency use than MNS but differ in the types of strategy used. From this amount, MNS employed [Pause fillers] for 40 times (41.67%) and [Define relation] for 30 times (31.25%) whereas GNS employed [Pause fillers] for 39 times (39.80%) and [Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement] for 36 times (36.73%) as their most preferred adjuncts to refusal strategies. Based on the overall responses retrieved from the respondents of MNS and GNS, the study found out that the respondents from both groups employed a combination of direct and indirect and a multiple amount of refusal in their refusal responses. This suggested that speakers from both groups are aware of their interlocutor's social and relationship distance status. Both language speakers tried as much as possible to save the face of their interlocutors by carefully selecting suitable refusal strategies on par with the interlocutor's status while still maintaining their stance as a refuser. In terms of directedness, based on the data for this study, it can be concluded that the GNS preferred to use direct refusal strategies more than the MNS. This study also supports Siebold and Busch's (2015) findings on GNS Western 'individually-oriented' values and Rahman's (2017) views on Malay indirectedness.

This present study presented the choices of refusal strategies preferred by MNS and GNS when refusing interlocutors from various social statuses in invitation situations. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the understanding of social behavioural between Malay and German cultures, with a focus on the pragmatics of refusal. A certain level of directness and indirectness goes along a way to get the message across and should not be interpreted negatively. For future studies, it is recommended that more cross-cultural studies be done in the Malay and German language/culture because both cultures showed unique social behaviour that has more or less progressed from traditional cultural norms.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: The combined Refusal Taxonomy by Beebe et al. (1990) and Al-Issa (1994)

#### I Direct

1. Performative: (e.g., "I refuse)
2. Explicit rejection (e.g. "Hell no!" "No way")



3. Non-performative:
  - i. "No"
  - ii. "Negative ability/willingness (e.g., "I can't")"

## II Indirect

11. Regret (e.g., "sorry..." "excuse me..." "forgive me...")
12. Wish (e.g., "I wish I could")
13. Explanation/Excuse (e.g., "I have to study," "I'm very busy")
14. Alternative (e.g., "Why don't you do X instead of Y?" "I'd rather..." "I'd prefer...")
15. Future or past acceptance (e.g., "Can we do it next week?" "If you asked me ten minutes ago...")
16. Statement of principle (e.g., "I don't borrow money from friends," "I don't ride with strangers")
17. Negative consequence (e.g., "I'm afraid you can't read my notes")
18. Insult/Attack/Threat (e.g., "Who asked about your opinion?" "If you don't get out of here, I'll call the police")
19. Criticise (e.g., "That's a bad idea," "You are lazy")
20. Let interlocutor off the hook (e.g., "Don't worry about it," "That's okay"; "You don't have to")
21. \*Reprimand (e.g., "You should attend classes too," "You shouldn't wait till the last minute")
22. \*Sarcasm (e.g., "I forgot I'm your servant!")
23. \*Conditional acceptance (e.g., "If I finish early, I'll help you")
24. Hedging (e.g., "I don't know: I'm not sure")
25. Postponement ("I'll think about it")
26. \*Request for information (e.g., "Why do you think I should take it?")
27. \*Request for understanding (e.g., "Please understand my situation")
28. \*Return favour (e.g., "I'll pay for you and me")
29. Positive opinion/feeling/agreement (e.g., "That's a good idea but...")
30. Pause fillers (e.g., "Uh," "Well..." "Oh...")
31. Gratitude (e.g., "Thank you very much," "I appreciate it")
32. \*Removal of negativity (e.g., "You are a nice person but...")
33. \*Define relation (e.g., "Okay my dear Professor but...")

\*Indicates additional categories that Al-Issa (2003) added to Beebe et al.'s (1990) framework based on the corpus of the current study.

## Appendix B: Discourse Completion Test (DCT) of Role-Play Invitation Scenarios

### 1) Malay Version of DCT

(S1): Anda telah bekerja dengan bos anda selama lima tahun di sebuah syarikat penerbitan. Anda mempunyai hubungan yang baik dengan beliau. Beliau telah menerima tawaran, dimana beliau akan berpindah ke Tokyo, Jepun. Satu majlis perpisahan akan diadakan di rumah beliau pada petang hari Jumaat dan seluruh ahli jabatan akan turut hadir.

**Bos:** Saya akan menganjurkan majlis perpisahan hari Jumaat ini. Semua orang akan hadir dan anda harus juga!

**Responden:**.....

(S2): Jiran anda memberitahu anda tentang satu perjumpaan berkaitan peluang membuka perniagaan yang sedang rancak diperkatakan. Anda sedar ia merupakan perniagaan yang baru dijalankan di bandar anda dan anda teragak-agak untuk menyertai perjumpaan itu yang menjanjikan keuntungan yang lumayan. Anda sudahpun mempunyai pekerjaan yang tetap.

**Jiran:** Ini merupakan peluang yang bagus untuk menjana pendapatan tambahan. Jomlah sertai perjumpaan ini. Jarang dapat peluang keemasan macam ini tau!

**Responden:**.....

(S3): Anda baru sahaja pulang ke rumah dari pejabat dan pembantu rumah anda memberi kad jemputan untuk menghadiri majlis hari jadi anaknya yang dianjurkan secara kecil-kecilan.

**Pembantu rumah:** Saya tahu tuan/puan sibuk dengan kerja, tapi, hari Ahad minggu depan, saya ada buat majlis sambutan hari jadi anak perempuan saya. Saya faham saya lambat maklumkan pada tuan/puan, tapi saya berharap tuan/puan dapat datang ke majlis anak saya nanti.

**Responden:**.....

## 2) German Version of DCT

(S1): Sie arbeiten seit 5 Jahren bei einer Verlagsgesellschaft mit Ihrer Chefin, mit der Sie sich gut verstehen. Ihre Chefin erhält eine Beförderung, für die sie nach Tokyo ziehen wird. Am Freitagabend wird sie bei sich zuhause eine Abschiedsparty mit der ganzen Abteilung feiern.

**Ihre Chefin:** Ich feiere an diesem Freitagabend meinen Abschied. Alle kommen, Sie sollten auch kommen!

**Ablehner:**.....

(S2): Ihr Nachbar erzählt Ihnen von der Tagung einer Multi-Level-Marketingsfirma. Sie haben bemerkt, dass die Firma noch sehr neu ist und zögern einzusteigen als Ihr Nachbar Ihnen tausende Euro Profit in Aussicht stellt. Sie haben momentan schon einen festen Job.

**Ihr Nachbar:** Dies ist wirklich eine gute Gelegenheit für zusätzliches Einkommen. Sie sollten an unserer Tagung wirklich teilnehmen. Sie wissen ja, dass Gelegenheiten wie diese nicht oft kommen!

**Ablehner:**.....

(S3): Sie sind von der Arbeit nach Hause gekommen und Ihre Putzfrau gibt Ihnen eine Einladungskarte für die kleine Geburtstagsparty ihrer Tochter.

**Putzfrau:** Ich weiß, dass Sie einen engen Arbeitsplan haben, aber am nächsten Sonntag werde ich eine kleine Geburtstagfeier für meine Tochter feiern. Ich weiß auch, es ist kurzfristig, aber ich hatte gehofft, dass Sie kommen können.

**Ablehner:**.....

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