

## On Refusal Strategies in Modern English



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Refusals and rejections are forms of negation. Almost as soon as we are born, we can use negation, indicating by gesture or other behavior that we reject, exclude or disagree with something.

The aim of the present article is to study refusals and rejections (that are forms of negation) and to present those strategies that the speaker applies to make his/her refusal tactful and felicitous.

“Refusing” means, essentially saying “no, I will not do it” in response to someone else’s utterance, in which he has conveyed to us that he wants us to do something and that he expects us to do it.

The focus of our attention here are particularly those refusal strategies that the speaker applies to decline a **request**. In other words, **our aim is to study the interplay between requests and refusals**.

In terms of pragmatics, **requests and refusals** are automatic sequences called “adjacency pairs” in the structure of the conversation. “Adjacency pairs” is a terminological word combination used for certain consecutive speech turns that are closely related (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973). They can be described as automatic sequences consisting of a first part and a second part produced by two successive speakers in the way that the second utterance is identified as related to the first as an expected follow-up. Having uttered the first part, the speaker immediately expects his/her conversational partner to produce the second part of the same pair. The most common adjacency pairs are greeting - greeting, thanking - response, request - refusal/acceptance, apology - acceptance, and question - answer. Managing adjacency pairs successfully is part of “conversational competence”.

**Request-refusal** is an important adjacency pair in that both requesting and refusing are face threatening acts (FTA), and therefore demand special attention from the speakers, so that the message can be conveyed in a socially acceptable manner. While requests are pre-event acts, refusals are post-event acts. In everyday life it is not easy to refuse. If you give a flat refusal, it may be interpreted as more than just the refusal itself. In contrast, it can cause both the requester and the requestee a feeling of discomfort. Let us consider the following example of a flat or direct refusal of request.

*“Oh, Daddy, can’t you give her something to make her stop screaming?” asked Nick.*

*“No. I haven’t any anaesthetic”, his father said.*

*The husband in the upper bunk rolled over against the wall. The*

*woman in the kitchen motioned to the doctor that the water was hot. Nick's father went into the kitchen and poured about half of the water out of the big kettle into a basin. Into the water left in the kettle he put several things he unwrapped from a handkerchief.*

(E. H., p. 31)

As can be seen in the above mentioned example the speaker makes a direct refusal to the hearer's request and the refusal made is likely to create a feeling of discomfort in the requester (the speaker), as well as in the requestee (the hearer).

The reason for this is that requesting and refusing are face threatening acts. As it is known face threatening acts (FTAs) impede the freedom of actions (negative face), and the wish that one's wants be desired by others (positive face) - by either the speaker, or the addressee, or both. **Requests** potentially threaten the addressee's face because they may restrict the addressee's freedom to act according to his/her will (Holtgraves, 2002; 40). **Refusals**, on the other hand, may imply that what he/she says is not favored by the speaker. In an attempt to avoid FTAs, interlocutors use specific strategies to minimize the threat according to a rational assessment of the face risk to participants. In other words these FTAs lead to a tendency on the part of the speakers to make use of certain refusal strategies such as indirectness and polite expressions in order to avoid conflict (Brown and Levinson, 1987). These strategies are various: **postponement, hesitation, the statement of alternative, silent refusal**, etc. They represent different semantic formulae.

A semantic formula may consist of a word, a phrase, or a sentence which meets a given semantic criterion or strategy. A semantic formula is described as "the means by which a particular speech act is accomplished, in terms of the primary content of an utterance, such as a **reason**, an **explanation**, or an **alternative**". (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 1991: 48).

#### **Postponement.**

The speaker uses postponement as a refusal strategy when he is obliged to give an immediate response to a **request** and he tries to delay it till some other time. A delay shows that the refuser has a good reason for refusing and implies that the refuser would accept or agree if it were possible.

*"Who are you?"*

*"I am Zeno Legge".*

*"What do you want at this hour?"*

*The question wounded me. "My dear uncle", I exclaimed, "I know you do not intend it, but you make me feel unwelcome. **Come down and let me in, I beg**".*

*"**Go to your hotel**", he said sternly. "**I will see you in the morning. Good night**". He disappeared and closed the window.*

*I felt that I let this rebuff pass, I should not feel kindly towards my uncle in the morning, nor, indeed, at any future time.*

(B. Sh., p. 187)

It is clear from the example that the hearer (who is the speaker's uncle) doesn't want to comply with the speaker's request (namely, to let him in) and he delays their talk till the next morning, instead of directly refusing his request.

**The Statement of Alternative.**

Another good strategy for making refusals or rejections is the statement of alternative.

*"Pull back that quilt, will you, George?" he said.*

*"I'd rather not touch it."*

*Later when he started to operate Uncle George and three Indian men held the woman still. She bit uncle George on the arm and Uncle George said, "Damn squaw bitch!" and the young Indian who had rowed Uncle George over laughed at him. Nick held the basin for his father. It all took a long time.*

*His father picked the baby up and slapped it to make it breathe and handed it to the old woman.*

*(E. H. p. 31)*

It is seen from the example that in order not to offend his interlocutor the speaker makes use of the statement of alternative and thus avoids giving a straight refusal.

**Hesitation.**

When hesitation is used as a refusal strategy, it seems that the speaker hesitates about his response to a request, i.e. he feels unsure about what to say, but in fact his response is similar to a refusal.

*"I suppose I can call you Jon?"*

*"I should think so just".*

*"All right! But you know there's a feud between our families?" Jon stammered: "Feud? Why?"*

*"It's ever so romantic and silly. That's why I pretended we hadn't met. Shall we get up early tomorrow morning and go for a walk before breakfast and have it out? I hate being slow about things, don't you?"*

*Jon murmured a rapturous assent.*

*"Six o'clock, then. I think your mother's beautiful".*

*(J. G., p. 93)*

We can easily see that in the given context Jon (the requestee) pretends that he feels uncertain about what to say, whether to comply or not with Fleur's (the requester's) request to call him Jon, but in fact he doesn't want his response to sound rude or insulting.

**Vagueness.**

Often a speaker can soften his/her refusal by making a vague statement which is another commonly used refusal strategy.

In most cases **modal words** are used to attach a sense of vagueness to the addressee's response, making a refusal sound less categorical. We can consider the following example:

“Do you love me?”  
 “Uh, huh”.  
 “**Will you come over and watch me play indoor?**”  
 “**Maybe**”.  
 “Aw, Hare, you don't love me. If you loved me, you'd want to come over and watch me play indoor”.  
 Krebs's mother came into the dining-room from the kitchen. She carried a plate with two fried eggs and some crisp bacon on it and a plate of buckwheat cakes.

(E. H., p. 109)

It is obvious that in this example the modal word “**maybe**” perfectly works as a refusal strategy. The addressee doesn't want to offend the addresser and tries not to make a sharp refusal, his response is rather vague.

#### **Hedging.**

Another refusal strategy is hedging.

WALTER. *Where I worked before I taught the children for two or three hours, and then was paid by their mother, and back always, to my small room - (with a faint smile) with my cooking, which is not so good. You will never know how much I owe to you.*  
 LOUISE. **My dear boy. Tell me about your family. Your people in Germany.** (WALTER stiffens perceptibly into withdrawal, rises and crosses above the armchair to R of the table).  
 WALTER. **There is nothing to tell.**  
 LOUISE. *There must be something.*

(P. Sh., p. 80)

The extract shows that the addressee avoids refusing directly the addresser's request (namely, to tell her about his family) and tries to change the subject of the conversation.

#### **Excuse and Explanation.**

This refusal strategy functions to reassure the recipient of the refusal that he/she is still approved of but there are necessary reasons for refusing the request.

In the following extract it is not difficult to see how **excuse and explanation** can function as means of expressing refusals.

CLIVE (*showing off to Walter*). *Yes, it's going to be brilliant. All Gothic darkness and calamities. It's called the "Black Hole of East Suffolk".*

*(He rises and crosses to LC; mock grave).*

**Sit down and I'll unfold.**

**WALTER . No, not now. Your mother is waiting. Excuse me.**

*(WALTER exits to the kitchen. CLIVE stares after Walter. His gaiety leaves him at once. There is a pause).*

**PAMELA. (rising and moving above the table). What's wrong?**

**CLIVE. (sitting on the bench). Nothing.**

*(P. Sh., p. 62)*

While making his refusal WALTER (the addressee) apologizes and explains why he can't wait until CLIVE (the addresser) tells them a story.

Often **an explanation without an excuse** may also function as a refusal strategy.

**HANSON. Actually, could you lend me five pounds?**

**ARNIE. I haven't a cent. It all went on this.**

*(HANSON has got up. He eyes the armour suspiciously)*

**HANSON. Oh. (Pause). Actually. Why did you buy it?**

**ARNIE. As a present.**

**HANSON. For your parents?**

*(ARNIE nods)*

*(D. S., p. 197)*

In the given extract ARNIE (the addressee) rejects HANSON'S (the addresser's) request to lend him five pounds through explaining to him why he can't give him the money (namely, because he spent all his money on buying a present).

#### **Answer-Requests for Additional Information.**

Often by making a request for additional information the speaker makes an attempt to hide his/her real attitudes and feelings, thus trying to make the refusal less direct and offensive.

This refusal strategy is rather commonly used in everyday communication.

**LOUISE. Now try and be a bit more pleasant, will you? (She moves above the table, removing her rings from her fingers as she goes). *Jou-Jou, it's washing-up time, are you going to help me?***

**CLIVE. Can't we leave it for once?**

**LOUISE. It's all right. I can manage perfectly well without you.**

*(LOUISE exits to the kitchen. There is a pause).*

**CLIVE (tentatively). I'm sorry I said that about the furniture, Father. I suppose it was tactless of me.**

*(P. Sh., p. 69)*

It is obvious that in the example the addressee makes use of a good tactic to reject the addresser's request – namely, he makes a request for additional information. It functions as a perfect refusal strategy.

**Silent Refusal.**

A speaker may express his/her refusal in response to a request not only verbally, but also by non-verbal behavior.

As is well known, sometimes even the best verbal communication skills are not enough to create and sustain successful relationships. Very often non-verbal communication speaks louder than words. The term “non-verbal” refers to a number of different communication processes - gestures, facial expressions, silence, touch and so on.

Very often we can refuse people’s requests by keeping **silence**.

In some cases refusals are expressed by means of silence at the same time through making use of body language, for instance, through shaking one’s head.

*It wasn't any good. He couldn't tell her, he couldn't make her see it. It was silly to have said it. He had only hurt her. He went over and took hold of her arm. She was crying with her head in her hands.*

*“I didn't mean it”, he said. “I was just angry at something. I didn't mean I didn't love you”.*

*His mother went on crying. Krebs put his arm on her shoulder.*

**“Can't you believe me, mother?”**

**His mother shook her head.**

*“Please, please, mother. Please believe me”.*

(E. H., p. 111)

Here, Krebs’s mother expresses her refusal through silence, just **shaking her head** without saying a word.

There can also be cases in which the situation itself prompts that the addressee makes a refusal to the addresser’s request.

*LOUISE. You just can't mean it. (She stretches across the table and takes the newspaper). Really, Stanley, there are times when I have to remind myself about you - actually remind myself.*

*STANLEY (quietly). Suppose you tell me, then. Educate me.*

*LOUISE (loftily). Clive, dear, explain it to your father, will you? (She opens the paper and prepares to read it).*

**(Clive continues eating).**

(P. Sh. p., 42)

It is obvious that in this example the situation itself prompts us that CLIVE (the addressee) refuses LOUISE’s (the addresser’s) request by keeping silence and continuing eating.

Thus, the analysis carried out shows that refusal strategies are various, that there are both direct and indirect strategies, the latter being used in order to try to avoid the task of offending one’s interlocutors, i.e. one’s partners in dialogue.

As far as the focus of our attention in this article is the adjacency pair of request – refusal, all the above analyzed strategies refer to requests. By analyzing different refusal

strategies an attempt has been made to discover the interplay between requests and refusals, the various interesting ways in which requests can be rejected.

It should be mentioned, however, that refusals can be used not only in response to requests, but also to offers, suggestions and invitations.

It is also important to note that the choice of various refusal strategies depends greatly on different social-cultural factors, which include *culture, age, gender, social distance, social status*, etc.

Thus, the realization of the speech act of refusing involves not only linguistic, but also pragmatic knowledge. One can have a wide range of vocabulary and a sound knowledge of grammar, but misunderstandings can still arise, if he/she cannot apply **pragmatic competence appropriately**.

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**Մերժման ռազմավարությունը ժամանակակից անգլերենում**

Սույն հոդվածում քննվում է մերժման ռազմավարությունը անգլերենում: Ուսումնասիրվում են մերժման հատկապես այն ձևերը, որոնք հաջորդում են խնդրանք արտահայտող խոսողական ակտերին, այսինքն՝ մեր քննության առարկան խնդրանքի և մերժման փոխներգործությունն է ժամանակակից անգլերենում: Մանրամասն քննության ենթարկելով հաղորդակցման գործընթացում մերժման ռազմավարության առավել հաճախ կիրառվող ձևերը՝ հեղինակը փորձում է բացահայտել և վերլուծել խնդրանքի և մերժման միջև առկա բարդ և հետաքրքիր հարաբերակցությունը: