

Variations in Ways of Refusing Requests in English among Members of a College Community in Ghana

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Abstract

This paper discusses the ways by which members of the Berekum Training College, Ghana refuse requests in English, and how age and socio-economic status affect those refusal forms. Employing the ethnographic research design together with the theories of face and politeness, the study reveals that there are two major ways of making refusals in English among the group, namely: direct and, more frequently, indirect refusals. The direct refusals mostly come from elder and higher-status interlocutors to younger and lower-status interlocutors – direct refusals are vertical. On the other hand, indirect refusals are inter- and intra-age and status-based – they are both vertical and horizontal. These findings have implications for understanding cross-, inter-, intra-, and socio-cultural communication.

Introduction

Aspects of the context of any utterance or the factors constituting the ethnography of any act affect, to a large extent, the choices made in any speech event. These factors need to be observed properly, and sometimes strictly, especially in performing speech acts which influence human behaviour. Since language and social organisation are linked to each other (Fishman, 1972), it is important that the rules of social organisation or interaction which affect language choices are observed, especially in expressing speech acts which influence human behaviour to a large extent. One of such acts which influence human behaviour is refusals.

Due to their inherently face-threatening nature, refusals are especially sensitive, and a pragmatic breakdown in this act may easily lead to unintended offence and/or breakdown in communication (Sadler & Eröz, 2001). Refusals by nature are complex; they are often negotiated over several turns and involve some degree of directness and indirectness, usually varying in the degree of directness and indirectness depending on the status and age of the interlocutors and the cultural context.

Individuals have the free will to either accept or refuse/reject a request, an offer, an invitation, a suggestion or a piece of advice. However, the way one makes a refusal can be offensive if the person whose request, offer, invitation or suggestion has been declined does not know about how a refusal is made in the culture of the one who makes it. Turning down a request, an offer, an invitation or a suggestion demands some form of empathy. However, when prior communication is minimal, empathic accuracy decreases: the less our prior experience is with an individual or a group, the less we are likely to empathise, and that the more we are likely to offend them (Berlo, 1960). Also there is the need to reduce uncertainty about others by gaining information about them.

In the light of the foregoing observations, this paper offers some significant preliminary concepts and findings on ways of refusing by educated Ghanaians in some Ghanaian contexts. The paper examines the forms and the semantic formulae of refusals, and how these are affected by age and socio-economic status of interlocutors. A number of socio-pragmatic research have studied how different cultural groups refuse in English as native, second or

foreign language (Garcia, 1996), some comparing native and non-native speakers' ways of refusing. Some of these studies include: Sadler and Eröz (2001), Takahashi and Beebe (1987), Liao and Bresnahan (1996), Nelson et al (2002), Ikoma and Shimura (1993), Shimura (1995), Laohaburanakit (1995), Moriyama (1990), Ikoma & Shimura (1993), Ueda (1974), Kanemoto (1993), Chen et al (1995), Nelson et al, (2002), Takahashi and Beebe (1987), Al-Issa, (2003), Chen (1996), Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz (1990).

Also, sociolinguistic research has shown that social variables such as sex, age, educational and socio-economic status affect language choices to a large extent (Barbieri, 2008; Hudson, 1996). However, in spite of its 'correlate of real time language change', age stratification of linguistic variables has received little attention (Barbieri, 2008; Chambers, 2002; Eckert, 1997; Cheshire, 1987). It is said that "Older people and younger people speak differently" (Llamas and Stockwell, 2002: 159). Thus, in studying an age-based linguistic variation in American English, Barbieri (2008) finds that there are two patterns of age-based lexicogrammatical variation.

Theoretical Framework

The theories of face and politeness (Goffman, 1955; 1967); Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987) are employed in the present study.

The Theory of Face: One major condition that can help to achieve the desired goal of an utterance is the observance or maintenance of what researchers have called *Face*, which refers to one's self-esteem which they want to protect (Goffman, 1957). Face relates to how people interact with and perceive each other in their daily lives. Goffman claims that everyone is concerned, to a large extent, with how others perceive him/her. Individuals act socially, striving to maintain or project their identity or public self-image. To lose face, therefore, is to publicly suffer a diminished self-image; maintaining face is accomplished by taking a line whilst interacting socially.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), face is of two types, namely: Positive Face and Negative Face. Positive Face refers to the desire to be liked, appreciated, approved of, or the need to have a positive image accepted by others. Negative face refers to the desire to be unimpeded, imposed upon, and intruded or the need to be free from obligation in one's actions. Failure to observe the face of an interlocutor can mar communication. Usually in social interactions, behaviours or actions such as commands or orders, requests, disagreements, criticisms, threats, daring, insulting and refusals undermine the face of an interlocutor because they run contrary to the wishes of the hearer. These are what Brown and Levinson call Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs). On the other hand, Face-Preserving Acts (FPAs) such as the expression of understanding, affection, or solidarity, recognition of one's qualities preserve the face of an interlocutor. Scholars such as Brown and Levinson (1987), Lakoff (1973) and Leech (1983) have proposed different ways to preserve a person's face.

The Politeness Principle: Closely related to the Theory of Face is the Politeness Principle put forward by Lakoff (1973), and further developed by Brown and Levinson (1987) as well as Leech (1983). Lakoff identifies three politeness maxims for the maintenance of Face or relationships in communication. These are: Do not impose, give options and make your listener feel good. Although we have the free will to refuse any form of request, offer, invitation or suggestion, we usually try not to impose our refusal on them: We normally

negotiate with them and suggest options to them for consideration. In refusing, we generally threaten people's face, unless it is done in such a way as to still preserve their face.

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), politeness strategies are developed in order to save the hearer's face. They identify four politeness strategies which deal with face-threat: Bald-on-Record, Negative Politeness, Positive Politeness and Off-Record. Bald-On-Record strategy usually provides no effort to minimize threats to the hearer's face: It does not normally recognise the addressee's want of respect. Negative Politeness strategy, which addresses Negative Face, concerns the assumption that the speaker is somehow imposing on the hearer although he acknowledges the hearer's want of face. Positive Politeness strategy recognizes the hearer's desire, interest, want and need to be respected. It therefore addresses positive face concerns, often by showing prosocial concerns for the other's face. Off-Record strategy employs an indirect way of making a demand. It seeks to recognise and respect the hearer's face: It shows little or no threat to the addressee's want of respect and dignity.

Leech (1983), in dealing with politeness, proposes a maxim that we should minimise the expression of beliefs which are unfavourable to a hearer and at the same time maximise those that favour him/her. According to him, this maxim is relevant for dealing with 'impositives' (speech acts that impose on the listener or addressee). Refusals can be said to be 'impositives' in the sense that when refusals are expressed, the hearer has no option than to accept them as they are. According to Leech, tact and generosity are the two principles that go with 'impositives'. The tact principle survives on the maximisation of the cost to the hearer, whilst the generosity principle maximises the benefit unto the speaker himself. He further says that the generosity maxim is less powerful in politeness strategies than the tact maxim. Leech further states that politeness focuses more on the addressee than on the addresser. Speakers tend to take negative politeness much more carefully than positive politeness.

The major assumptions underlying both Leech, and Brown and Levinson's theories are the same. They both acknowledge that interlocutors have 'face' and need certain principles to guide them in their communication in order to make the communication process successful. The above-mentioned theories of face and politeness provide a basis upon which this paper is built. This is because one cannot rule out Face, FTA and FPA, as well as the politeness principles, as discussed above, when looking at refusals as a social act (an act whose performance requires two or more participants (Smith, 1990)). All the theories therefore offer a solid foundation for the study of the speech act of refusals because anytime a refusal is made it involves face threat.

Methodology and Research Design

The study is based on purely qualitative analysis, which describes observations in predominantly non-numerical terms and emphasises description or interpretation of communication events (Reinard, 1994; Priest, 1996); it observes how people interact with each other, and how people's attitudes are translated into actions (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2000). Since this paper involves socio-human relationships, and interactions between participants in communicative events, it is essential to employ a qualitative method of study.

Consequently, this research employs the ethnography of communication proposed by Hymes (1974), which indicates the various factors that influence our language choices, and make any communicative event a successful one. According to Locke et al (1987), an ethnographic research helps to understand a particular social situation, event, role, group or interaction. It

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involves an investigative process in which the researcher makes sense of a social phenomenon by contrasting, comparing, replicating, cataloguing and classifying objects of study (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

The ethnography of communication proposed by Hymes serves as an appropriate design for this study because refusals are a genre of communication, and a social act, that requires the elements embodied in Hymes' model, which he coins as SPEAKING. In the model:

S stands for *setting* and *scene*. Setting refers to the time and place, that is, the physical circumstances in which communication takes place whilst scene refers to the abstract psychological setting, or the cultural definition of the occasion (Wardhaugh, 1992). For example, a classroom is a physical setting meant for teaching and learning. The teaching and learning that goes on there forms the scene.

P in the acronym stands for *participants* involved in the communication event. For instance, in the classroom, the participants are the teacher and the students. Depending on the socially specified roles, the participants can be referred to as speaker – listener, speaker – hearer, addresser – addressee, and sender – receiver. Here, we are interested in looking at the age, social and economic status of the interlocutors and how they affect both the linguistic and non-linguistic features of the communicative event.

E refers to *ends*. This is the expected outcome or objective of the communicative event. A requester expects an addressee to undertake whatever activity the request expects of him or her. An inviter expects the invitee to honour the invitation.

A stands for *acts of sequence*. This is the content and form of the discourse: the precise words used, how they are used, and the relationship of what is said to be the actual topic at hand (Wardhaugh, 1992).

K, *key*, refers to the tone, manner, or spirit in which a message is conveyed. The message can be carried out in a manner that is serious, gentle, kind, pompous, teasing, mocking, sarcastic, insulting, circumlocutory or precise.

I, *instrumentalities*, refers to the choice of channel, that is, the medium through which the message is conveyed. It refers to the language used - English, French, Pidgin English, etc; the medium - oral or written, or a particular variety of the language. According to Edu-Buandoh (1999), a speaker can use a combination of instrumentalities in communication, especially in code-switching.

N stands for *norms of interaction and interpretation*. Every society has its own acceptable ways of communication. The norms of communication determine whether a speaker is being polite or impolite towards the addressee.

G, *genre*, refers to the type of utterance. Types of utterances include poems, riddles, sermons, prayers, lectures, judgement and sentencing, etc.

The Social Setting of Berekum Training College

One significant element in an ethnographic research is the choice of a setting, or the community which one wants to study. In the case of a linguistic study a speech community is preferred. A speech community is a group of people who share a set of norms, rules and expectations regarding the use of language (Yule, 1996). According to Matthews (1997), a speech community is “Any group of people whose language or use of language can be taken as a coherent object of study” (p. 349). The setting for this study is the Berekum Training College.

Founded in 1953, the College is one of the state-owned colleges established to train teachers for primary and junior high schools in Ghana (Berekum Training Collge, 2003). The college is one of the few colleges in Ghana that run diploma programmes in basic education. A successful applicant should have passed the West African Senior School Certificate Examination with aggregate twenty-four (24) or better, with passes in any three elective subjects as well as in the three core subjects, Mathematics, Integrated Science, and English language. Thus, successful applicants are expected to have a considerable proficiency in both spoken and written English.

The population of the Berekum Training College comprises the following groups: students, teaching staff, non-teaching staff and administrators. At the helm of affairs of the college is the Principal supported by two Vice Principals, one for administration and the other for academics. Social interaction among members of any speech community shows two important kinds of relationship – vertical and horizontal relationships i.e. formal/informal or neutral, (McCarthy & O’Dell, 1999). These kinds of relationship are what we refer to as levels of formality; they affect the way we interact and our choices of expression.

The above-mentioned relationships manifest themselves in the social interactions among members of the College community. For example, most instances of student-tutor interaction are formal whilst student-student interactions are mostly informal. Also, tutor-tutor interaction is usually either neutral or informal, whilst tutor-worker relationship is normally formal. However, depending on the context of situation, the usual relationship may change, and a student-tutor relationship may, for instance, be informal.

Research Instrument and Data Collection

The study used participant observation for the collection of relevant data (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000; Twumasi, 1986). As a covert participant I was able to disguise my identity and acted just like any of the participants. This is because I was introduced to the college community as a lecturer who was there to teach for a short period as part of a major programme, so while the other tutors saw me as their colleague, the students and other workers saw me as a tutor. This enabled me to overcome, to some extent, the ‘observer’s paradox’ (Labov, 1972), which states that when people are being observed their behaviour becomes artificial, yet the aim of the observation is to obtain the information in its natural state.

Digital Voice Recorders were used to record conversations. The advantage of using the digital voice recorders was that it cast away with all kinds of anxiety on the part of the informants. Apart from the recorders, an observation checklist containing bio-data (example, sex, age, socio-economic status, educational level, etc) of the interactants was used to gather information about the informants.

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In recording the conversations, I sought the informants' consents before recording them. If it was not possible to seek the consent of an informant before recording him/her, I had to inform him/her immediately after the recording (Owusu-Ansah, 1992). If the informant did not agree that such a recording should be taken away, I deleted the file in the presence of the informant.

Direct Refusals

From the data three types of direct refusals are identified. They include the use of: (a) definite or flat *no* without any other form(s) of expression; (b) definite *no* with some other expression(s), and (c) negative expression(s) without the word *no*.

1. Definite/Flat No without Any Other Expression(s)

In the following conversations, for example, the refusers use flat *no*.

Example 1:

A. I'm going to eat with you.

B. No.

A. Won't you?

B. No.

(23/03/07)

Example 2:

A. Can you do something about decreasing the money?

B. No.

A. You can't reduce it?

B. No.

(20/03/07)

This strategy was scarcely used. It occurred only about 2.35% of the total number of strategies identified

2. Definite/Flat No with Some Other Expression(s)

Examples of direct refusals involving *no* with some other expression(s) include: *no* plus an excuse/reason (Example 3 below); *no* plus excuse plus promise of future acceptance (Example 4 below). For example:

Example 3:

A. Sir, can I get your book for personal study?

B. No. Last year, some students came for my books and did not return them.

(10/05/07)

Example 4:

A. Sir, can there be extra hours for teaching since there is a whole lot of activities?

B. No. This is not done by any teacher. If I go for teaching practice and I come, by all means I will organise classes.

A. Thank you.

(10/03/07)

Generally, the two different ways of employing *no*, as presented above, are used when a high-status and/or older person refuses a low-status and/or younger interlocutor. In other words, the relationship is hierarchical. For example, in Examples 3 and 4 above, a tutor of about 44 years old refuses a student of about 23 years old. In example 2, a college prefect refuses a request to reduce dues paid by students. Here, though the two interactants are of the same age, the college prefect uses the flat *no* because of his position as prefect.

3. Negative Expression(s) without *No*

The last set of direct refusals is the use of a negative expression without the word *no*. The negative expression may come with or without other form(s) of expression, as in Examples 5 and 6 below.

Example 5:

- A. Jane, I'm going to eat in one bowl with you.
B. (*sharply*) I'm not.
A. You are not what? You are not going to eat because I'm going to eat?
B. I didn't say that.
A. What did you say?
B. I said I'm not going to eat in one bowl with you.

(08/05/07)

In example 5, B, a female student of about 18 years, refuses A, a male classmate of about 23 years. The sharpness in B's tone is influenced by the familiarity between them.

Example 6:

- A. Do you use Areeba or Onetouch?
B. Areeba.
A. Areeba. Oh! Then I want Areeba chip to make a free night call.
B. I can't help. Maybe I'll get a call.
A. You are thinking you may get a call?
B. Yes.
A. Then you can give it to me since you're not sure you'll get a call.
B. That is I may receive an important call.
A. So you can't help eh?
B. Yes.
A. Ok. Thank you.

(23/03/07)

In example 6, on the other hand, the dialogue occurs in the classroom between a first year male student, A, of about 23 years and a female student, B, of about 18 years. They are classmates but not friends and have known each other for about six months. This example involves a negative expression, which Crystal (1995) calls apologetic, plus an excuse. It also involves the use of *yes* to mean *no*.

It must be mentioned that, among the members of the College community, the use of direct refusals is not as common as indirect refusals (see table under Conclusion). This compares with Chen et al's (1995) report that irrespective of their background, Americans and the Japanese do not commonly refuse directly. It is also consistent with the findings by Ikoma and Shimura (1993) and Shimura, (1995). It is not common because of its face-threatening nature. Direct refusals can be referred to as refusing strongly, as proposed by De Devitiis et al (1989). It involves what Brown and Levinson (1983) call Bald-on-Record. Here, there is usually no doubt about the intentions of the refuser. Because of its face threatening nature, it is difficult for younger interlocutors to use it. If it is used by the younger interlocutors, it may show their disrespect for the older adult. This has some cultural undertones: In the Ghanaian culture, a child or young person is not supposed to refuse an elder person in a manner that shows disrespect. Even in some communities, a younger person would not refuse an elder person at all, which is in consonance with Nelson et al's (2002) finding that Egyptians would not make refusals in certain contexts. The older adult, however, may refuse the younger adult. The younger person, in an attempt to maintain his/her relationship with the elder person, will not refuse directly because the power to maintain the relationship mostly lies with the elder person and so the younger person risks destroying the relationship if s/he does not show respect to the elder person.

Indirect Refusals

From the data, three major types of indirect refusals are identified, including: excuses/reason, request for information or clarification, and suggesting alternatives. Minor ones include mitigated refusal, setting condition for future acceptance and laughter indicating refusal (compare Beebe et al, 1990; Kitao, 1996; Sadler & Eröz, 2001). In relation to the direct ones, indirect refusals are comparatively common. Due to space constraints, I will discuss only the three major types.

Excuse

The use of excuse as a refusal strategy is common among the subjects. Excuse may involve varied forms such as: an excuse/reason; an excuse plus a request for information or clarification; an excuse plus suggesting an alternative; citing a higher authority as excuse, etc. For example:

Example 7:

- A. Rhoda, is that your phone?
B. Yes, of course. What do you want me to do?
A. To give me some units to make a call.
B. I've got nothing.
A. Ok. Thank you.

(23/03/07)

Excuses as forms of refusal occur in both vertical and horizontal relationships. Thus, excuses do not reflect differences in status and age. For instance, in example 7, the refusal comes from a female student to a male student. Both are of the same age and in the same academic year. However, in Example 8, B is older than A by about 20 years.

Example 8:

- A. Sir, erm, I would like to collect the book and then take it home and then sit down and write pieces of information from it.
B. Mmm I don't know if //
A. But he is saying they are not allowed to borrow books from the library.
B. That is it. And ...erm ... it seems it is the only one there now.
So.... The students have got it (*suggesting that A should see the students for a copy of the book*).
A. I am still on campus. I am not gone yet.
B. Ok, if erm... There is a man at the office called Diawuo. You call him for me.
A. The general office?
B. Yes.
A. Thank you.

(26/03/07)

In the above conversation, B is a Vice Principal who sees A as a young person even though both of them hold first degrees. A is doing a master's programme. A makes the request at B's office. Thus B is higher in many respects than A, yet B refuses the request through an excuse plus a suggestion.

In some cases, the refuser cites a higher authority (that is, a third party, Kanemoto, 1993) as an excuse or a reason for the refusal and then, if possible, offers a suggestion, as in the following conversation.

Example 9:

- A. I want to borrow this and then //
B. That is why I am saying the problem is to give it out //
A. because I need a lot of information but I can't stay here and write it just now.
B. I have been authorised by the principal seriously not to give anything out. So if you can consult the Vice... May be he will allow you to. But don't tell him that I'm giving you that chance to consult him. So he will ... he will question me about it.
A. Emm, Thank you.
B. So you can put it here and come back later.

A. Thank you.

(26/03/07)

Here, A, the same age as B (a librarian), asks to borrow a book from the library. B sees A as a new tutor who has been posted to the school. So, in terms of status, A appears higher than B. Sometimes, the excuse is followed by a question for information and then another excuse. Consider Example 10 below:

Example 10:

A. Sir, I was wondering if I could get a place to lodge for the period that I am going to be around to do the data collection....

B. In fact, I have a very large family, very very large family //

A. very large?

B. We are eight. So it is a problem..... How many months are you going to be around?

A. Ooh! Just about three weeks.

B. Just about three weeks.

(19/03/07)

The information is normally needed to help the refuser to decide what to do next. It can also show some kind of solidarity on the part of the refuser; it shows concern. These features are observed in Example 10 above in which B is older than A by about 10 years. Also, B is a former tutor of A in the same institution under reference. Both are males.

The use of excuses as refusals is both hierarchical and horizontal. It cuts across different age groups and statuses. It, also, has some cultural reasons. In most Ghanaian societies, refusing a request from another person intentionally without any excuse indicates one's insensitivity to the person's plight, and does not show good neighbourliness. An excuse indicates that one would attend to the other's needs but for some setback. The excuse indicates solidarity, which is a positive politeness strategy as it attempts to save the addressee's face.

Request for Information or Clarification

Request for information or clarification is also a frequent strategy used by the refusers. It can be realised as: a question plus a statement; a question plus an excuse plus a promise of future acceptance; a question plus postponement plus suggestion plus an excuse, etc. Example 11 below involves a question and a statement. The interaction is between two male students of the same year and age. They are friends.

Example 11:

A. Sell this to me (*points at B's wrist watch*).

B. What did you say?

A. I said sell this to me.

B. (*Sharply*) I should sell this to you? My wife gave it to me.

(03/04/07)

Again, some instances indicate a refusal by means of a question plus an excuse plus a condition for future acceptance, as in example 12 below.

Example 12:

A. I would like you to accompany me to a night club this weekend.

B. Why me?

A. Well, as you know, a night club is a place of entertainment.

B. I wouldn't get time. If it had been a place like a restaurant, I would.

(30/03/07)

One thing is worth mentioning here. We must differentiate between a genuine or sincere question, which asks for information or clarification, and a question which is insincere or not genuine. In Example 13 below, B's question is not a genuine question: It does not ask for any information. It suggests outright refusal.

Example 13:

A. Sir, please, can I get the book from you?

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- B. (*a bit sharply*) If you get it from me, what shows that you will bring it back in time?
(02/05/07)

Another instance is Example 11 above. In this example, B's second question is not a genuine question. The question does not ask for any information or clarification but rather suggests a refusal of A's request. It shows B's attitude to the request - irritation. It reflects the fact that A and B are close and familiar.

This strategy pays little or no attention to the addressee's face. Insincere questions as direct refusals mostly come from higher status or older persons to lower status or younger persons. It may also be used between interactants of the same age, who are familiar. This is because an insincere question that indicates a refusal may show how irritating the request is. Thus, a younger person, in the Ghanaian culture, will appear offensive by directly or indirectly telling an elderly person that his/her request is irritating.

Generally, requests for information or clarification and insincere questions are employed by adult and/or higher status interlocutors to younger persons due to the Ghanaian cultural and social implications inherent in them, as I have already indicated. If the younger person cannot do anything but refuse a request, it should be done respectably, by means of excuses, down-toners or some other politeness principles. It must, however, be noted that a younger person can ask for the clarification of a question if s/he does not understand or hear it well.

Suggesting an Alternative

This is one of the indirect strategies found among the subjects. It is, however, not common as compared to the two strategies discussed above. This strategy may involve: suggesting an alternative only; an alternative plus an excuse, as it happens among the Chinese (Chen et al, 1995). In Example 14 below, B suggests an alternative for the requester to pursue.

Example 14:

- A. () so once more I am asking you for your P.C.
B. (*a bit sharply*) But I am saying you can bring yours and then you can get all the information you want from it () then you take yours away.
(04/06/07)

This is a conversation between old school mates who meet at a shop. B is the College's storekeeper. A and B have known each other for a number of years; they are both males of about 23 years of age. B sees himself as being a bit higher in status than A.

When the request demands something or some information that is formal or beyond the reach of the addressee, the requester is referred to the appropriate source. Reasons normally are offered for the referral, as in the following example:

Example 15:

- A. Good morning, Sir.
B. Good morning. (*in Twi*) ete sen? (*How are you?*).
A. (*in Twi, a Ghanaian language*) Mepa wo kyew, bɔkɔkɔ. (*Please, I am fine.*)
B. (*in Twi*) Anɛpa yi? (*What brings you here this morning?*)
A. Thank you, Sir. Erm, still on my data collection exercise I, I need some information about the school and I was wondering if you could assist me get the information.
B. If it is information that will be documented, mention it to Principal. If you mention it to him and he asks anyone of us to give you... because he has already compiled some information towards the (.) our accreditation of (). So whatever you take must not conflict with what is on record. So if it is something within my means, no problem. But you mention it to him that you need such and such information. Then he will tell me or Awuni. That will be better.
A. Thank you, Sir.
B. All right.

(11/05/07)

Here, A asks B, the Vice Principal in charge of Administration, for information about the College. B asks A to consult the Principal of the College because the information required is formal. The request is considered formal because it is made at the Vice Principal's office and the information needed is formal. B is older than A by about 20 years. B sees A as young even though both of them hold first degrees. A is doing a master's programme. Thus B is higher in many respects than A, yet B refuses the request by referring A to the 'right' source. Another example of suggesting an alternative is found in Example 16 below:

Example 16:

- A. Good afternoon, Sir.
B. *(talking to another person)* Aha!
A. Please, Sir... Good afternoon once again.
B. Good afternoon.
A. I need some information about the school //
B. The principal is the best person to do that. The principal has to do that.
A. It is going to form part of my thesis. And I was wondering if you could provide me the information.
B. Mmm, I cannot give you details because the history of the school is with the principal. So you better see the principal. Eh because there are certain things I might not know. I might say it and may be wrong. If it gets out there and eh the Principal gets to know, he says who gave you that information. So it is the Principal who can give you information about the College.
A. Yes, Sir.
B. Unless he authorises me to do that and then I do it.
A. Yes, Sir.
B. Even if you are giving it, you might not give all.
A. Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir.

(11/05/07)

In this example, B, about 48 years old, is a former tutor of A, about 33 years old, in the same College. B is now the Vice Principal in charge of academic affairs. A makes the request at B's office.

Sometimes, referring the requester to another source for what s/he wants becomes necessary because the informant may be occupied with something else, as in:

Example 17:

- A. Good morning, Sir.
B. Good morning. *(in Twi)* Anɔpa yi? *(What brings you here this morning?)*.
A. Sir, *(in Twi)* Anɔpa yi deɛ brɛw *(there is no problem)*. I am still on my data collection.
B. Uhuh, you said you were teaching.
A. Yes. I have been doing it. And then, I need some information about the school //
B. Yes, see the Vice Principal.
A. I went to him. He said I should see you.
B. He said you should see me?
A. Yes. He said you really are the head of the school and therefore if I need the information //
B. When did you see him?
A. This morning.
B. Tell him that I said you should see him. I'm travelling now. I'm going to Cape Coast.
A. Yes, Sir. Thank you.
B. So tell him that I said whatever you need, he should give you.
A. Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir.

(11/05/07)

In this example, A contacts the Principal at his office as directed by both Vice Principals in Examples 15 and 16. However, because the Principal is busily preparing to travel, he refers

the requester back to the Vice Principal in charge of administration. In the examples presented above, the refusers appear higher in many respects (age, socio-economic status) yet their responses appear formal because of the formal nature of the request. In each of the cases, the responders could have said they did not have the means to providing the information needed by A. The manner of refusing tells the respect they have for the requesters. This may be due to the requesters' educational levels. Thus, they preserve the requesters' face.

Each of the two major types of refusal, direct and indirect, portrays the attitude of the refuser to the refused. In general, the use of indirect refusals is the result of the refuser's regard for the face and interest of the requester. Direct refusals are suggestive of the refuser's disregard for the requester's welfare. Direct refusals are, therefore, likely to mar relationships. The use of the direct refusal shows that the refuser may not care about what happens to the relationship. Thus, the use of indirect refusals has some socio-cultural underpinnings, in line with Al-Issah's (2003) view that semantic formulae of refusals are largely influenced by socio-cultural values. In most Ghanaian socio-cultural contexts, hospitality is revered very much. Thus, when one does not appear to be hospitable, caring and accommodating in dealing with one's neighbours, one incurs displeasure from others. Refusing indirectly is akin to De Devitiis et al's (1989) and Leech's (1983) tactful refusal strategy. Indirect refusals maintain relationships and mostly involve off-record politeness strategy (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Conclusion

This study identifies and discusses the different ways of refusing requests and how those ways of refusing are influenced by age and socio-economic status among members of the Berekum Training College community. The paper finds two main forms of refusals used by the members of the college community, namely, direct and indirect refusals. Three types of direct refusals are identified, the use of: (a) definite or flat *no* without any other form(s) of expression; (b) definite *no* with some other expression(s), and (c) negative expression(s) without the word *no*. These forms are influenced, to a large extent, by age and socio-economic status. Generally, the different forms of direct refusals are used when a high-status and/or older person refuses a low-status and/or younger interlocutor. In other words, the relationship is hierarchical.

Three major types of indirect refusals are identified. These are those involving: excuses/reason, request for information or clarification, and suggesting alternatives. Minor types include mitigated refusal, setting condition for future acceptance and laughter indicating refusal. The use of excuses as forms of refusal is both vertical and horizontal. In other words, excuses do not reflect differences in status and age. Excuses also have some cultural influence. In most Ghanaian societies, refusing a request from another person intentionally without any excuse indicates one's insensitivity and inhospitality to the person's request. It does not show good neighbourliness. Thus, giving an excuse is to show that one would attend to the other's needs if one had the chance or ability or were capable. The excuse indicates solidarity.

Requests for information or clarification and questions that are not genuine normally come from adult and/or higher status interlocutors to younger persons. This is because lower status and younger persons find it difficult to ask questions about why they are being asked by higher status or older persons to do something. Asking such questions does not show respect in some Ghanaian socio-cultural interactions. This implies that younger persons find it

difficult refusing requests from the elderly or a higher status person. If the younger person cannot do anything but refuse the request, it should be done politely, by means of excuses, down-toners or some other politeness principles. It must, however, be noted that a younger person can ask for the clarification of a question if s/he does not understand or hear it properly.

Also, suggesting alternatives for the requester to follow, and laughter as refusals come from older and higher-status persons to younger and lower-status persons, whilst mitigated refusal is the other way round. Setting a condition for acceptance is horizontal (see table below)

| Frequency & Age/Status Variation of Refusal Strategies | | |
|---|-----------|---------------------------|
| Type of Refusal | Frequency | Variation in age & status |
| <i>Direct Refusals</i> | | |
| 1. Flat <i>No</i> | 2 | Higher → Lower |
| 2. <i>No</i> with some other expression(s) | 4 | Higher → Lower |
| 3. Negative expressions without the word <i>No</i> | 2 | Higher → Lower |
| <i>Indirect Refusals</i> | | |
| 4. Excuse | 20 | Horizontal/Vertical |
| 5. Request for Information or Clarification | 14 | Higher → Lower |
| 6. Suggesting an Alternative | 3 | Higher → Lower |
| 7. Mitigated Refusal | 2 | Higher ← Lower |
| 8. Setting a Condition for Future Acceptance | 1 | Horizontal |
| 9. Laughter as Refusal | 1 | Lower → Higher |
| Total | 49 | |

As noted earlier, these findings are preliminary and, therefore, further research is needed to ascertain the generality of these findings as they apply to the general Ghanaian socio-linguistic and socio-pragmatic situation. Such research may concentrate on universities and other institutional and non-institutional settings. One major implication of the findings is the need to understand people's sociolinguistic values. Such an understanding will engender local, national and international communicative competence.

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