WAYS OF REFUSING INVITATIONS IN ENGLISH AMONG MEMBERS OF A COLLEGE OF EDUCATION COMMUNITY IN GHANA

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Abstract

Refusing an invitation from another person is potentially face-threatening and therefore with knowledge of such potential danger, interlocutors employ different ways of minimising such threats. This paper is an attempt to contribute to the ongoing discussion on the maintenance of face in the performance of face threatening acts such as refusals. By means of ethnography of communication and theories of face and politeness, the paper analyses and discusses some ways of refusing invitations among members of the Berekum College of Education. The paper identifies two main ways of saying no to invitations, direct and indirect, and tries to find out how these ways are influenced by sex differences as well as age and social status. The study concludes that the different ways of refusing invitations are largely influenced by the above-mentioned variables. The paper has implications for social relations and cross-cultural understanding.

Key Words: refusing, invitation, face, face-threatening act, sex, age, social status

Introduction

Refusals are especially sensitive due to their face-threatening nature, and a pragmatic breakdown in their issuance may easily lead to unintended offence (Sadler & Eröz, 2001), and therefore turning down an invitation demands some form of empathy. According to Barbieri (2008) and Hudson (1996) social variables such as sex, age, educational and socio-economic status affect language choices. However, it has been suggested that little attention has been paid to age stratification of linguistic variables (Barbieri, 2008; Chambers, 2002; Eckert, 1997). It is also said that "Older people and younger people speak differently" (Llamas and Stockwell, 2002: 159).

In the light of the above, this paper offers some significant preliminary findings and concepts about ways of refusing an invitation by educated Ghanaians in some Ghanaian contexts. It examines the forms and the semantic formulae of refusing invitations, and how these are affected by sex, age and social status of interlocutors.

Studies on Refusals in Specific Cultures

Refusals have been studied variously by researchers in different cultural contexts such as British, American, Japanese and Chinese cultures.

British Refusals: According to Kitao (1996) over half of British refusals include an expression of regret and an excuse or reason. He states that the British give reason(s) in refusing, and usually depending on the degree of face-threat, a statement of regret is added to refusals to status equal persons rather than people of higher or lower status.

American Refusals: The Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) reports that generally native speakers of American English tend to be sensitive to status equals as compared to status unequals and they commonly give excuses as part of refusals whether to a higher or lower status person. For refusals of invitations, Americans are said to give expressions like *Well, Thank you, I'd love to go,* then use an expression of regret or apology followed by an excuse to speakers of either higher, lower or equal status. Sadler and Eröz (2001) report of similar strategies and report that, with invitations, regret was expressed when refusing someone of higher status. Gratitude and appreciation were used along with an excuse or reason in refusing an offer, whilst a reason, an explanation or excuse was used in the case of suggestions.

Japanese Refusals: According to Ikoma and Shimura (1993), and Shimura (1995), native speakers of Japanese tend to use direct refusals less frequently than native speakers of American English; while Beebe et al (1990) report that, in Japanese refusals, speakers tend to offer many more alternatives, especially when they are higher in status, and they do so more often than Americans speaking in English. By analysing data in terms of closeness, social status, age, and gender of interlocutors, Moriyama (1990) says that direct refusals were found to be directed at close friends. The use of incomplete sentences in refusing is also one of the strategies among the Japanese, especially when the requester is higher in status, in order to

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avoid making direct refusals and appear hesitant, which is considered a polite gesture (Ikoma & Shimura, 1993; Shimura, 1995). Similarly, Kanemoto (1993) says the three formal characteristics in Japanese refusals are: (1) avoiding a clear refusal, (2) mentioning a third party as a reason for the refusal, and (3) using a fictitious reason for the refusal, which serve as a social lubricant to reduce the impact of the refusal assertion.

Chinese Refusals: According to Chen et al (1995), the overall distribution of Chinese refusal strategies in terms of frequency of occurrence, from the highest to the lowest, is: reason (33%), alternative (14%), direct refusal (13%), regret (11%), dissuade interlocutor (10%), verbal avoidance (7%), acceptance that functions as refusal (4%), principle (1%), folk wisdom (0.3%) and others (7%). One thing, according to them, that influences the choice of a refusal strategy is the social status of the refuser.

It can be observed from the foregoing that most of the studies on refusals have employed the use of Discourse Completion Test, which, although, may be an appropriate method for data collection, fails to reveal the socio-pragmatic complexities of face-threatening acts such as refusals (Nelson et al, 2002). The major strength of the current study is that it examines naturally occurring data recorded from face-to-face interactions between interlocutors, allowing us the opportunity to also examine how tone of voice affects ways of making refusals.

2.0 Theoretical Framework

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

2.1   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, 1967). 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 (source: http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/theory/face.html).

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.

2.2   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 no or little threat to the addressee's want of respect and dignity.

Leech (1983), in dealing with politeness, proposes 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. He 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 (source: http://members.aol.com/romanmeyer/Request.html).

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, especially in performing face-threatening acts such as a refusal.

3.0   Methodology

3.1   Research Design

Since this paper involves socio-human relationships, and interactions between participants in communicative events, it is essential to employ a qualitative method of study, 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).

Consequently, this paper 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 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 (Smith, 1990), that requires the elements embodied in Hymes' model, which he coins as SPEAKING, where *S* stands for *setting* and *scene* (the time and place, that is, the physical circumstances in which communication takes place, and the abstract psychological setting, or the cultural definition of the occasion (Wardhaugh, 1992)). *P* stands for *participants* involved in the communication event (looking at the age, social and economic status of the interlocutors and

how they affect both the linguistic and non-linguistic features of the communication event). *E* refers to *ends*, the expected outcome or objective of the communication event. *A* stands for *acts of sequence*, the content and form of the discourse. *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. *N* stands for *norms of interaction and interpretation*, which may determine whether a speaker is being polite or impolite towards the addressee. *G*, *genre*, refers to the type of utterance.

3.2   Context of the Study: Berekum College of Education

The speech community (Yule, 1996; Matthews, 1997) chosen for this study was Berekum College of Education (formerly 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 College, 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.

3.2.1   Social Organisation

The population of the 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.

3.2.2   Social Life

Social interaction among members of any speech community shows two important kinds of relationship – vertical and horizontal relationships, that is, 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 language choices.

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.

3.3   Research Instrument and Data Collection

Data used in this paper was part of data collected in 2007 for a study of speech acts. The study used participant observation to collect the data, which is the method of data collection in which the researcher goes to live and participate in the daily activities of the people s/he is studying (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000; Twumasi, 1986). As a covert participant I was able to disguise my identity and acted just like anyone of the participants as suggested by Fraenkel and Wallen (2000). 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 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.

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 his/her presence.

Analysis and Discussion

An examination of the data indicates two major ways of refusing request, namely: direct and indirect refusals, with indirect refusals being more frequent than the direct ones. Both types, especially the indirect ones, involved major and minor ones, but for the purpose of this paper, I will discuss only the main ones.

Direct Refusals

Two types of direct refusals were found in the data:

(a) **The use of *no* plus gratitude and reason**, as for example: (i) *No, thank you* (gratitude)*. I have just taken mine* (reason); (ii) *No, thank you* (gratitude)*. I have eaten (reason)*. Example (i) was a response from a second year male student of about 23 years to a first year female of about 18 years who invited the former to a meal. It must be noted that *No, thank you* is a formal expression. In this context, it was largely influenced by the sex difference and the social distance between the two interactants; they were not friends. The

influence of sex and social distance also manifests itself in example (ii), in which the invitation to a meal came from a male university student of about 33 years to a female post-secondary school student of about 23 years. The strategy involved negative politeness strategy (Brown & Levinson, 1987) as it recognised the face threat to the addressee and makes an attempt to minimise so as to save the face of the addressee (Axia and Baroni, 1985)

(b) **The use of a negative expression involving *not* plus a reason**, as in: (iii) *I cannot* (use of negative expression). *This vacation I won't be there. I will be in Kumasi* (reason). This response came from a female student to a male student. The two were close friends in their second year of their programme in the College. The two were of the same age of about 23 years. In this example, the sharpness in the response was the result of familiarity and intimacy. This manner of refusing is bald-on-record (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Edu-Buandoh, 1999); however, the addition of a reason tries to minimise the face threat.

Indirect Refusals to Invitations

Three types of indirect refusals were found in the data: Request for information or clarification; *Oh* plus some other expression(s); and excuse plus gratitude.

Request for Information

In this manner of refusing, the refusers normally wanted to know why, when or to where they were being invited before they declined the invitation. The question or series of questions were to help them find out whether or not they would have time to honour the invitation. The question(s) may be followed by: an excuse/reason, as in: (iv) *10th of next month?* (question) .... *By that time we wouldn't be on campus* (reason/excuse). The conversation that elicited this response was between two close female friends who were of the same age of about 18 years and at the same level. It was an invitation to a birthday party.

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Also, the question may be followed by an excuse/reason and promise of future acceptance, as in: (v) *Which meeting is that?* (question) ... *When?* (Question) ... *Saturday, I won't be around. We are going for this UTTDBE programme* (excuse). *So may be some other time* (promise of future acceptance). The invitation that elicited this response was from a female student of about 23 years old to a male Science tutor of about 35 years old. The tutor was invited to a church programme. The relationship between them was vertical and formal: a tutor – student relationship. Even though the tutor appeared higher in status and age than the student, the way he refused the invitation appeared somewhat empathic, thus recognising and minimising the face threat in his refusal to attend the programme.

Again, the question may be followed by an apology plus excuse/reason plus promise of future acceptance, as for example: (vi) *So what day will that be?* (question). *I'm sorry* (apology) *I have already fixed that day for something* (excuse/reason). *Let's make it next year* (promise of future acceptance). The exchange that resulted in this response was between a post-secondary student of about 23 years and his former teacher of about 33 years when the former had invited the latter to a birthday party.

Oh Plus Other Expression(s)

The use of *Oh plus Other Expression(s)* was one of the indirect strategies used in refusing invitations. The *Oh* may be followed by: gratitude; gratitude and excuse; question plus suggestion; ok and request. The addition of gratitude is similar to what happens among the Americans (CARLA, 2006). In the use of this formula, tone of voice played a very significant role. The voice may indicate empathy, wish or disinterest in the subject of invitation. Examples included the following: (vii) (slowly and mildly) *Ooh, thank you* (gratitude). This response came from a female tutor of about 33 years who was a tutor of English in the

College when a male postgraduate student of about 33 years had invited her to a meal in the staff common room.

Also, *Oh* could be followed by gratitude and excuse, as in: (viii) (slowly and mildly; in a low tone, with a smile) *Ooh, thank you* (gratitude). *I am ok* (excuse). This was in response to an invitation to a meal by a postgraduate student of about 33 years to a College girl of about 28 years. A similar example is (ix) below: (quite sharply) *Oh, thanks for the call* (gratitude). *I'm ok* (reason), which was from about 23 year old male student to a 33 year old male student who was invited to a meal.

Example (x) *Oh, ok* (reason), *you go on* (request) was one other example of the use of *Oh* plus some other expression. This example came from a male tutor of about 48 years to a male postgraduate student of about 33 years when the latter had invited the former to a meal. A similar example was (xi) *Oh, go on,* which was from a male tutor of about 33 years to a postgraduate student of about the same age. In the use of these two examples, (x) and (xi) above, the speakers' tones were a bit sharp and high.

It must be noted that in the use of *Oh* as part of the refusal strategy, the females sounded milder, warmer, and more appreciative than their male counterparts; the males were quite sharp in their responses.

Excuse

Sometimes, the indirect refusal involved only an excuse, or an excuse and gratitude or some other expression. It may also involve an excuse plus: gratitude and reason; excuse plus regret, as it normally happens among the British and Americans (CARLA, 2006; Kitao, 1996); as in the following example: Example (xii) *Sir, it's okay. I have eaten* (excuse/reason). This example came from a male student of about 25 years to a male tutor of about 33 years when the latter invited the former to a meal. Another example, (xiii) *I will be travelling,* was used

to refuse an invitation by a male postgraduate student of about 33 years to a female student of about 23 years, when she was invited to Easter festivities in the former's hometown. Example (xiv) involved an excuse plus gratitude: (xiv) *I am okay* (excuse/reason). *Thank you* (gratitude). This was a response to an invitation to a meal from a male tutor of about 33 years to a female student of about 23 years.

Again, the excuse could be followed by regret, as in example (xv) *Morning will be class hours* (excuse) ... *Sorry, I can't join you* (apology). This was in response to an invitation to a funeral. The invitation was from a female student of about 18 years to a male student of about 23 years. In this response, the speaker recognised the face threat in his response. However, he felt that he could not but refuse the invitation, and therefore tried to minimise the threat by apologising, a negative politeness strategy as propounded by Brown and Levinson (1987).

From examples xii, xiii, xiv and xv, it could be observed that the use of an excuse and/or gratitude or some other expression came from (and to) both sexes.

Conclusion

Generally, in refusing invitations, the use of direct refusals was not common among the group: It occurred only about 10.59%. This was because refusing an invitation outright did not normally show solidarity, empathy, concern and friendliness, which are values sanctioned by Ghanaian cultural norms. The direct strategy was used among familiar interlocutors; and from older interlocutors to younger ones. Sex did not play any significant role in this.

Indirect refusals were, however, more common (about 74.11% of occurrence). Request for information was both vertical and horizontal: It cut across different age groups, sex and social status. *Oh* plus other expressions also cut across different age, sex and social status. The differences lied in the kinds of expressions that followed *Oh* and the tone of voice.

In using this refusal strategy, the females sounded more appreciative and milder; that is, whether they refused a male or female of any age, the females' voices were significantly lower and warmer. The females mostly used *Oh* plus gratitude. The men on the other hand appeared to be a bit harsh and sharp in their tones of voice and, especially when the refusal came from an older male to a younger male, *Oh* was followed by *(you) go on)*, which appeared quite instructive. Excuse as a refusal strategy was also both horizontal and vertical: It was either age, sex or status sensitive.

The frequency differences in the use of direct and indirect refusal forms reflect Ghanaian socio-cultural values and norms as it happens among Jordanians (Al-Issah, 2003). Direct refusals have the potential to mar relationships and so their use demands care, tact and circumspection. Indirect refusals maintain relationships and mostly involve off-record politeness strategy (Brown and Levinson, 1987). In most Ghanaian socio-cultural contexts, when one does not appear to be hospitable and accommodating in dealing with one's neighbours, one incurs displeasure from others and so indirectness is a tactful way (De Devitiis et al, 1989; Leech, 1983) to refuse and still maintain relationships at the same time.

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