



## Ritual refusals and face-work: A Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Investigation

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### ABSTRACT:

This qualitative study explores the pragmatic functions of ritual refusal as used in Palestinian Society. The significance of this paper rises from the fact that it attempts to highlight potential causes of pragmatic failure and breakdown in cross-cultural communication. Brown and Levinson's (1987) and Leech's (1983) models of linguistic politeness are considered as a theoretical framework of the study.

Naturally occurring data were collected ethnographically from two situations. Analysis of data shows that ritual refusals by Palestinians are rooted in maintaining face which is oriented toward a person's public image. In Palestinian Arabic, it is necessary to preserve the interlocutor's face and to leave a way out for the refuser him/herself. In Palestinian society, the refuser finds it more important to make his/her addressee feel wanted, and to be considerate of his/her wants and feelings than it is to be honest or direct, whereas the opposite is the case in the USA where honesty is a sign of friendship. Therefore, ritual refusal in Palestinian Arabic has taken on the pragmatic functions of minimizing imposition and expressing intimacy and connectedness. The refusal is thus used both accompanied by a positive politeness strategy, establishing a friendly context for the interaction, and by a negative politeness strategy aimed at minimizing imposition and softening negative statements. These pragmatic functions reflect the role of ritual refusal in Palestinian colloquial discourse as a device utilized by Palestinians to mark, establish, or assert social relationships including connectedness and solidarity

Key words: Refusal, Ritual, Politeness, Face, Pragmatics

### الملخص:

تقوم هذه الدراسة ببحث الوظائف (البراجماتية) المقامية للرفض الشكلي في المجتمع الفلسطيني. وتأتي أهمية هذه الدراسة كونها تسعى الى ابراز الاسباب المحتملة لفشل التواصل البراجماتي وسوء الفهم اثناء التواصل بين متحدثي اللغات المختلفة. وقد تم الاعتماد على كل من نظرية براون وليفنسون (1987) ونظرية ليتش (1983) للكياسة او التهذب اللغوي كاطار نظري للدراسة.

ان تحليل البيانات التي جمعت من سياقاتها الحقيقية اظهر بان الرفض قد يكون شكليا في اللهجة الفلسطينية العربية، حيث يهدف الى حفظ ماء الوجه واعطاء صورة ايجابية عن المتحدث الذي ينوي قبول العرض فيما بعد، مما يجنبه الاحراج. ان الاهتمام بالصورة العامة للمتحدث اهم بكثير من الصدق والصراحة في القبول لان ذلك يعطيه شعورا بالرضى والقبول من الاخرين. أما الرفض في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية فيهدف الى الصدق والصراحة ، مما يحافظ على الصداقة. ولذلك فان الرفض الشكلي له وظائف مقامية تهدف الى التقليل من الالزام والتعبير عن الالفة والترابط. فالرفض قد يكون مرافقا لاستراتيجيات التهذب (التأدب) الايجابية التي تهدف الى التعبير عن التضامن والتعاطف والتأسيس لسباق من التفاعل. وقد يكون الرفض مرافقا لاستراتيجيات التهذب السلبية التي هدفها التقليل من الالزام والتقليل من الاثار السلبية للعبارات اثناء التخاطب بين الناس. ان هذه الوظائف المقامية تبين الدور الذي تقوم فيه اساليب الرفض المهذب في الخطاب العامي الفلسطيني كوسيلة لتأكيد وتعزيز العلاقات الاجتماعية والترابط بين الناس.

## INTRODUCTION:

One of the main functions of language is to establish and maintain human relationships. In interaction, the participants' assumptions and expectations about people, events, places, etc, play a significant role in the performance and interpretation of verbal exchanges. The choice of linguistic expressions and strategies to convey certain communicative purposes "is governed by social conventions and the individual's assessment of situations" (Nureddeen, 2008:279).

Although there are a number of studies of refusals, most of them deal with English, Chinese or Japanese (e.g., Iwamoto 2004; Mao 1992). Only a handful of studies focus on Arabic (e.g., Eshreteh, 2015; Morkus, 2014; Al-Kahtani, 2005; Al-Eryani, 2007), and these studies tend to analyze refusals from the perspective of semantic content. Although examples of refusal strategies are given, the contexts in which these strategies were used are not analyzed in detail. For example, the contextual restrictions of each strategy were not studied and hence may make over-generalizations. Furthermore, these studies

have focused primarily on the person who conducted the refusals so that the party who responded to the refusals was not analyzed. Moreover, such studies (Morkus, 2014; Al-Kahtani, 2005; Al-Eryani, 2007 etc.) relied on using a DCT, rather than direct observation and naturally occurring data as it is the case in this present study, which has some disadvantages with regard to reliability of such method.

Considering these limitations, it is necessary to examine when, where, as well as the roles of the interlocutors ("initiator" and "refuser"). This is the kind of knowledge that speakers of Arabic most ly need when they encounter situations of refusals. This paper therefore analyzes the situations in which ritual refusals occur and examines the refusal strategies and corresponding pragmatic functions that can be revealed in certain refusal situations.

Refusal is an act in response to other acts, so acts that prompt refusals play an important role in the choices of refusal strategies. Therefore, this paper explores some culture-specific pragmatic functions of refusals to offers and invitations extended in Palestinian society. Refusals by Palestinians

are rooted in maintaining face (Brown and Levinson, 1987), which is oriented toward a person's public image. Refusals sometimes are realized through reciprocal avoidance of face-to-face confrontation. In Palestinian Arabic, it is necessary to preserve the interlocutor's face and to leave a way out for the refuser him/herself. Since a fundamental principle for social interaction is that it is based on reciprocity, a speaker's own face cannot be preserved unless the other person's face is maintained as well. The honor of being given an offer or invited should be acknowledged and the face of the person being refused should be maintained. At the same time, the refusal must be effective and clear in meaning but not rude.

Palestinian speakers express their intentions not to comply with the interlocutor's proposed action plan, indicating "no" in a polite way. This type of negative response is sometimes referred to as "substantive refusal". However, in Palestinian Arabic, speakers are generally not supposed to accept an invitation or an offer right away. They should normally refuse several times before accepting. Such refusals are termed as "ritual refusals" and are almost traditional in Palestinian society.

This cross-cultural study of the speech act of refusals is vital to the understanding of "face-work" in Palestinian society. It is realized that face-threatening acts are particularly important to study because they are the source of so many cross-cultural miscommunications. Leech (1983) also points out that "transfer of the norms of one community to another may lead to 'pragmatic failure'

and to the judgment that the speaker is in some way being impolite" (p.281). In performing face-threatening acts, therefore, speakers must integrate personal and societal values with linguistic competence and, most importantly, gain some knowledge of "face-work". This paper investigates Palestinians and American performances of the face-threatening act of refusal. It looks at how this face-threatening act is performed among equals and colleagues, without any consideration of gender and social status. The primary purpose is to present data describing the differences between Palestinians and Americans in their refusals.

#### **MATERIAL AND METHOD:**

The data for analysis in this qualitative study were collected ethnographically from two real informal situations in which the researcher, as a participant, recorded the whole interactions that included refusal speech acts. The two interactions were recorded by the researcher, who is a male, after being invited to dinner in the houses of two different male colleagues in two different situations in Hebron city in Palestine. The researcher was not the only invitee in both situations; other colleagues were also invited. In the first situation, 5 male colleagues were present and six males were present in the second. Both situations lasted for 3 hours and forty-seven minutes.

In both situations, nothing was revealed about the researcher's intention to record and/or gather data for research in

an attempt to collect reliable data for analysis. Therefore, the data were spontaneous and naturally occurring intra-conversational situations in real environments of everyday communication between friends. The speech contributions of participants in both situations were in Arabic. Therefore, whenever we tried to collect the data no attempt was made by us to inform the participants being involved in the interactions about our intention. The study aimed at analyzing and revealing the different pragmatic functions of ritual refusals as utilized by Palestinians in informal situations.

In fact, the sample for this study is limited since all participants, instructors in the Faculty of Arts at Hebron University, were males who have the same socio-cultural status. No females were present in both situations. Sociological factors, including gender and social status were not considered since the study focuses on revealing certain cultural and pragmatic tendencies within a certain society rather than studying and revealing differences due to different sociological factors

#### **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND & LITERATURE REVIEW:**

The concept of ritual refusals is defined by Chen et al. (1995:152), as “polite act(s) to indicate the speaker’s consideration of the hearer”. The relevant literature of ritual refusals in Arabic is not as rich as other cultures or nations. While present in cultures such as the Irish culture, and also in such speech communities as China (cf. Chen et al. 1995, 151), and the Arab World (cf. Barron

2000, 48), ritual or polite refusals do not represent part of polite behavior in the US society and some other Western countries. Instead, refusals in the USA are genuine refusals, also termed substantive (real) refusals (cf. Chen et al. 1995), - in other words - Searle’s sincerity condition for refusals, “S wants H not to do x,” is satisfied unlike the case with ritual refusals where it is not satisfied since the speaker, S, merely pretends to refuse the invitation/ offer in question in the interest of the norms of politeness. In reality, however, S, in a ritual refusal, expects a second invitation/offer, which s/he can then either accept or refuse, as s/he wishes. As a result, an inviter or an offerer, in the Palestinian culture, largely expects the first refusal to be ritual, and so proceeds to reoffer another invitation.

Only a limited number of studies focus on refusals in Arabic (e.g., Eshreteh, 2015; Morkus, 2014; Al-Kahtani, 2005; Al-Eryani, 2007), and these studies tend to analyze refusals from the perspective of semantic content. Although examples of refusal strategies are given, the contexts in which these strategies were used are not analyzed in detail. Moreover, such studies in Arabic considered refusals in general without any consideration or mention of ritual refusals and “face-work” involved.

For instance, Al-Shawali (1997) investigated the semantic formulas used by Saudi and American male undergraduate students performing refusals. The results revealed, as mentioned in Al-Kahtani (2005:36), that Saudis and Americans used similar semantic formulas in refusing request, invitation,

offer, and suggestion. The study also proved that there were no significant differences between them except in the employment of the direct no. Al- Issa (1998), in a study of Jordanian Arabic refusals, found by using a DCT that Jordanians were more likely to express regret (like "I'm sorry") than Americans, and that both groups in his study employed explanations and reasons more than any other strategies.

As far as sociopragmatic issues related to refusals is concerned, it can be noted that for example, in several Middle Eastern languages, it is required to refuse an invitation several times and for the inviter to insist further (Eslami, 2005; Eshreteh, 2015). A strong social convention in Eastern societies is that, out of modesty, any invitation/offer must be refused at least once and often more than once as a matter of course, resulting in the initiator's strong insistence. Such insistence is seen as a sign of consideration for the guests' needs. However, this may cause misunderstanding in communication with Americans who do not use ritual refusals in response to invitations and offers as much. The situation has potential for cross-cultural miscommunication because the same amount of persistence may be interpreted as imposition or forcefulness in American culture.

While substantive (real) refusal is a face-threatening act according to both Arabic and Western concepts of politeness, ritual refusal is closely tied to Arab cultural values and thus may be a rich source of cross-cultural miscommunication. Ritual refusal takes place in response to an initiating commissive-

directive act (Hancher, 1979), such as an offer or an invitation. These acts are commissives in that the speaker commits him/ herself to a future course of action which is beneficial to the hearer. At the same time, they are directives in that they influence a future course of action on the hearer's part. Their success hinges on the hearer's being able and willing to engage in the proposed action, and on the speaker's honoring the commitment he/she made.

To sum up, the present study is unique in its objectives. It is clear that none of the above reviewed studies considered the notion of face in their investigations of refusals in different dialects of Arabic, but the focus was on the semantic content of refusals; therefore, the significance of this study arises from the fact that it attempts to explore "face-work" and some pragmatic implications of ritual refusals rather the semantic contents of refusals in general as it is the case in the studies reviewed.

#### DATA ANALYSIS:

"No" in ritual refusals does not simply mean no. Indeed, so common place are ritual refusals in the Palestinian speech community that the linguistic expressions "šāwir ḥālak" شاوور حالك [just think of it well], "xalīna niksabak" خالينا نكسبك [it is an honor for us], has acquired the status of a pragmatic routine used to realize the second turn of an invitation, i.e. in Coulmas' (1981:3 as cited in Barron, 2000) terms, it has become a "highly conventionalized prepatterned expression(s) whose occurrence is tied to more or less standardized communi-

cation situations". Indeed, this routine has become so conventional that it has, to a large extent, lost its semantic meaning, as is often the case with pragmatic routines.

The large occurrence of ritual refusals in the Palestinian culture can be explained with reference to the different hierarchies of values characteristic of both Arab and Western cultures, and in particular with reference to the direct/indirect continuum noted earlier. In Palestine, it is more important to make your addressee feel wanted, and to be considerate of his/her wants and feelings than it is to be honest or direct, whereas the opposite is the case in the USA where honesty is a sign of friendship. This basic underlying cultural difference is reflected in initial refusals. In Palestine these are presumed to be ritual – to be motivated by politeness and a concern for one's addressee. Consequently, a ritual reinvitation follows in order to attempt to ascertain the true wishes of the hearer (H), politeness aside. Whether the addressee finally refuses or accepts, it is clear that the mere existence of this 'game' reflects the Palestinian tendency towards solidarity and connectedness.

In the USA, the second turn occurs relatively seldom, given the absence of ritual refusals. If a second invitation/offer should occur, there is, therefore, no pragmatic routine available to realize it. Instead, ad hoc realizations are used. This feature of American invitations/offers reinforces the view that a focus on autonomy rather than a concern for solidarity and connectedness is of primary importance in this culture. If an

American invites a person for a drink and if that person refuses out of politeness, the inviter will not invite a second time. In fact, in American English, direct - no means no and yes means yes. The US inviters do not understand an invitee when he/she says no and means yes.

Therefore, it is clear that when an American says no, he/she mean no, ... and if he/she say yes, he/she means yes ... whereas a Palestinian might not mean it. Palestinians know that if they say no, they know the inviter is going to ask them two or three more times and they will get a chance to say, "Oh, well, of course I will." Example (1) below can be used for more illustration.

يوسف: شو رايبك في كمان كاسة شاي؟ (invitation 1)

Yousef: How about another cup of tea?

Šu rāyak fi Kamān kāsīt šāy?

محمود: شربت كفاية (Refusal 1)

Mahmoud: I had had enough.

Širibit kifāyeh

يوسف: الشاي مليح بعد الغداء

Yousef: Tea is good after lunch. (Invitation 2)

Iššāy mliḥ baḡid ilḡada

محمود: بكفي كاسة واحدة (Refusal 2)

Mahmoud: One cup of tea is enough.

Bikfi kāsēh wāḥideh

يوسف: اي جرب كمان كاسة (Invitation 3)

Yousef: Just try another one.

Ay jarib Kamān kāsēh

محمود: زي ما بدك

Mahmoud: As you like. Zay ma bidak (Acceptance)

Taking into account to Leech's (2005:9) comments on invitations and politeness in Chinese, similarly, politeness makes Palestinians "behave in ways which our

visitor from Mars would think irrational”: e.g. a sequence of polite utterances such as the following may occur in certain cultures (traditionally, in Chinese, for example):

invitation → refusal → invitation → refusal → invitation → accept

It is worth mentioning, as can be noticed in example (1) above, that a sequence of such utterances usually occurs in Palestinian Arabic as well, but not in American English. According to Leech (2005:10), such sequences represent “battles for politeness”. These battles can be resolved by negotiating with the other person’s a politeness agreement. Thus traditionally, after a third invitation, say, an invitee will ‘reluctantly’ accept the invitation.

Data analysis also revealed that the ritual refusal is a polite refusal strategy to indicate the refuser’s consideration of the interlocutor. Sometimes ritual refusal helps Palestinians gauge the real intentions of the inviter/offerer to determine the sincerity of the invitation/offer. For a ritual invitation, to decline is the only appropriate response. If the assessment shows that the inviter/offerer is sincere and serious, ritual refusal is likely to lead to acceptance as in example (2) below:

A: bidna niḡmal ḡada baḡdein ilšāy wa ilqahweh

بدنا نعمل غدا بعدين الشاي والقهوة

[We’ll prepare lunch first, and then we will drink tea and coffee.]

B1: La la. . لا لا [No. No.]

B2: la akīd. ma rāḡ niTawil.

لا، أكيد. ماراح نطول

[No, for sure, we won’t stay longer]

A: ma rāḡ yaxuḡ ?kḡar min sāḡah.

ماراح ياخذ أكثر من ساعة

[(Preparing the meal) won’t take more than an hour.]

B1: ma bidna nijarbak wala nizḡjjak.

ما بدنا نجريك ولا نز عجك

[Your generosity is well known. We don’t want to bother you.]

A: Um Ali bitjahiz fiḡ. أم علي بتجهز فيه

[Um Ali (i.e. the speakers’ wife) is preparing it (the lunch).]

B2: ?iḡna xaTaTna nirūḡ makan āḡar.

اचना خططنا نروح مكان اخر

[We had planned to visit another place.]

A: niḡyada baḡdein rūḡu wein ma bidkum. نتغدا بعدين روجوا وين ما بدكم

[We’ll have lunch together, and then you can go wherever you like.]

In ritual refusal, the person being invited always gives reasons in consideration of costs to the inviter. However, in the above situation, the host’s generosity is ‘forced’ upon the invitees who end up staying for lunch. The host insists and starts challenging all the arguments the visitors put forward. The visitors seem to have no choice but to stay since rejecting the lunch invitation at this stage would convey a negative message – that the hospitality being offered is not appreciated – and could put at risk the good relationship between the host and the guests.

In example (2) above, the refuser starts the refusal focusing on the trouble and cost the inviter will have to bear. Other oriented strategies are used, which indicates that the refusal is a ritual one. Then the inviter reinforces the invitation as expected. This invitation/offer-refusal sequence is played out three times before acceptance of the invitation. The host not only gives face to

the visitor by showing he is a welcome guest, but also enhances his own face by offering hospitality. An invitation to dinner or a meal is considered a polite act, indicating positive feelings on the part of the inviter to the invitee.

Having started to eat, the guests, as in example (3) below, are urged to eat more and more by their host:

3. A: شو هالأكل هاظ! والله غير تاكل هاي من ايدي

šu hal ?kil haz! Wallāh yeir tākul hāy min īdi.

(What you have eaten is very little! I swear that you eat this from my hand!)

B: والله ما عاد اقدر! ان شاء الله دائمة! بالافراح! wallāh ma çad iqder! inšallah daymeh! bil?fraḥ! (I swear that I cannot eat any more! God makes you always do this on happy occasions!)

A: أهلا وسهلا! شرفتونا! šaraftūna!

(You are most welcome! You have honored us)

Since the social phenomenon of hospitality might not be highly valued in the American culture, as it is in Palestinian culture, a limited set of linguapragmatic utterances are involved in English linguistic exchanges that are somehow similar to the ones mentioned above such as Help yourself!, Have some more!, Please just another helping! in offers and invitations and Thank you!, That was delicious!, You're a wonderful cook! as expressions of gratitude for a meal.

Offers/invitations in the US are realized through a process of negotiation so as to avoid any threat to the face of both interlocutors as in example (4) below:

A: It's really horrible that we never see each other.

B: I know. We have to try to arrange something.

A: How about dinner? Why don't we go out to dinner together?

B: That's a good idea.

A: What days are good for you and Joe?

B: Weekends are best.

A: Oh, weekends are bad for us. Don't you ever go out to dinner during the week?

B: Well, we do. But we usually don't make plans till the last minute. Joe gets home late a lot and I never know what his schedule is going to be.

A: O.K. Well, look. Why don't you call me when you want to go out? Any week night is good.

B: O.K. I will.

A: Really. Don't forget.

B: O.K. I won't. I'll call you. (Wolfson et al. (1983:123)

In the above example, both interlocutors in this situation tried to reach a commitment, but at the end nothing was accomplished except a promise to go out together when both of them find the time to do so. Imposition or insistence which might be considered a face-threatening act in the US is completely avoided. Therefore, it is clear that when an American says no, he/she mean no, ... and if he/she say yes, he/she means yes ... whereas a Palestinian might not mean it. Palestinians know that if they say no, they know the inviter is going to ask them two or three more times and they will get a chance to say, "Oh, well, of course I will."

In Palestinian Arabic, imposition is preferable since it is a face-enhancing



act. Speakers are not supposed to accept an invitation or an offer right away but should normally refuse several times before accepting. Such refusals are termed as “ritual refusals” and almost traditional in refusing invitations and offers. The invitee could use ritual refusals to assess the sincerity of the inviter, namely how firm the invitation was and if the invitation was a ritual one or a matter of face. As the inviting-refusing sequence goes on several times, the invitee should be able to figure out whether the invitation is sincere. However, whether or not the ritual refusal is performed depends on the nature of the relationship between the inviter and the person being invited.

To sum up, in the perspective of Leech’s (1983) politeness principle, the speech act of inviting (as a directive and commissive) is directly associated to Tact Maxim. Accordingly, since American culture emphasizes more on individuals, the inviter offers an activity beneficial for the invitee to maximize the invitee’s benefit. When the invitee rejects the invitation, the inviter would minimize the cost of the invitee by avoiding impeding the individual freedom to invite. This conforms to the concept that negative politeness is more important than positive face (Leech, 1983). However, Palestinian culture seems to flout the rule. Although the inviter in the Palestinian society would follow Tact Maxim to maximize benefit to the invitee by offering an invitation, Palestinians tend to invite again and again, even when they are rejected. The reason is that rejection is seen as a ritualized formulation of invitation in Palestinian

Arabic, and the seeming rejection is interpreted as a way of expressing politeness, as “pragmatic paradox” (p.111) proposed by Leech. In this sense, as consistent with O’Driscoll’s (1996:10) contention, Americans seem to emphasize negative face over positive face to show desire for “disassociation/independence/individualism”. Palestinians tend to have desire for “association/belonging/merging” by prioritizing maintenance of positive face and sacrificing negative face as the two faces conflict (O’Driscoll, 1996).

#### CONCLUSION:

Substantive and ritual refusals are two types of refusals with different functions. As non-native speakers tend to transfer their native sociopragmatic knowledge to the use of their target language, both substantive and ritual refusals may seem confusing, and give rise to misunderstanding. Therefore, it is most important to distinguish these two types of refusals in interpersonal interactions in Palestinian culture. One is real refusal when the addressee says no directly or indirectly and means no. The other is ritual refusal when the addressee says no directly or indirectly, but in fact the addressee is willing to accept the initiating act.

The offer/ invitation in Palestinian society is often, if not always, a ritual one which is often inappropriate for the visitor to immediately accept. The host not only enhances the face to the visitor by showing that the visitor is a welcome guest, but also enhances the host’s own face by offering hospitality. In fact,

ritual refusal is so closely tied to Palestinian cultural values and discourse conventions that it can lead to cross-cultural miscommunication. If one takes into account Mao's (1992) analysis of the speech act of invitation in Chinese, Palestinian invitation should be taken as a speech act of multi-layers, ranging from multiple turns of refusal to an expected acceptance, which is quite different from Wolfson's (1983) one-layer speech behavior of invitation in English. The ritual refusal of invitation in the Palestinian society calls on the invitee to protect the inviter's negative face first, and then after refusal, the inviter offers the invitation again to attend the invitee's positive face, and, at the same time threat invitee's negative face. The turns may be possibly repeated one to three times to achieve the acceptance. Therefore, the invitee should not accept the invitation from the first time, but the inviter should repeat the invitation insistently.

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**APPENDIX (A) TRANSLITERATION KEY**

The following system of transliteration has been adopted in this study:

**1. CONSONANTS**

Phonetic Symbol	Arabic Sound
ʔ	ء
b	ب
t	ت
θ	ث
j	ج
ħ	ح
x	خ
d	د
ð	ذ
r	ر
z	ز
s	س
ʃ	ش
ʒ	ص
D	ض
T	ط
ʒ	ظ
ʕ	ع
ɣ	غ
f	ف
Q	ق
K	ك
L	ل
m	م
n	ن
h	هـ
w	و (Semi Vowel)
y	ي (Semi Vowel)

## 2. VOWELS

a	(Short Vowel)◌◌
ā	(Long Vowel)◌◌
u	(Short Vowel)◌◌
ū	(Long Vowel)◌◌
i	(Short Vowel)◌◌
i:	(Long Vowel)◌◌