



**FACTORS INFLUENCING THE SPEECH ACT OF REFUSALS OF OFFERS BY
NATIVE SPEAKERS OF AMERICAN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE PEOPLE**

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Abstract

Refusal speech acts are prevalent across all languages. Similar to other speech acts, declining of an offer is affected by linguistic and cultural factors. The formulations for expressing declination vary between languages and civilizations due to distinct linguistic features and cognitive patterns linked to each society. These result in misinterpretations and disputes in intercultural communication. The paper examines factors influencing the strategies by which Americans and Vietnamese decline offers. All data have been collected and categorized from over eighty Vietnamese and American literary works and films in two languages. By identifying the factors that affect the rejection of offers, the authors aim to furnish insights regarding the determinants influencing how individuals decline offers, thereby contributing to the enhancement of English language instruction in Vietnam and the teaching of Vietnamese to foreigners.



MỘT SỐ NHÂN TỐ TÁC ĐỘNG ĐẾN HÀNH VI TỪ CHỐI LỜI ĐỀ NGHỊ CỦA NGƯỜI MỸ VÀ NGƯỜI VIỆT

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Từ khóa

hành vi ngôn ngữ, yếu tố, đề nghị, hành vi từ chối lời đề nghị, giảng dạy ngôn ngữ

Tóm tắt

Trong các hành vi ngôn ngữ, hành vi từ chối là hành vi phổ quát của mọi ngôn ngữ. Cũng như tất cả các hành vi từ chối khác, từ chối lời đề nghị chịu sự chi phối của các nhân tố ngôn ngữ và xã hội. Tuy nhiên, phương tiện thực hiện hành vi từ chối và các phương tiện ngôn ngữ để biểu hiện từ chối trong mỗi ngôn ngữ, mỗi nền văn hóa lại khác nhau do đặc điểm ngôn ngữ và thói quen tư duy, ứng xử khác nhau của mỗi dân tộc. Điểm khác nhau này chính là nguyên nhân dẫn đến những hiểu lầm, những xung đột trong giao tiếp liên văn hoá. Trong khuôn khổ bài viết này, tác giả bước đầu tìm hiểu một số nhân tố tác động đến việc thực hiện từ chối lời đề nghị của người Mỹ và người Việt. Các số liệu được thu thập, sàng lọc từ 85 tác phẩm văn học Việt Nam; 35 phim Mỹ và một số phim Việt, Mỹ phát sóng trên Đài Truyền hình Việt Nam. Thông qua bài viết, tác giả hy vọng sẽ cung cấp một số thông tin liên quan đến các yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến việc lựa chọn từ chối lời đề nghị ở cả hai ngôn ngữ và phần nào góp phần nâng cao hiệu quả dạy và học tiếng Anh ở Việt Nam cũng như dạy tiếng Việt cho người nước ngoài.

1. Introduction

The art of refusing offers extends far beyond the fundamental questions of who, what, and how to refuse. It encompasses understanding how to diplomatically decline proposals across various cultural contexts and social situations. Given that refusals constitute a face-threatening act affecting both parties involved—the one refusing and

the one being refused—they demand particular sensitivity in communication.

When executing a refusal, one must carefully navigate social dynamics, taking into account various factors such as hierarchical relationships, age differences, and the potential presence of third parties. These considerations ultimately influence

both the decision to refuse and the manner in which the refusal is expressed.

A refusal manifests when someone declines an offer, whether through direct or indirect means. It represents one of the most nuanced speech acts, capable of either strengthening interpersonal bonds and intimacy or potentially leading to communicative mishaps. The authors of this article explore various factors that shape how people refuse offers, basing their analysis on a collection of documented refusal dialogues.

2. Offers and the speech act of refusal of offers

The concept of an “offer” is defined by Hornby (2003, p. 551) as expressing willingness to perform an action or provide something for another person. This definition is complemented by Hoang’s revised Vietnamese Dictionary (2006, p. 308), which characterizes an offer as “...to offer, usually to be private, and to be accepted...” The primary purpose of making an offer is to influence the speaker’s subsequent actions.

Human societies fundamentally operate on principles of cooperation and mutual support. This manifests in prosocial behavior, where individuals engage in actions beneficial to others, such as offering voluntary assistance.

Regarding refusals, Hornby (2003, p. 1052) provides a clear definition: “Refusing an offer means saying or showing that you do not want to do or accept the offer of someone.” This act represents one of the most significant face-threatening speech acts in communication. The complexity arises from the dynamic role exchange between speaker and hearer during face negotiation.

When someone makes an offer, they potentially threaten the hearer’s negative face by challenging their independence. Conversely, when an offer is refused, it threatens the offerer’s positive face by suggesting their proposition is unwanted. The person refusing faces a particular challenge: they must maintain politeness to protect their negative face while minimizing damage to their

interlocutor’s positive face. Consequently, as Brown and Levinson (1987, pp. 62-68) explain, speakers employ various negotiation strategies in conversation to maintain face for all parties involved.

3. Factors influencing the speech act of offer refusals among Americans and Vietnamese people

In his work, Nguyen Quang (2004, p.16) identifies three fundamental sociological variables that determine the degree of politeness employed between a speaker (Sp) and hearer (H) in communication. These critical factors comprise: 1) Relative Power (P): The power dynamics between the interacting parties. 2) Social Distance (D): The degree of familiarity or distance in the relationship. 3) Absolute Ranking (R): The gravity or weight of the face-threatening act in question. For effective communication, particularly in situations involving refusals, interlocutors must carefully evaluate these various contextual factors that shape and influence their interactive discourse. Through analysis of refusal dialogues, certain factors emerge with notable frequency as particularly significant in determining appropriate refusal strategies and their linguistic expression.

3.1. Relative Power- P

The concept of relative power attracts significant scholarly attention across various linguistic disciplines due to its pervasive influence on social communication. Different fields approach this phenomenon distinctively: conversation analysts examine asymmetrical power relationships in interactions, sociolinguists explore and evaluate power in relation to social variables, while pragmatics scholars investigate power’s role in shaping interpersonal dynamics.

As defined by Hornby (2003, p. 512), “*Power is the ability to control people or things or to do something*”.

The power differential between interlocutors fundamentally shapes their communicative choices, including:

- The selection between direct and indirect communication strategies
- The deployment of lexical-modal markers
- The utilization of paralinguistic and extralinguistic elements

Nguyen Quang (2002, p.18) notes that when faced with identical communicative situations, speaker 1 (Sp1) must employ different communicative strategies and techniques compared to speaker 2 (Sp2) of equal status.

Example 1: Conversation between Nathan and Ms. Clark at her office

Nathan: *You want a hand tomorrow? They don't want me at the hospital, so I could stop by for an hour in the morning. Help you put in the calls.*

Clark: ***That's kind of you. But no. I'll be fine. Probably simpler if I do it all.***

(Jojo, 2012, p. 262)

In this interaction, Ms. Clark employs a complex refusal strategy when declining Mr. Nathan's offer of assistance. She initially acknowledges his generosity with the appreciative phrase "That's kind of you," demonstrating politeness and recognition of his good intentions. However, she then proceeds to refuse the offer through two distinct statements: "But no. I'll be fine" and "Probably simpler if I do it all." This sequence illustrates a sophisticated refusal pattern that combines gratitude, direct declination, and a justification for her decision, while maintaining professional courtesy.

Example 2: Conversation between General Minh and Major Luan's wife at the police station

General Minh: I will leave a military police team here to keep you safe and assist you,.

(Tướng Minh: *Tôi sẽ để lại đây một toán quân cảnh bảo vệ và giúp bà.*)

Ms. Dung: Perhaps there is no need, sir Lieutenant General.

(Bà Dung: *Có lẽ không cần, thưa trung tướng.*)

(Nguyễn, 2015, p.1135)

In this communicative exchange, Ms. Dung demonstrates sophisticated face-saving strategies in her refusal. To mitigate the potential face threat and soften the definitiveness of her declination, she employs multiple linguistic devices: the deferential form of address "Sir," preceded by the hedging marker "Perhaps," combined with the indirect refusal phrase "there is no need." This careful orchestration of politeness markers, hedging devices, and indirect refusal strategies reflects her attention to maintaining harmonious interpersonal relations while achieving her communicative goal of declining the offer.

Example 3: Conversation between Lara - a senior staff member of the US Congress and Paul - a politician at the embassy

Lara: *Let me get you a cocktail*

Paul: ***No, thanks. Remember? I don't drink.***

(Sidney, 1995b, p.372)

Example 4: Conversation between Khuynh and Luan at the office

Lieutenant Colonel Khuynh: Yes, let me go with the major..

(Trung tá Khuynh: *Dạ, để tôi cùng đi với thiếu tá...*)

Luan: Don't bother Lieutenant Colonel.

(Luân nhã nhặn: *Khỏi phiền trung tá.*)

(Nguyễn, 2015, p.392)

In this hierarchical interaction, despite Major Luan occupying a superior social position to Lieutenant Colonel Khuynh, his refusal strategy appears notably direct. His response, "Don't bother Lieutenant Colonel," is characterized by its unmitigated directness, conspicuously lacking any modal markers or softening devices. This direct communicative style, while perhaps warranted by his higher rank, nonetheless creates a potential face-threatening situation. The absence

of linguistic mitigation strategies in his refusal could potentially compromise the interpersonal dynamics, even within their established power relationship.

3.2. Social distance (D)

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Example 5: Conversation between Justine and Herr Hartheim - her brother friend's gangster at the bar

Herr Hartheim: ... *Justine, Let me order for you!*'

Justine: *No, dammit, I won't! I'm perfectly capable of thinking for myself, and I don't need some bloody man always to tell me what I want and when I want it, do you hear?*

(Colleen, 1977, p.645)

In this interaction, Justine employs the expletive "dammit" as an intensifier in her refusal, signaling both the emphatic nature of her declination and her emotional investment in the response. This use of strong language indicates an unequivocal and categorical refusal, seemingly targeted directly at her interlocutor, while simultaneously suggesting a departure from conventional politeness norms in interpersonal communication.

Example 6: The conversation between Riri Hue and Du, the one-eyed person at Du's house

Hue: I'll go with you. I "fight" beside you. I know how to kill people, Mr. Hai.

(Huệ: *Em đi với. Em "chiến đấu" bên anh. Em biết giết người mà, anh Hai.*)

Du: Shut up. No following at all. Don't bother me.

(Du chột: *Câm mồm. Không đi đứng gì hết. Bẩn chân.*)

(Duyên, 1967, p.28)

One manifestation of refusal can take the form of direct face-threatening language directed at the interlocutor. In example 6, the linguistic choices demonstrate a marked deviation from politeness conventions, incorporating crude, aggressive, and impolite expressions. The context reveals that both interactants are characterized as thugs, which frames Du Chot's hostile response to Hue's offer of assistance in combat. His utterance, "Shut up. No following at all. Don't bother me," exemplifies a triple-layered refusal strategy combining: an aggressive silencing command, an absolute prohibition and a dismissive rejection. This concatenation of hostile expressions constitutes an unequivocal refusal that deliberately disregards face-saving conventions, reflecting both the speakers' social roles and their antagonistic relationship dynamic.

Example 7: Dialogue between Mallory and Kat - her lover in the living room

Mallory: *Now just I'll make some tea for you.*

Kat: *Sorry, I can't. I must off...*

(Sidney, 1995a, p.34)

Kat employed gentle and considerate language to decline her partner's proposition. Through her delicate choice of words - expressing inability ("I can't"), offering an apology ("Sorry"), and citing a need to depart ("I must off") - she attempted to soften the impact of her refusal. While these phrases served as consolatory elements, they ultimately conveyed her unequivocal rejection of her boyfriend's advances.

Example 8: Lam phones his lover

Lam: Can I come pick you up to have lunch with me?

(Lâm: *Trưa nay anh đến đón em đi ăn nhé.*)

Phuong: No, I can't go. It would be better if you came back to the company to have a meal with me.

(Phuong: Em không đi được đâu. Tốt nhất là anh về công ty ăn cơm tập thể với em.)

(Nguyễn, 2005, p.9)

In the instance, Phuong explicitly declined Lam's offer to pick her up for lunch by saying "No, I can't go".

Example 9: Conversation between Dung and the driver when they got out of the car

Dung: Let me carry it for you so that you won't feel tired.

(Dũng: Ông để tôi cầm hộ cho đỡ mệt.)

Driver: You are still be in pain. You absolutely cannot carry it.

(Người tài xế: Ông còn đau cầm sao được.)

(Nhất, 1977, p.62)

The driver employed a tactful approach to decline Dung's offer to assist with the luggage removal. By emphasizing Dung's ongoing physical discomfort and asserting that such exertion would be inadvisable ("You are still be in pain. You absolutely cannot carry it"), the driver conveyed his refusal diplomatically. This subtle rejection served dual purposes: it acknowledged

the driver's professional responsibility while demonstrating consideration for Dung's well-being. The indirect nature of the refusal aligns with the cultural tendency to decline assistance without causing offense, particularly when the offered help could potentially compromise someone's health condition.

Example 10: Conversation between Mr. Phil and his daughter Jenny in the living room about not getting the university notice

Mr. Phil: *Would you like me to telephone them?*

Jenny: ... *I want to get a letter like other people, sir. Please.*

(Erich, 1970, p.13)

3.3. Absolute Ranking (R)

In communication dynamics, three key factors influence the choice of refusal strategies: Absolute Ranking (R), relative power (P), and social distance (D). While R focuses on the message content itself, P and D primarily benefit the communicator. When analyzing the impact of these factors, we must consider not only the interpersonal relationships between speakers but also how the communication content affects the overall interaction, particularly regarding the weight of the refusal act.

In practical communication scenarios, all speech acts potentially risk damaging the other party's face (social self-image). The Absolute Ranking system serves as a framework for measuring this face-threatening potential. Specifically, refusing offers inherently carries risk as it imposes a burden on the relationship dynamic.

The degree of imposition varies according to the context and nature of the declined action. When Speaker (Sp) refuses an action (A) proposed by the hearer (H), the impact differs based on the potential consequences. A refusal carries greater weight when declining the action would disadvantage the hearer, compared to situations where the refusal might actually serve the hearer's interests. Consequently, speakers must calibrate their refusal strategies based on this cost-benefit

analysis of action A, considering its imposition level on the interpersonal relationship.

Example 11: Dialogue between a hotel staff and a guest at the reception desk

Hotel staff: *Let me help you with that bag.*

A guest: *Oh, no, please don't bother.*

(Fredrick, 1997, p.199)

For fear of causing trouble, the guest declined the offer to show her concern for the hotel staff's sake.

Example 12: Conversation between Hagen and the boss at the hospital

Hagen: *Do you want me to call Freddie home for a few days?*

Boss: **What for?** *My wife can still cook our meals. Let him stay out there.*

(Mario, 1983, p.250)

In the given scenario (example 12), the boss employs a nuanced approach to reject Hagen's proposition. By utilizing the rhetorical question "what for" followed by the statement "My wife can still cook our meals," he constructs a sophisticated refusal. The reference to his wife's continued ability to prepare meals serves as a rhetorical device, conveying a deeper message: Freddie's proposed return would be superfluous and ineffective in addressing the boss's actual concerns. This indirect refusal strategy effectively communicates both the rejection and its underlying rationale through contextual implications rather than explicit statement.

Example 13: Conversation between Jennifer and a client over the phone

Jennifer: *Will I help you?*

A client: *There's nothing you can.*

(Sidney, 1999, p.164)

The client employs a strategic refusal by challenging the fundamental capacity of the initiator through the statement "There's nothing you can-". This truncated response implies a deep-

seated skepticism regarding Jenifer's competence to execute the task at hand. The interaction suggests an interesting role reversal: while Jenifer initiated the offer of assistance, the client's response indicates that the perceived misstep lies with Jenifer's presumption of capability rather than any error on the client's part. This refusal strategy effectively questions the very premise of the offer, suggesting that the proposer's judgment, not the receiver's needs, constitutes the problematic element in this exchange.

Example 14: Conversation between Quy and teacher Chi while they are riding horses on the road

Quý: Can I follow and assist you, Mr. Quy?

(Quý: *Thầy có thể cho tôi theo phụ giúp thầy được không?*)

Chi: I refuse. It's very difficult. How can you afford it?

(Chi: *Thầy từ chối. Vất vả lắm. Em kham làm sao được.*)

(Lê, 2011, p.74)

The dialogue demonstrates a clear hierarchical relationship between Quy and Teacher Chi, evidenced by their choice of pronouns in Vietnamese ("thầy/you- tôi/me, thầy – em"), which explicitly marks their relative social positions. Despite his superior status, Teacher Chi manages his refusal diplomatically. While he employs a direct rejection statement "I refuse," he immediately mitigates its impact by expressing concern about the financial burden ("It's very difficult. How can you afford it?"). This balanced approach serves dual purposes: maintaining the hierarchical relationship while demonstrating consideration for Quy's dignity and social face. The combination of directness and thoughtful justification helps preserve harmony in their interaction despite the status differential.

Example 15: Conversation between Luan and Ngoc at the interrogation

Luan: In this worst moment, I don't want to argue with you. I just ask you: What can I do to help you?

(Luân: Trong giờ phút bi đát này, tôi không muốn tranh luận với anh. Tôi chỉ hỏi anh: Tôi có thể làm gì giúp anh?)

Ngoc: You have no right! ... And me, I also have no right to ask you, either!

(Ngọc: Anh không có quyền! ... Và tôi, tôi không có quyền nhờ anh!)

(Nguyễn, 2015, p.194)

3.4. Gender

Gender emerges as a crucial determinant in the execution of refusal speech acts, as established through various scholarly perspectives. Holmes (1995, pp. 1-2) delineates three fundamental rationales explaining the linguistic divergence between genders:

The first explanation centers on biological determinism. Scholars including McGlone (1980, pp. 215-227) and Levinson (1987, pp. 89-90) posit that inherent biological gender characteristics influence cognitive processes and temperamental dispositions, thereby creating distinct gender-based linguistic patterns. Chodorow (1978, pp. 167-168) and Gilligan (1982, pp. 24-25) observe that women typically demonstrate a stronger inclination toward relationship building and addressing interpersonal interdependence, while men tend to prioritize independence within relationship hierarchies. These behavioral tendencies manifest in distinct linguistic choices.

The second framework, advocated by researchers such as Maltz and Borker (1982, pp. 196-216) and Tannen (1990, pp. 42-43), emphasizes socialization's role. They argue that varying social experiences between men and women across cultures lead to distinct linguistic behaviors and interpretational frameworks.

The third perspective focuses on societal power dynamics. West and Zimmerman (1987, pp. 125-151) contend that those in subordinate

positions typically display greater linguistic politeness. Brown and Levinson (1978, pp. 56-311) highlight how subordinate groups, often including women, emphasize camaraderie and benefits in their communication styles. This power differential explains the varying frequencies of politeness strategies between genders in linguistic expression.

Example 16: Conversation between Jenifer and Ken Bailey in the office

Jenifer: *Is there anything I can do to help?*

Ken Bailey: *No. If God can't help me, love, there's nothing you can do.*

(Sidney, 1999, p.252)

Example 17: Conversation between two close friends in the office

Mr. Hoa: If you find it difficult to say, let me talk to your wife about Lam.

(Ông Hòa: *Nếu khó nói, anh để tôi nói chuyện với chị nhà về cháu Lâm nhé.*)

Mr. Cam: No. There's no reason to rush. It would be preferable for you to speak with Lam in private and get his opinion.

(Ông Cẩm: *Thôi. Chưa cần vội. Tốt nhất là anh nên nói chuyện riêng với thằng Lâm xem nó nghĩ gì.*)

(Nguyễn, 2005, p.81)

Mr. Cam flatly rejects Mr. Hoa's idea with the words "*It's best for you to talk privately with Lam to see what he thinks*" with the pause "*There's no need to rush.*"

Example 18: Dialogue between artist Robert Chiltern and the Duchess of Cheveley at a party

Robert Chiltern: *But you have not seen my Corots yet. They are in the music-room. Corots seem to go with music, don't they? May I show them to you?*

Ms. Cheveley: *I am not in a mood to-night for silver twilights, or rose-pink dawns. I want to talk business.*

(Oscar, 2000, p.17)

Mrs. Cheveley employs a sophisticated refusal strategy when declining the artist's proposition.

Through her poetic rejection, “I am not in a mood to-night for silver twilights, or rose-pink dawns,” she artfully masks her disinterest in the Corot artworks while maintaining social grace. Her true motivation lies in pursuing business matters rather than engaging in artistic appreciation. This elegantly crafted indirect refusal serves a dual purpose: it mitigates potential damage to the artist’s face (social self-image) while preserving the delicate balance of their professional relationship. The metaphorical language she chooses demonstrates how refined linguistic choices can soften the impact of rejection in social interactions.

Example 19: Dialogue between Pha and the midwife when he saw the guest out of the house

Pha: Let me take you home.

(Pha: Để tôi đưa bà về.)

the midwife: Thank you, the moonlight is as bright as the day.

(Bà trùm: Cảm ơn bác, sáng trăng như ban ngày đây mà.)

(Nguyễn, 2014, p.12)

The midwife employs a highly contextual refusal strategy by responding to Pha’s offer with the seemingly unrelated statement, “the moonlight is as bright as the day”. This metaphorical response appears disconnected from the immediate conversation when viewed in isolation. However, its significance emerges only within the specific communicative context shared between the interlocutors. The apparent non-sequitur nature of the response highlights how indirect refusals can rely heavily on shared understanding and contextual knowledge between speakers, making them potentially opaque to outsiders lacking the necessary contextual framework for interpretation.

4. Conclusion

Analysis of cinematic and literary sources in both languages demonstrates that refusing offers constitutes a socially delicate and potentially face-threatening speech act that speakers generally prefer to avoid. The execution of such refusals is significantly shaped by multiple sociolinguistic variables, including power dynamics, social proximity, absolute ranking, and gender-based considerations. This research aims to illuminate the various factors influencing refusal strategies across both linguistic contexts. Through this enhanced understanding, the authors seek to make a meaningful contribution to two pedagogical domains: the instruction of English to Vietnamese learners and the teaching of Vietnamese to international students. The insights provided should facilitate more effective cross-cultural communication and language instruction methodologies in both educational contexts. The findings have practical implications for language pedagogy, potentially improving learners’ pragmatic competence in navigating these complex social interactions across both linguistic and cultural boundaries.

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