

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the findings are summarized and discussed. This includes both culture general and culture-specific features of refusals, their relation to the concept of face and the two social variables ‘power’ and ‘politeness’. Finally the chapter concludes the thesis and provides suggestions for further research.

5.2 Summary of the Findings

The findings of the study are summarized based on the two research questions which come as follows.

5.2.1 Strategies frequently used by Iranian Farsi speakers (Research Question Number One)

The findings suggest that the number of indirect strategies was far greater than direct ones in Persian refusals. Also, in the majority of cases direct strategies were expressed along with indirect ones to form a refusal. The strategy ‘reason/excuse or explanation’ was the most frequent strategy used in refusing invitations, suggestions and requests, but not offers. ‘Gratitude’ was the commonest strategy in refusals to offers and second most frequent in refusing other acts. Strategy ‘No’ combined with some indirect strategies was the third common.

The strategy 'define relationship' which was previously found only in Arabic language (Al-Issa 1998) was very common in refusing offers and suggestions which were initiated by a person of higher status. Strategy 'returning the invitation' is a strategy that was found only in the present research and the strategy 'returning the invitation' was a newly-found strategy to refuse invitations.

5.2.2 The Effects of Power and Social Distance on Refusal Strategy Choice

Participants varied the type of strategy used in refusals according to the 'power' of their addressee over them and the 'social distance' between their addressees and themselves. In refusing a person of more power, the participants used more elaborate strategies including a repetitive use of 'define relationship'. Regarding 'social distance', the results showed that the very distant participants (complete strangers) used the least number of strategies. Also very close participants like close friends used a few number of strategies to refuse each other. For example, they might provide only one reason or even refuse directly.

5.3 Refusal Strategies in Persian

Findings of the present study support the findings of previous research at least in that, refusals operate by universal rules in terms of preference of indirect over direct strategies in communications between the people who have ongoing relationship (see Kasper & Rose, 2002; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, for the universality of speech acts). A large number of studies on refusals in different languages have reported that people prefer to refuse more indirectly than directly (Beebe, et al., 1990; Kwon, 2003; Felix

Brasdefer, 2004, 2006; Wannaruk, 2008; Izadi and Zuraidah, 2010; Shokouhi and Khalili, 2008; Al-Issa, 1998; Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 1991).

Och (1996: 425) maintains that “there are certain commonalities across the world’s language communities and communities of practice” in people’s social ends in communication. She cautions that this principle does not mean that all pragmatic principles are shared across all cultures. Rather, this principle, as she says, makes “a common ground of socialization experiences” that interlocutors can employ as their common ground to realize “local ways of indexing and constituting social situations”. This is what she has termed the Local Culture Principle which is formed through situationally specific values.

Direct refusals like ‘no’, ‘I can’t’ or ‘I won’t’ were observed very occasionally. This is in accordance to findings of many previous scholars (Beebe, et al., 1990; Kwon, 2003; Felix-Brasdefer, 2004, 2006; Shokouhi and Khalili, 2008; Wannaruk, 2008; Izadi and Zuraidah, 2010). The majority of informants avoided a direct refusal a (mere *no*) and tended to provide reasons, explanations or excuses as a way to imply their lack of ability or unwillingness.

In Iranian culture, direct refusals even to a person of lower status may be taken as impolite and lacks courtesy. Direct refusals also are very risky to the ‘face’ of both speaker and hearer (Brown and Levinson, 1978/87). That is why they are not welcome by the interactants in any society.

Concerning the type of strategies, expectedly, ‘reason/ excuse or explanation’ was the most common strategy in Persian refusals (Eslami, 2010). Since it was the most frequent strategy present in all the studies mentioned in the review section, this strategy type can be considered as a universal feature of refusals. Moreover, in initiating act

distinction analysis, this strategy again gained the first place among other types of strategies except for in refusals to offers.

The strategy, 'Gratitude', was strikingly frequent especially in offers. Koutlaki (2002) shows that offers and expression of thanks are very common in Iranian society, because they not only are not "face threatening" (as in Brown and Levinson, 1978/87) but also "face saving". The expression of thanks is a conventional response to offers in Iranian interactions, especially in offering food and drinks in home parties (Koutlaki, 2002). These often repetitive offering and refusing is known as 'taarof' in Persian.

The meaning of 'taarof' is very broad and it is beyond the scope of the present study to deal with all aspects of it. What is relevant is that these kinds of refusals to offers and invitations which are perceived as '*taarof*' are also part of 'taarof', and are considered an important element of Iranian ritual politeness system (Sharifian, 2007; Sahragard, 2003; Koutlaki, 2002, 2009). To refuse these acts of 'taarof', most of the times it is enough to say a word of thanks. That is why the expression of 'gratitude' is very common. Considering the fact that in many cases of offer-refusal and invitation-refusal interactions, the strategy 'gratitude' is repeated many times to bring the interaction into a final resolution.

Many non-Iranians who have communication with Iranians find this aspect of 'taarof' confusing. Iranians repetitively refuse an offer to show their politeness by conforming to the ritual norms of '*taarof*'. At the same time, the other party must insist on his/her offer to persuade the interlocutor to accept the offer. This insistence is just another side of Iranian ritual politeness system. The complexity of '*taarof*' makes its understanding problematic even for Iranian themselves. '*Taarof*' includes both real and ostensible offers/invitations/refusals. It is not always clear whether an offer or an invitation is

genuine or insincere (Sharifian, 2007). So it is up to the hearers to estimate the intention of the speaker and use an appropriate refusal strategy.

Refusing offers and invitations which function as *'taarof'* is often not face threatening because the offerer or the inviter usually makes the offer or invitation to be refused not to be accepted. Therefore, refusals to these acts are preferred as they comply with the speakers' intentions.

One important point regarding refusals in Persian is that in case they are not ostensible, they can easily damage long term interpersonal relationships. Therefore, Iranian Persian speakers are fully aware of the negative effects of a refusal. Many a time, a refusal, regardless of how indirect it is, causes breakdown in an ongoing communication.

Iranian people are generally collectivist in nature (Eslamirasekh, 2004; Koutlaki, 2002) and depend a lot on the social circles they belong to. Hence, requests and suggestions are very common among them. Amouzadeh and Tavangar (2004) state that in intercultural settings, Iranians are often labeled as 'demanding' due to a large number of requests they make. Invitations and offers are taken as a sign of hospitality which is highly valued (Koutlaki, 2009; Sahragard, 2003).

However, refusing is not a social expectation. In Izadi and Zuraidah's (2010) study, the participants verbally reported that in many cases, they prefer not to refuse at all even if they do not intend to comply with the given initiating act. Therefore, very frequently when an Iranian gets in a situation that he/she has to do the difficult job of a refusal, 'mitigating strategies' are usually employed.

A strong motivation for using a number of strategies to soften a refusal, as has frequently been discussed in the literature, is 'face' considerations (Goffman, 1967; Brown and Levinson, 1978/87). Respondents of the present study attempted to soften their refusals with softening strategies like the statement of regret, providing

explanations, gratitude, etc. As Beebe et al. (1990:106) indicate such softeners are expected in face-threatening acts to save the face of the requester or inviter.

It could be argued that in Iranian society because people depend more on each other as members of social circles, refusals may even be more face threatening than in cultures where people are more individualistic and independent (Eslamirasekh, 2004).

“Returning the invitation” was a frequent strategy found in refusing invitations in the present study, while previous research did not report this. It seems that this strategy is common among Iranians and is a culture-specific strategy. The reason for the frequency of ‘returning invitation’ as a strategy to refuse an invitation as well as using a higher number of strategies in refusing invitations is a great value Iranian society gives to hospitality. When someone shows his/her hospitality by inviting you home for a dinner, you are also expected to show your hospitality as a respect to his/her decision to invite you.

It is very important to note in many interactions, refusals were not the final acts of the interactions. In many cases, refusals changed into acceptance at the end of the interactions as a result of the insistence of the act initiators. For example in offering food and drinks in Iranian home parties, it is not socially acceptable to accept the offer the very first time. Guests usually refuse first and wait for the host to insist on his/her offering. After some repetitive offerings, guests usually accept the offer (Koutlaki, 2002, 2009; Sahragard, 2003; Sharifian, 2007).

5.4 The influence of selected initiation acts on refusals

The results of the present study indicate a slight variation in the choice of refusal strategies based on the selected initiated acts. The frequency of strategy 'reason/excuse/explanation' was considerably lower in refusals to offer than refusals to other three acts. Instead, in this category, the strategy of 'gratitude' was the most frequent. The main justification for this finding could be that most offers in the present study belonged to insincere offers, which are known as '*taarof*'. They are ostensible, not genuine offers. To refuse these offers, one does not have to provide reason, since they are not real offers. Refusing these offers is usually made through 'gratitude' to conform to the social ritual norms of Iranian society.

Returning the act (offer, invitation, etc) was found to be a strategy specific to invitations and offers. Offers and invitations are two socially favorable acts in Iran. Therefore, it is part of the convention to redirect them to the speaker to appreciate them being kind enough to do such favors. These acts are also attached to the cultural schema of hospitality which is highly valued among Iranians. These acts, regardless of sincerity or insincerity, are part of ritual politeness (*taarof*) which has its roots from ancient Persia. Therefore, it is considered polite to return the invitation and offer to the speaker to appreciate his politeness and hospitality.

5.5 Power and Social Distance in Persian Refusals

The second research question concerning the 'power' and 'distance' influence on the strategy types showed that in Persian, participants used more indirect strategies when making refusals to someone of higher power. The 'low-familiar' relationship type involved situations where the power of the addressee was high, and the social distance between the refuser and his/her addressee was neither as great as strangers nor as close

as intimate friends. The only example for this relationship type in the present research data is student-teacher interactions.

Unsurprisingly, the participants found these refusals challenging and employed a host of mitigating strategies in realizing them (see example 4, chapter 4). The justification for this outcome may be the greater consciousness of the hierarchical nature of teacher-student relationship in Iran, where people tend to either defer the individual with higher status and more power (Nelson et al., 2002:183) or fear the probable negative consequences of their refusals (Izadi and Zuraidah, 2010), or a mixed sense of both.

Social distance was also found to be an influencing factor in determining the strategies used by participants. In this study, three relationship types differentiated only in terms of the degree of distance between the interlocutors. The results suggest that Iranians use more indirect strategies in refusing someone with whom they have ongoing relationship, but to whom they are not very close. They used more indirect strategies in equal-familiar than equal-distance and equal-close. In equal close relationship, there is no risk of threatening the face of the interlocutor. Also, a refusal is less likely to be taken as offensive because people have long-term cordial relationship with each other, and are very close like members of a family or two intimate friends. In refusals to distant people, mainly strangers, however, people do not mind threatening the face of the addressee (Felix-Brasdefer, 2006). So, refusals are not mitigated in many cases.

In Iran, refusals can be used as a means to cut the ongoing relationship with those we do not want to be friends with any longer. Exchanging invitations is a very common practice among many Iranian families, relatives and friends. For example these invitations are made for a meal which is served at home. Refusing such an invitation may lead to a second invitation in some other day in future. Refusing the second invitation, however, is very likely to be taken as a sign of lacking interest in continuing

the relationship. The refuser may offend the refusee and this may cause a friction in the relationship.

The conclusion is that culturally, Iranians are very refusal-sensitive. For many of them, refusals do more than face threatening. Many a time, a refusal works as a motive to break up the ongoing relationship.

The last point about the findings of the present study is that it is perfectly possible to expect a bald on record refusal when participants are distant, but this possibility is certainly not to be generalized. Even in distant relationships, there are many people who do not make such refusals. There are people who are considerate of others' face; even if they are complete strangers. There are people who are considerate of at least their own face and avoid direct refusals, and there are still people who simply cannot say 'no' due to their personality types.

5.6 Conclusion

The study aimed at investigating the types and frequency of different refusal strategies which were used to express a speech act of refusal in Persian language by Iranians. The results showed conformity to the previous research on refusals in other languages (English, Arabic, Thai, Spanish, Japanese, and Chinese) in that people generally tend to prefer indirect refusals to direct ones. Also, strategy 'reason/ excuse or explanation' is reported to be the culture-general feature of refusals. However, there are some cultural differences in the production of refusal in Persian. For example, the strategies of 'returning the invitation' and 'defining relationship' are quite common in Persian refusals, while refusal studies in other languages have not reported so. The study also revealed that in a hierarchical society like Iran, the social variables 'power' and 'social distance' play a great role in the linguistic realization of refusals. The participants'

understanding of power and distance relationship in a hierarchical society made them very cautious in refusing a person of higher status.

In sum, refusals in Persian like many other languages are taken as face threatening. This is a good reason why people tend to soften their production of refusals by indirectly realizing them. One specific type of refusal in Persian is not face threatening and that is because they are responses to ostensible, not real offers and invitations.

In a collectivist culture like Iran, refusals are not welcomed, while requests, invitations, offers and suggestions are more frequently used. People expect help from each other as they value social and group membership. People value invitations as they are part of hospitality which is highly valued. But they do not like to be refused. They feel hurt by refusals easily and may even cut the relationship.

These features of Iranian society make people more cautious while making refusals. Refusals are even more challenging when people receive request, suggestion or invitation from a more powerful addressee. Many a time, we receive a request which is very big and we can not conform to it. But we can simply say no because the requester has a higher status than us and refusing her/him may bring negative results for us.

The present research used naturally occurring interactions as its data (see appendix D for the transcripts). This helped the researcher to look at the refusal speech acts in the segments of discourse beyond the utterance level. Also natural data helped the researcher to find more strategies that have not been found by previous research. It is also suggested that future research use natural data to explore more features of refusals in different types of interactions.

5.6.1 Implications of the Study

The implications of the study are in interpersonal communication and intercultural communication. The findings of this study can help foster the interpersonal/intercultural communication by introducing the indirect strategies which are needed to refuse. More importantly, a special kind of refusal which functions as ‘taarof’ has potential for intercultural miscommunication (Sharifian, 2007; Sahragard, 2003; Koutlaki, 2002). These refusals are not usually taken as serious and insistence on offers or invitations is required on the part of act initiators.

Also, the findings provide a baseline for future cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics research in Persian and other languages.

5.6.2 Suggestion for Further Research

The present study relied on refusals which occurred naturally in a university as its data. To be able to generalize the findings, however, more research which covers a wider range of social and geographical contexts is needed. Also, the study did not look at the roles that variables like gender, age, level of education may play on refusals. There are definitely good areas for future research.

Another important aspect of refusal production which could be subject to future research is other pragmatic (pragmatic markers, address terms) and paralinguistic features (tone of voice) of refusals (which is beyond the scope of the present study). The role that these features play are very important, but have not been addressed yet.