

## **Refusal Strategies among Sundanese students: An Analysis of Gender and Power Relation**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to investigate the contribution of power relation to the realization of refusal strategies done by Sundanese male and female students. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach. The data used in the present study were gathered from a Discourse Completion test (DCT) that was distributed to 4 male and 4 female respondents. The data were analyzed by using Takahashi and Beebe's (1990) classifications of refusal. The findings show that there is no substantial difference in terms of the strategies employed by both genders. It is also found that power relation influences the realization of refusal. This finding suggests that when the respondents refuse someone who is more powerful, they tend to prioritize the emotional feeling of the requester. Meanwhile, when the respondents refuse someone who is more powerless, they tend to prioritize things by using their logic.

**Keywords:** *Refusal, genders, Sundanese, power relation*

## INTRODUCTION

Speech act plays an important role in the success of communication because it is an essential element in daily interactions. Basically, refusal is one of the speech acts that is mostly used by people in any language. According to Aziz (2000), refusal is a directive response of directive speech acts such as offer, invitation, request, argument, suggestion, and command (as cited in Septiany, 2013). For several reasons, understanding the studies of refusal is important since the act of refusal always occurs in everyday communication. Moreover, refusal strategies have to be employed properly to minimize errors in communication.

There have been studies conducted to investigate the acts of refusal in certain languages. Al-Mahrooqi and Al-Aghbari (2016) investigated the refusal strategies among Omani EFL students. The findings indicate that students' responses are mostly inappropriate since they are heavily influenced by the students' culture. Abarghoui (2012) analyzed a comparison of refusal strategies used by Iranians and Australians. He found

that Iranian speakers tend to use limited strategies for refusing their interlocutors since the analysis is regarded by the length and content of responses. Meanwhile, Guo (2016) explored a comparison of refusal strategies used by Chinese and American. With regard to studies refusal in Indonesia, Aziz (2000) observed that in Indonesia, it appears that the study of refusal is based on the trend of Indonesians who do not speak openly, preferring to express their feeling, thoughts and ideas indirectly (as cited in Muniroh, 2013). This conclusion is also confirmed by others studies in Indonesian context, such as Septiany (2013); Chojimah, (2015); Nurweni, Sudirman & Mahpul, (2016).

Although there have been studies investigated the issue of refusal in Indonesian context, the issues about realization of refusal strategies which involve ethnic groups in Indonesia have not received much attention.

Sundanese is one of the biggest ethnic groups in Indonesia, and they have their own way to realize refusal in accordance with their culture. According to Sudaryat (2007)

Sundanese language has each speech level in communication which are related to power, social status and solidarity which is called as *undak-usuk basa*.

There are basically few studies so far conducted to investigate a refusal in Sundanese context (Aziz, 2000; Mulyani, 2013; Sukmawan, Wahya and Darmayanti, 2014). However, there has been no research carried out that studies refusal in power relation and gender context.

It is for all these reasons that the author decided to examine the contribution of power relation to the refusal strategies which are realized by Sundanese people regarding to speakers' gender. This study is expected to be advantageous for people who are interested in studying the way Indonesian people which come from different ethnic groups communicate especially in realizing the speech of refusals.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Speech act of refusal and refusal strategies**

The act of refusal is one of the frequently researched speech acts.

Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest that refusal is a face-threatening and rapport-threatening speech act (as cited in Soepriyatna & Waluyuni, 2017). Aziz (2000) defines refusal as the hearer's inability to fulfil requests which are uttered by the requester due to some reasons (as cited in Muniroh, 2013), while Gass and Houck (1993) claim that refusals are complicated speech act since it needs long progression of negotiation and face-saving change to provide the disobedient nature of the acts (cited in Hedayatnejad & Rahbar, 2014). The speech act of refusal occurs under some circumstances. According to Ellis (2008), the speech act of refusals occurs in the form of responses to illocutionary acts such as, invitation, offers, request and suggestions (as cited in Asmali, 2013).

There are two kinds of speech acts of refusals, which are direct and indirect. As Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest that the speakers can use strategies such as directness, indirectness, and polite states in order to avoid quarrels. Meanwhile, Searle (1975) states that speakers use a direct speech act to convey literal meanings

(as cited in Hedayatnejad, Maleki & Mahrezi, 2016). In terms of indirect refusal, the speaker has to select the appropriate form(s) to decrease the negative influence of a direct refusal (Hedayatnejad & Rahbar, 2014). The classification of refusal has been introduced by some researchers. One of the classifications of refusal strategies was examined by Rubin (1983) and his study states that there are nine ways of refusing.

However, the most commonly known semantic formulas in refusal strategies are based on Takahashi and Beebe et al's (1990) classification: direct and indirect refusal. The direct refusals are divided into two: performative verbs such as 'I can't', and non-performatives like 'no'. The indirect refusals consist of various types:

- a. Statement of regret
- b. Wish
- c. Excuse
- d. Statement of alternative
- e. Set condition for future or past acceptance
- f. Promise of future acceptance
- g. Statement of principle
- h. Statement of philosophy

- i. Attempt to dissuade interlocutor
- j. Acceptance that functions as a refusal
- k. Avoidance
- l. Adjuncts to refusals

Takahashi and Beebe et al (1990) classification strategies include the semantic formula that can be used in refusal to different speech acts; for example, invitations, requests, offers and suggestions. However, it should be noted that not all of these strategies may necessarily be used to respond to each of the eliciting speech acts.

### **Power relation in refusal**

Power is a social variable that is related to the positions and status of certain people. According to Gray (2009), power is a complex social variable which is determined by different social and individual factors. Meanwhile, Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that power determines speaker and hearer's plans and self-evaluation. It means that some people can accept or reject a specific action proposed to him or her based on the power.

In the present study, there are three types of power employed. First is interaction between the powerless refuser and powerful refusee (L to H). Second is between powerful refuser and powerless refusee (H to L). Last is between the refuser and refusee who possess equal power. The study of power relation and refusal has been conducted by some researchers with similar findings that power relation give influence the realization of refusal such as done by Farashaiyan & Muthusamy (2017), Farrokhi & Agami (2017) and Moaveni (2014).

### **Gender's role in refusal**

According to Holmes and Lakoff (1995), gender and speech acts are interwoven to each other (as cited in Hedayatnejad & Rahbar 2014). Similarly, Abarghoui (2012) claims that gender and speech behavior are interrelated variables. In line with the previous argument, Brend (1975) states that women tend to use certain patterns associated with surprise and politeness more often than men (as cited in Miri, Rohani and Ravand, 2015). Furthermore, from a sociolinguistic viewpoint, Smith

(1998) and Fraser (1990) believe that refusal extremely depends upon some factors such as gender, power, level of education, and social distance. Additionally, since directness and indirectness are part of the act of refusal, Nguyen (1998) states that sex or gender may affect the choice of directness and indirectness in communication (as cited in Abarghoui, 2012).

A number of linguists have undertaken research in the study of refusal in relation to gender in different setting. Hetnayajad, Maleki and Mehrizi (2012), who studied the effect of social status and gender on realization of refusal among Iranians, found that the frequency of applied strategies in refusal is not statistically different between the female and male participants in each levels of social status. In contrast, in Malaysia, Miri, Rohani and Ravan (2015) revealed that there are gender differences between male and female regarding the use of some refusal strategies. In another study, Liao and Bresnehan (1996) who investigated refusal between Chinese and American students concluded that women used

more strategies than men to refuse someone of a higher status.

With regard to refusal in Sundanese, Mulyani (2013) explored two types of realizations of making refusal in Sundanese context. The finding shows that the realization of making refusals in Sundanese is grouped into two: expressed in indirectness by employing saving face, and expressed in indirectness by employing both saving and losing face. Additionally, Sukmawan, Wahya and Darmayanti (2014) deal with refusal in spoken language of daily conversation of Sundanese society in Sukabumi. The result shows that the Sundanese community in their research did not indirectly refuse on certain requests. It implies that refusal realization reflects Sundanese society as a society who is always concerned with politeness in speech activity especially in refusal.

There have been studies investigating the issue of refusal in Sundanese context; however, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, there have been no studies related to the role of gender in Sundanese context with the specific conclusion

about gender so far. Therefore, the present study is conducted to address this gap by revealing the contribution of power relation to the realization of refusal which is realized by Sundanese male and female students.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### **Research Design**

The method used in the present study is qualitative descriptive. It involved 8 Sundanese students (4 males and 4 females), ranging in age from 19 to 23 years old. In the following section, these participants will be represented in the form of acronym F which refers to females, and M which refers to males. They are students of Indonesia University of Education, West Java, Indonesia. Regarding the participant's linguistics background, they speak Sundanese as their mother tongue. Involvement of these participants is voluntary basis.

### **Data Collection**

Research data were collected by using a written Discourse Completion Test (DCT) adopted from Moaveni's (2014) study of refusal translated into Bahasa Indonesia. The DCT was in the form of situations requiring the

participants to give response to the act of refusal in question. The DCT consisted of 6 situations, and they were classified into different power relation: low-to-high, high-to-low, and equal.

The data were collected through DCT that was completed by Sundanese students in Indonesia University of Education, Indonesia. The reliability and validity of the DCT had already been established in Moaveni's (2014) study. However, the DCT was checked in the field for face validity by experts.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed and coded based on the taxonomy of refusals developed by Takahashi and Beebe et al (1990). The semantics formula was also analyzed in the present study. To find comprehensive analysis and findings, the analysis was divided into several steps.

The first step was coding the answer of the respondent into sixteen classifications of refusals as proposed by Takahashi and Beebe et al (1990). Afterwards, the next step was

calculating the most-used type of refusal. After calculating the strategies used by the respondents, the last step was analyzing and describing the participants' answers.

### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

As proposed by Takahashi and Beebe (1990), there are three classifications of refusal strategies, namely direct refusal, indirect refusal, and adjuncts to refusals. They further classified these strategies into several strategies. From the data observed, the strategies applied are not significantly different in both genders. They applied strategies in the same way. The more powerful the refusee faced by the refuser is, the more both genders tend to use statement of regret first in expressing the refusal. Meanwhile, the more powerless the refusee is, the more males and females tend to use *Excuse, reason, explanation* strategy.

#### **Power Relation and the Realization Refusal Strategies**

In this study, there are three classifications of power relations which are engaged in the DCT. The

first is between the powerless refuser and powerful refusee (Low to High). The second is between the powerful refuser and the powerless refusee (High to Low). Last, it is between the refuser and the refusee who are equal in terms of power.

The first category of power relation is between powerless refuser and powerful refusee. As can be seen in the table, there are no considerable differences between Sundanese male and female students in refusing powerful refusee. This finding is similar to Hetnayajad, Maleki and Mahrezi (2012) that found the

frequency of applied strategies in refusal is not statistically different between the female and male participants in each levels of social status and power. In the present study, both genders tend to use *statement of regret* first to refuse powerful refusees in expressing the refusal. The illustration of how the powerless refusers refused requests from the powerful requester is shown in the form of table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1  
 Refusal Strategies between L – H Relation

Strategies	Respondents			Total	
	Male	Female	Over- all Freq.	Percentage (%)	
				Male	Female
Non-performative	6	5	11	12.50	10.20
Statement of regret	7	8	15	14.58	16.32
Excuse, reason, explanation	6	6	12	12.50	12.50
Statement of alternative	3	2	5	6.25	4.16
Promise of future acceptance	2	1	3	4.16	2.03
Pause filler	1	1	2	2.03	2.03
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>100</b>	



The table above is between the L – H relation. The frequency of strategies applied is not considerably different in both genders. There are six (out of 8) strategies found. As the table demonstrated, *Statement of regret* strategy is the most common strategy used by male and female students. Following *Statement of regret* strategy, there is *Excuse, reason, explanation* strategy. Therefore, in the L – H relation, males and females tend to use *Statement of regret* as the first strategy, then *excuse, reason, explanation* is employed in the last strategy. The illustration is taken from situation 4 and 5 in which the refuser has to refuse a request from lecturer. The answer is as follows.

M3 : *Hapunten bu (regret) , kangge pelajaran tambahan senen enjing teh jigana abdi teu tiasa ngabantosan (non performative) kumargi nuju teu raraos(reason). Kin abdi komunikasi deui ka adi tingkatna,mungkin reschedule bu (statement of alternative).*

‘I’m sorry Ma’am, regarding the additional lesson tomorrow, likely I couldn’t help you because I am

feeling sick. I’ll talk about it later with my junior. I think it will be rescheduled for another time

F3: *Punten pak (regret), simkuring teu tiasa ngaluuhan uleman ti bapak (non performative) margi simkuring ngaraos anyar keneh (reason), ngkin pasti dongkap upami tos waktosna(promise of future acceptance)*

‘I’m sorry sir, I can’t attend your invitation because I am still freshman here, I’ll come in another time’

The employment of semantics formula of the refusal strategies in this L – H relation shows several ideas. When M3 and F3 refuse a request from powerful person, they will show regret to the refuse first. It indicates that males and females will prioritise emotional feeling of the refusee first. It means that the refuser will be more comfortable in conveying refusal since they refuse a powerful person. Hatam (2014) States that hearing a refusal results in disappointment at the beginning, so the speaker should do his/her best to decrease the disappointment by using

phrases like 'I'm (so) sorry. Furthermore, males and females want to show their respect towards the refusee who is more powerful than them. This idea is illustrated from the employment of *Statement of regret* strategy.

This strategy is also softened by using an address term. Since the person who was refused is a lecturer, the usage of 'Bu or Pak' is usual for Sundanese participants. Afterwards, it is found that males and females avoid direct strategies like (no). According to Sattar, Che lah and Sulaeman (2011), saying 'no' to someone's face means as an insult to the other person. Instead, the respondents here used 'negative ability' by using *I can't*. Similarly, Felix-Brasdafer (2002) point out that the low use of the directness (flat no) to refuse the higher power interlocutor can save hearer's positive face.

Then, the use of those six strategies also indicates that males and females do not want to make the refusees disappointed because they are unable to fulfil their requests. This idea is

viewed from the usage of *Excuse, reason, explanation* and *Statement of alternative* strategy.

Additionally, it is also found that the refusers do not want to break or harm the trust of refusee by providing *statement of alternative and promise of future acceptance* strategy. With regards to speech level in Sundanese, both genders used refined language which is called *Bahasa lemes* in Sundanese. According to Sudaryat (2007), *Bahasa lemes* is usually used when people talk to a powerful person.

The next power relation discussed is between a powerful refuser and a powerless refusee (H – L). As can be seen from the table, males and females tend to use *excuse, reason, and explanation* strategy. However, different with females, males tend to use less an apology or *statement of regret* strategy.

The illustration of how the powerful refuser refuses requests from the powerless refusee is provided in the form of Table 4.2 below.

Table 4.2  
Refusal Strategies Between H – L Relation

Strategies	Respondents			Total	
	Male	Female	Over- all Freq.	Percentage (%)	
				Male	Female
Non-performative	5	5	10	10.20	10.20
Statement of regret	2	5	7	4.08	10.20
Excuse, reason, explanation	8	8	16	16.32	16.32
Statement of alternative	1	2	3	2.40	4.08
Promise of future acceptance	6	2	8	12.24	4.08
Pause	1	3	4	2.40	6.12
Avoidance	1		3	2.40	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>100</b>	

In this H – L relation, it is found that the respondents employed seven strategies of refusal. *Excuse, reason, explanation* strategy is the most used strategy employed by both genders. However, the differences found when males and females employed the second and the third strategy. The second most used refusal strategy by females is *Non-Performative* while *promise of future acceptance* becomes the second most used refusal strategy by males. Afterwards, the third strategy employed by females is statement of regret while males employed *Non-Performative* strategy. Below is the illustration of the

respondents of H – L relation. The situation involves a junior who asked a senior to check his paper.

*F4 : Nuju seueuer tugas eung, kudu bikin chapot jeung presentasi oge, 3 matkul deuih barengan (reason). Maafin pisan (regret) gak bisa ngabantuan(non-performative).*

‘I have many assignments, I have to make chapter report and prepare for presentation, three tasks at once. I’m sorry I can’t help you’

*M2 : keur ngerjakeun tugas euy (reason), teu bisa jigana (non-performative), ke we lamun*

*sempet* (promise of future acceptance)

‘I’m doing an assignment right now, it seems like I can’t, I’ll do it if I have time’

The example shows that when F4 and M2 refused a request from a powerless requester, they provided reason or explanation first instead of expressing her regret to the refusee. In other words, males and females tend to prioritize things by using their logic first and put the emotional feeling of the refusee afterwards. M2 also provided *reason or explanation* strategy first but employed *promise of future acceptance* strategy in the last statement. It indicates that males prioritizes logical things first and try not to break or harm the trust by using *promise of future acceptance strategy*. Different with females, males do not seem to be too concerned with emotional feeling of the requesters because they use less *statement of regret* strategy. Furthermore, both genders also employed non performative strategy by using ‘I can’t’ to make their stand clearly. According to Saad, Bidin and Shabdin (2016), the word *I can’t* as

direct strategy indicate their stand clearly.

Additionally, in this H-L relation, when females employed *excuse, reason, and explanation* strategy, they employed the complex reason rather than males. Females tend to put more than one reasons to convince the refusee that they can’t fulfil their request because they have something urgent to do.

With regards to speech level in Sundanese, both genders used middle language or in Sundanese it is called *Bahasa loma*. According to Sudaryat (2007), *Bahasa loma* is usually used when people talk to someone who is powerless or someone who has equal power.

The last category in this study is the equal power relation. In other words, the refuser and the refusee are the same in terms of power. It involves the interactions between the respondents and their classmates. According to the table, the most used strategy employed by males and females is *non performative* strategy. Table 4.3 below reveals the number of occurrences of all refusal strategies found in the study.

Table 4.4  
Refusal Strategies between Equal Power Relation

Strategies	Respondents		Over- all Freq.	Total	
	Male	Female		Percentage (%)	
				Male	Female
Non-performative	9	8	17	17.30	15.38
Statement of regret	5	5	10	9.61	9.61
Excuse, reason, explanation	8	5	13	15.38	9.61
Statement of alternative	2	1	3	3.84	1.92
Promise of future acceptance	3	1	4	5.76	1.92
Acceptance functioning as refusal	0	1	1	0	1.92
Pause filler	3	2	5	4.28	2.28
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>100</b>	

As the table demonstrates, males employed more strategies rather than females. Non-Performative strategy is the most widely used strategy in this equal power relation between both genders. Following non-performative, there are *Excuse, reason and explanation* and *Statement of regret* strategies. Below is the example. The situation involves someone who asked his friend to watch football competition with him.

M3: *Hampura daks (regret) sigana gak akan datang euy (non performative), saya mau pergi. Biasa urusaneun (reason)*

‘ I’m sorry, it seems like I can’t come, I have to go. I have another business’

F3: *hampura ih (regret) aku gak bisa dateng (non-performative), tugas aku banyak jeung numpuk sedangkan deadline nya besok (reason)*

‘I’m sorry, I can’t come. There are so many assignments and tomorrow is the deadline.

Several things can be noted from the data above. When equal refuser refused a request from equal requester, M3 and F3 tend to provide *statement of regret* first, and use the

*direct non performative* by saying ‘I can’t’; after that, they provide reason or explanation strategy in the last statement. This finding is in line with Sattar, Che lah, and Sulaiman’s (2011) finding that claims people who are of equal power tend to refuse the request with following semantic formula; *Regret, negative ability, and explanation or reason* strategy. This semantic formula is similar to L-H relation. Males and females are concerned with the emotional feeling of the requester first, and put logical thing to convince the requester. However, some differences are found in the speech level of communication in Sundanese. In L-H relation, the respondents use refined language (Bahasa lemes), while in this equal relation, males and females used middle language (Bahasa loma). It can be seen when males and females employ the apology strategy. They used the word ‘hampura’, instead of ‘punten’, which is less polite in sundanese.

From all strategy that both genders employed related to 3 power relations, male and female students are considered to be polite in refusing

since they use indirect strategies and contain apologizing and expressing regret. Hatam (2014) states that the use of indirect strategies, such as apologizing, shows the politeness degree of the refusal. Additionally, these refusals in the present study also contain *post-refusals* like *promise for future acceptance* strategy which decrease the threat of refusal (Levinson, 1997 cited in Hatam, 2014).

In addition, based on the illustrations above, this study indicates that the *Non-performative* strategy is never used at all by the participants as the only strategy to refuse request. In other words, the use of that strategy is always combined with indirect refusal strategies.

From all explanation above, it can be concluded that males and females employ the strategy in the same way. The more powerful the requester faced by the refuser is, the more males and females tend to use statement of regret first in expressing the refusal. Meanwhile, the more powerless the requester is, the more males and females tend to use *Excuse, reason, explanation* strategy as their first

strategy in delivering refusals. However, when male refuses powerless requester, they do not seem to be too concerned with the emotional feeling of the refusee since they employed less *statement of regret* strategy.

## CONCLUSION

This study aims to examine the contribution of power relation to the realization of the refusal strategies by sundanese male and female students. The data were collected through the distribution of a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) to 4 male and 4 female students. The present study applied classifications of refusal proposed by Takahashi and Beebe (1990) to analyze the responses of the participants.

The finding shows that there are no considerable differences between Sundanese males and females in the realization of refusal in three level of power relation. It is revealed that more power of the requesters tends to lead both genders to use the *statement of regret* strategy in refusal. It indicates that males and females prioritize the emotional feeling of the

refusee. In this context, an expression of regret is the mitigator of the dissapointed effect of a refusal. Additionally, it is also found that less power of the requesters tends to lead both genders to use the *excuse, reason, explanation* strategy. It indicates that males and females tend to prioritize things by using their logic.

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