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Refusals in the Malay Culture: Gender Differences in Focus

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Abstract

Expressing 'no' is by no means a simple act. In a multicultural and gendered society such as Malaysia, the speech act of refusal is realised in a multitude of ways across ethnic groups as well as gender types. This paper investigated the refusal strategies of Malay male and female students in a Malaysian public university. The research participants consisted of 15 Malay male and 15 female undergraduates who were asked to complete a Discourse Completion Test (DCT). The DCT contains nine authentic real-world contexts; designed to elicit genuine and spontaneous responses from the respondents. The data was then analysed in accordance to Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz (1990) semantic formula taxonomy. The findings revealed that indirect refusal is the predominant strategy employed by both male and female participants; with the choice of refusal being negative willingness ability. However, the male participants utilised direct refusal strategies more frequently than their female counterpart. Despite the small sample size, specified participants' age range and singular setting, this preliminary study sets fresh impetus on investigating the cultural dynamics underscoring Malay community refusal pattern. Empirical exploration of this nature could be expanded to other gender-oriented multicultural communities as it is pivotal in mitigating and dissuading miscommunication stemming from the rich diversity.

Keywords: *Speech Act, Refusals Strategies, Linguistic Politeness, Semantic Formula, DCT*

Introduction

Language is an intentional behaviour and should be regarded as a form of action. Under this purview, language is viewed as speech acts or performative utterances; necessitating one to understand the speaker's intention in order to fully gauge the language used. When the speaker's intention is not appropriately acknowledged, a breakdown in communication would occur. Stemming from the aforesaid premise, expressing 'no' is by no means a simple linguistic expression; it is an act laden with layers of cultural underpinnings. According to Searle (1969), refusal refers to the act of refusing or the state of being refused. It is a highly sensitive and potentially offensive speech act needing extensive pragma-linguistic skills and strategies. It also requires one to have knowledge on the target