

# Frequency Employments of Direct Refusal Strategies of Offers by the Native Speakers of American English and the Vietnamese

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## ABSTRACT

According to Searle (1969), the production of speech acts, such as making requests, asking questions, making promises, or refusing to have an existence in all languages. Like other speech acts, refusals of requests, offers, invitations, suggestions, etc., are widely used to express the recipients' declination in conversations. Up to now, there have been many researchers conducting the speech acts of refusals in the world as well as in Vietnam. It is interesting and causes a lot of confusion for the people who have different cultures. The refusal is contrary to the interlocutor's desires. Therefore, refusing not to make other people feel hurt and how to be on good terms with other people is essential and vital. This study focuses on discovering some frequency employments of direct refusal strategies of offers used by the native speakers of American English and the Vietnamese. 85 Vietnamese literary works, 35 American ones, and some Vietnamese and American films broadcast on Vietnam Television Station were collected and sorted out. The writer hopes that similarities and differences in frequency employments of direct refusal strategies of offers in both languages drawn from the research will partly contribute to improving the qualities of teaching-learning English for the Vietnamese and Vietnamese to foreigners.

**Keywords:** *speech acts of refusals, offers, refusals of offers, direct refusal strategy, frequency employments.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Refusals are speech acts occurring in our daily lives. They are the ones that go against the recipients' requests and aspirations. Therefore, making a declination that does not hurt the recipient and still ensuring to have a good relationship with each other is very important. In communication, it is necessary to select appropriate expressions. However, even when using your native language, choosing an appropriate refusal strategy that is clever and effective is not simple, let alone refusing in a foreign language that contains many different cultural factors. Refusing occurs when the speaker directly or indirectly declines an offer. It is not only one of the most sensitive and open-minded speech acts that strengthen relationships or intimacy but also lead to misunderstandings in communication. This study focuses on discovering some preferred direct refusal strategies of offers used by the native speakers of American English and the Vietnamese selected from 85 Vietnamese literary works, 35 American ones, and some Vietnamese and American films broadcast on Vietnam Television Station. The writer hopes that the research findings will partly contribute to improving teaching

and learning English for the Vietnamese and Vietnamese to foreigners.

## 2. THE SPEECH ACT OF REFUSAL AND POLITENESS

Politeness is a need in society, especially in a civilized society. It affects the communication process and communication efficiency. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), we are motivated to apply politeness strategies by an individual's face needs. Face means the individual's self-esteem. All individuals wish to maintain both a positive face and a negative face. In this context, a positive face refers to one's desire to be liked and accepted by a certain group to which one wishes to belong, whereas a negative face means one's desire to be autonomous and have freedom of action. Like refusals, acts that may threaten the speaker's face need, the addressee, or both are, thus, defined as face-threatening acts. In fact, some politeness strategies are used to wear off face threats and save participants' faces. Therefore, the listener has to adjust expressions of refusing in communities with different cultures. Each ethnic group, a cultural community, has different refusal strategies. In

many situations, the direct refusal strategies are effective solutions for speakers to achieve their communication goals chosen in both languages.

**3. OFFERS AND THE SPEECH ACT OF REFUSAL OF OFFERS**

**3.1. Offers**

According to Hornby (2003, p. 551), "Offer means an act of saying that you are willing to do something for somebody or give something to somebody". According to the Vietnamese Dictionary edited by Hoang (2006, p. 308), an offer is "... to request, usually to be private, and to be accepted...". Thus, the offer's purpose is towards the speaker's future action. In general, people tend to cooperate and help each other in any society. An individual does things for the benefit of others to show a friendly and cooperative attitude, such as offering to do something for someone.

**3.2. The speech act of refusal of offers**

Hornby (2003, p. 1052) stated, "Refusing an offer means saying or showing that you do not want to do or accept the offer of someone". Thus, in daily communication, the speech act of refusal of offers is considered as one of the face-threatening acts. They are very complicated because it is a negotiation of face actualized by taking turns between the speaker and the hearer. While offers pose a threat to the interlocutor's negative face by impeding their independence, refusals pose a threat to the interlocutor's positive face by implying that their wants are not desirable. In this case, the person who declines an offer meets a specific challenge. To be polite, he needs to save his negative face and minimize the threat his refusal poses to his interlocutor's positive face. As a result, speakers must use various strategies to negotiate the interaction with their hearer to "save face". (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 62-68).

**4. SOME FREQUENCY EMPLOYMENTS OF DIRECT REFUSAL STRATEGIES OF OFFERS BY THE NATIVE SPEAKERS OF AMERICAN ENGLISH AND THE VIETNAMESE**

Out of a total of 1,200 dialogs by the native speakers of American English, we sorted out 664 direct refusals, and of a total of 850 dialogs by the Vietnamese, we also selected 392 direct ones. In both languages, we all find seven direct refusal strategies of offers. In this article, we only focus on some frequency employments of direct refusal strategies of offers in both languages (*see in Table 1*)

**Table 1:** The frequency of using direct refusal strategies of offers by the native speakers of American English and the Vietnamese

No.	Direct refusal strategies of offers	American English (664 direct refusals /1200 dialogs)		the Vietnamese (329 direct refusals /850 dialogs)	
		Number	Percentage (%)	Number	Percentage (%)
1	Statement of frank speaking	161	13.4	30	3.5
2	Statement of offensive speaking	54	4.5	28	3.3
3	Statement of using polite words	171	14.3	80	9.4
4	Set condition for future or past acceptance	54	4.5	30	3.5
5	Statement of paying attention to the interlocutor's benefit	32	2.7	28	3.3
6	Statement of reason	160	13.3	142	16.7
7	Statement of personal principle	32	2.7	54	6.4
	Total (1- 7)	664	55.4	392	46.12

**4.1. Some frequency employments of direct refusal strategies of offers by the native speakers of American English**

**4.1.1. Statement of using polite words**

The strategy uses a number of cautious, apologetic, and regrettable words accompanied by semantic formulas expressing the speech act of rejecting offers in order to appreciate the interlocutor's face and somewhat minimize the face-threatening act to the proponent. Some expressions occur in this strategy such as I'm sorry; I'm afraid I can't; That's very kind of you...

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

*Nathan: "You want a hand tomorrow? They wanted 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'm fine. Probably simpler if I do it all." (Jojo, 2012, p.262)*

Clark turned down Mr. Nathan's help by expressing an appreciation, "That's kind of you." and gave a reason, "But no. I'll be fine".

The American respondents especially like the expression "(I'm) sorry" when refusing offers.

Example 2: Conversation between Ms. Mallory and Kat, her lover, in the living room

*Mallory: "Now I'm just making some tea for you."*

*Kat: "Sorry, I can't. I must off ..." (Sidney, 1995, p.34)*

With a close relationship, Kat expressed direct rejection of her lover's offer, "I can't", along with regret "Sorry," and the reason "I must off" is also a consolation to her lover.

#### 4.1.2. Statement of frank speaking

This strategy expresses a frank refusal, and to some extent, it threatens the interlocutor's face. The language contains neutrally expressive words with no modality meanings. Statement of frank speaking is often used when an equal or higher status person refuses an offer. Here are some formulas for expressing this strategy.

##### a. Semantic formulas of performative verbs

There are some performative verbs in English, including refuse, decline, deny, resist...

**(N1/PRO1) + V (pv) + N2/PRO2 + ...**

**Notes: N1 / PRO1: 1st person noun / pronoun ( present or absent); N2 / PRO2: 2nd noun / pronoun of person, V (pv): performative verbs of refusal...**

Example 3: Conversation between Mr. Morris- the owner of a shop and McMurdo- a member of the freelance group, at a club meeting

*Morris: "I offer you a clerkship in my store."*

*McMurdo: "... I refuse it ..." (Arthur, 1986 , p. 271)*

The example above shows that McMurdo's statement contains the verb refuse to describe McMurdo's frank refusal to Mr. Morris's offer, regardless of the social status between them.

b. Semantic formulas containing negative words: NO; NOT; NEVER and adding prefix or suffix

This word NO often appears at the beginning of the utterance as an indicator of refusal's speech act.

Example 4: The conversation between Mr. Phil and his daughter, Jenny, in the living room about not getting the university letter.

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

*Jenny: "No! ... I want to get a letter like other people, sir. Please." (Erich, 1970, p.13)*

Jenny turned down his father's offer attached to an explanation "I want to get a letter like other people".

Example 5: Conversation between a security guard, Mick and Mr. Will Traynor in the garage

*Mick: "You want me to call a taxi for you?"*

*Will Traynor: "No." (Jojo, 2012, p. 10)*

The above example shows that NO can form a complete utterance without any linguistic elements. Will Traynor seemed to express a definitive refusal to Mick's offer.

NOT is used to describe the negative ability or negative willingness in the statement of denial. NOT can be used in the abbreviation form, preceded by NO to express a definitive rejection or not combined with any modal verbs to form a complete structure to express the refusal.

Example 6: Conversation between Clark and her mother

*Clark's Mom: "Are you sure I can you get you something, love? ..."*

*Clark: "No. Not hungry, thanks." (Jojo, 2012, 103)*

NOT is preceded by modal auxiliary verbs such as can't, shan't, couldn't, won't, mustn't ... and can form a full semantic formula: S + modal verb + NOT + V or an incomplete semantic formula: S + modal verb + NOT.

Example 7: Conversation between Detective Holmes and Lord Cantlemere at his home

*Holmes: "How do you do, Lord Cantlemere? It is chilly for the time of the year but rather warm indoors. May I take your overcoat."*

*Cantlemere: "No, I thank you; I will not take it off." (Arthur, 1986, p.887)*

NOT (N'T) is preceded by auxiliary verbs do / does or to be and can form a full semantic formula: S + do / does / + NOT + V or S + BE + NOT + ...

Example 8: Conversation between Jean and Merci at a party

*Jean: "Merci. I would like to give you a cadeau-a gift, for Christmas."*

*Merci: "No. That isn't necessary. I -" (Sidney, 1999, p. 87)*

In the example above, the status between Jean and Merci is equal. Merci gave a direct declination, "No. That isn't necessary. I -" with the offer Jean made. It seems that Jean dislikes Jean and does not want to give him any chance to have a further progress in the relationship between them. Therefore, Merci's way of refusing more or less threatens the interlocutor's face.

Example 9: Conversation between Lara - a senior official of 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, 1995, p.372)*

This strategy is quite popular with native speakers of American English. In the semantic formulas, they often use negative words combined with a brief explanation or a polite word such as: No, thanks; I'll get it; .... It can be classified into a statement of using polite words but tends to be more concise and definitive.

c. Semantic formulas containing negative words by adding prefix or suffix in the stem words

New negative words are formed by adding prefixes or suffixes such as: UN-, IM-, DIS, IN-, -LESS ... to the stem morphemes. In terms of morphology, it is called bound morphemes.

Example 10: Conversation between Detective Homes and a client

*Client: "Sir, I could take you around now if you have free time."*

*Homes: "Unfortunately, I have not. If I should be able to look in tomorrow, I presume that there would be no objection to my glancing over them." (Arthur, 1986, p.915)*

In the above situation, Detective Homes frankly rejected the client's offer "Unfortunately", but also gave another suggestion "If I should be able to look in tomorrow, I presume that there would be no objection. to my glancing over them." to minimize the face-threatening act to the proponent.

#### 4.1.3. Statement of reason

In many situations, the interlocutor may give many reasons for not being able to accept the offer. In everyday life, while many difficulties may arise in personal life, there are many reasons the interlocutor can use to refuse it. Some prominent expressions are as follows: I'm busy; I have no time; I feel not well... This direct refusal strategy is tactful to avoid hurting the proponent and the relationship between them.

Example 11: Conversation between two friends at the dormitory.

*Friend 1: "Would you like me to open the window?"*

*Friend 2: "No, not necessary. I am going out now." (collected by the writer in the American movie GET LOST broadcast on VTV3, Vietnamese National Television Station)*

Example 12: Conversation between Lara and her husband at home

*Lara: "Do you want me to make an appointment with your barber."*

*Phillip: "No. I'm sorry, Lara. I'm just not ready to go out on the street yet." (Sidney, 1995b, p.438)*

The husband gave the reason, "I'm just not ready to go out." (I don't want to go out on the street yet.) to refuse his wife's offer.

Example 13: Conversation between Kat and her lover at home

*Kat: "Poor baby. Can I fix something for you?"*

*Mallory: "No, I'm fine. All I really need is a good night's sleep." (Sidney, 1995a, p.204)*

Mallory directly rejected her lover's offer by saying "no", accompanied by an explanation, "I'm fine. All I really need is a good night's sleep. ". It is also a good way to reassure Kat. If the negative word "no" is removed in the utterance of Mallory, the response will become an indirect refusal.

In semantic formulas containing extensive parts, it often has the statement of excuse/reason/explanation. This is also very understandable because when the respondent wants to choose a satisfactory expression to satisfy and respect the interlocutor.

Example 14: Conversation between two friends, Jacob and Jake while they are parking on the street

*Jake: "Do you want me to drive you home."*

*Jacob: "No. I don't feel sick yet. Just... wrong. If I have to, I'll pull over." (Stephenie, 2006, p.108)*

In the example above, Jacob used "No" accompanied with an extensive part by stating the reason "I don't feel sick yet." Just... wrong "and state his own ability," "If I have to, I'll pull over ". In general, a semantic formula containing extensive parts is widely used by the respondent. It not only harmonizes the relationship with the interlocutor but also reduces the face-threatening act.

## 4.2. Some frequency employments of direct refusal strategies of offers by the Vietnamese

### 4.2.1. Statement of reason

This strategy is considered a face-threatening act. In fact, it is a fairly common strategy, so sometimes it is not very useful. In Vietnamese, using subjective or objective reasons to refuse is quite popular. It accounts for 16.7% of the 850 data collected.

Example 15: Conversation between Lam and his mother, Mrs. Dung, in the living room

Mrs. Dung: Can I prepare breakfast for you?

Bà Dung: “*Mẹ chuẩn bị bữa sáng Cho con nhé.*”

Lam: No, I have an appointment to have breakfast with Phuong at the Daewoo Hotel.

Lâm: “*Không, con hẹn ăn sáng với Phuong ở Khách sạn Daewoo rồi.*” (Nguyễn, 2005, p.46)

Lam refused his mother's offer by directly saying "No" the reason "I have an appointment to have breakfast with Phuong, his lover at Daewoo Hotel".

Example 16: Conversation between Dung and Loan when he comes to her house

Dung: Shall I take you to visit Lang pagoda tomorrow afternoon?

Dũng: “*Chiều may and đưa em lên chùa Láng chơi nhé.*”

Loan: No. I can't go. Tomorrow, I'm very busy with the housework. I can't go there with you.

Loan đáp: “*Không. Đi thế nào được. Mai em bận lắm, công việc ở nhà còn bẻ bộn ra đấy, ai lại đi chơi.*” (Khái, 1934, p.37)

To refuse Dung's offer to visit Lang pagoda, Loan said "No", accompanied by an explanation, "Tomorrow, I'm very busy with the housework. I can't go there with you", to avoid hurting the proponent and the relationship between them.

Example 17: Conversation between Tien and a guest at a restaurant

Tien: Can I get you more? please eat it when it is hot. This is the brood nest of Nha Trang steamed with saccharose.

Tiên: “*Tôi lấy thêm Cho ông món này nhé. Ông ăn đi Cho nóng. Đây là yến huyết Nha Trang hấp đường phèn đấy.*”

Guest: No. This is my first time I have eaten this dish. But to be honest, it doesn't taste delicious.

Khách mời: “*Thôi. Lần đầu tiên tôi được ăn món này. Nhưng thú thực, tôi không thấy ngon.*” (Nguyễn, 2003, p.18)

The guest gave the reason, “The first time I have eaten this dish. But to be honest, it doesn't taste delicious..” to refuse the offer to eat more the brood nest of Nha Trang.

Example 18: Conversation between Kim and Chí at home

Kim: Let me call them to bring water for you to wash the hands.

Kim: “*Để em gọi lấy nước Cho and rửa tay đã.*”

Chí: Oh, no. Thank you. Let me go home. I also have to instruct them to mend the granary.

Chí: “*Thôi, cảm ơn cô, để tôi về nhà. Tôi còn phải bảo chúng nó chặt lại vừa thóc.*” (Lê, 2011, p.143)

In the above example, Kim gave her direct refusal "Thôi", accompanied by a "cảm ơn cô", with another alternative "để tôi về nhà- let me go home" and a reason "Tôi còn phải bảo chúng nó chặt lại vừa thóc - I also have to instruct them to mend the granary." These extensive parts are used to minimize the face-threatening act and avoid tension in the conversation.

### 4.2.2. Statement of using polite words

Like Americans, in this strategies, the Vietnamese use some words/phrases as follows “*dạ, Xin lỗi, dạ thôi, thôi ạ, có lẽ*”. This strategy is used when a lower-status person refuses the offer.

Example 19: Conversation between General Minh and Major Luan's wife at the police station

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

General Minh: I will leave a military police team here to protect and help you.

Ms. Dung: Probably not, Lieutenant General.

Bà Dung: “*Có lẽ không cần, thưa Trung tướng.*” (Nguyễn, 2015, p.1135)

Mrs. Dung uses a number of cautious, apologetic, and regrettable words “*Có lẽ/ thưa*” accompanied by *semantic formulas* expressing the speech act of rejecting an offer “*không cần*”, to appreciate the interlocutor's face and somewhat *minimize the face-threatening act to the proponent*.

### 4.2.3. Statement of personal principle

The direct strategy of refusal by giving personal principle to decline the offer. It has a semantic formula containing “*KHÔNG BAO GIỜ/ KHÔNG ĐỜI NÀO – NEVER*”. It accounts for 6,4% of the data collected. In fact, this strategy more or less threatens the interlocutor's face.

Example 20: Conversation between a daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law entering the living room

Daughter-in-law: Can I make you a cup of milk to warm your stomach?

Con dâu: “*Con pha tạm Cho mẹ cốc sữa uống Cho ấm bụng nhé.*”

Mother-in-law: I never drink milk in the morning.

Mẹ chồng: “*Tôi chẳng bao giờ uống sữa vào buổi sáng.*” (collected by the writer in the movie **Sống Chung với mẹ chồng** broadcast on VTV3, Vietnamese National Television Station)

The mother-in-law declines her daughter-in-law's offer by using “*chẳng bao giờ* - never” to express not only an absolute negation of the frequency of drinking milk but also the time to do the action “in the morning”.

Declining by giving personal principle is also a preferred expression by Vietnamese people. Statement of apology with a semantic formula containing direct utterance of refusal is a prominent way of direct refusals.

Example 21: Conversation between a girl and a young man at a party

The young man: Could I have the honor of picking a pretty girl like you up at the hotel at 7.30 tomorrow morning?

Chàng trai: “*Cho phép tôi có Vinh hạnh may được đón người đẹp tại khách sạn lúc 7.30 sáng nhé.*”

The girl: Sorry. I can not go. I do not have the habit of sharing the car with a strange man.

Cô gái: “*Xin lỗi anh. Tôi không đi được. Tôi không có thói quen đi xe người lạ.*” (collected by the writer in the movie **Về nhà đi con** broadcast on VTV3, Vietnamese National Television Station)

## 5. CONCLUSION

Through literary works and films in both Vietnamese and American, we all found seven direct strategies of refusing offers used in the languages. In terms of frequency, American people tend to use direct refusal strategies more than Vietnamese ones. The Americans prefer most strategies of using polite words; Statements of frank speaking; and Statement of reason. Some frequency employments of direct refusal strategies of offers by the Vietnamese include Statement of reason, Statement of using polite words, Statement of personal principle. Through this article, the writer hopes to provide readers with similarities and differences in choosing direct strategies of refusing offers in two languages, partly contributes to improving the quality of teaching and learning English in Vietnam as well as teaching Vietnamese to foreigners.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

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