A Pragmatic Analysis of Jordanian Arabic and American English Refusal Strategies

By

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Abstract

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The present study investigated refusal strategies used by native speakers of Jordanian Arabic (JA) and native speakers of American English (AmE). The subjects were seventy Jordanians living in Jordan and sixty-eight Americans living in the USA. Subjects’ refusals were elicited using a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) taken from Beebe et al (1990). The DCT consisted of 12 situations that included requests, invitations, suggestions and offers from higher, equal and lower status of the interlocutors. Data were analyzed as consisting of semantic formulas sequences. The semantic formulas were categorized according to the taxonomy of Beebe et al (1990). The mean and the frequency for each semantic formula were calculated for each situation. The t-test was used to test the significance of the differences between the means of the recurrence of each semantic formula across JA and AmE refusals. The results indicated that although both language groups used a similar range of refusal strategies, some variations were evident at two levels: the frequency and content of the semantic formulas used by each group. For instance, Jordanians used negative willingness/ability more frequently than Americans who said ‘no’ more frequently. Although the content of the reasons was similar in both groups in most situations, in the cases of invitations, Jordanians gave more elaborate and specific reasons that reflected the influence of their culture and religion, particularly to a higher
status person, whereas Americans gave brief and less specific reasons. Jordanians were more sensitive to a higher status person; they used mitigating strategies more frequently with a higher status person. Americans were not sensitive to any type of status person; they used mitigating strategies with all people regardless of their status. Jordanians tended to be critical toward lower status persons in the cases of suggestions and requests, whereas Americans were more cooperative and helpful. It was recommended that further studies be conducted on Arabic refusals to detect the effects of age, gender, dialect and data eliciting method.

Key Words: Speech acts, Refusals, Semantic formulas, Jordanian Arabic, American English, Discourse Completion Test