



## The Art of Saying “No” An Examination of Refusal Statements in Filipino Workplaces

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**Abstract:** This study intended to examine the specific occurrences of refusal in particular Filipino workplaces. It projected to seek the elements of refusal, as it also aimed to discover its effect(s) to a deliverer. In line with the foregoing, a descriptive research design was significantly used to interpret the gathered data, and purposive sampling was utilized as the means to identify the respondents. The conduct of interview was the data gathering tool used and five out of fifteen purposely chosen respondents have made the study determine its findings. For its stated bases, the paper has cored itself to the classification of refusals by Beebe et al., and to the Theory of Politeness of Brown and Levinson. This paper, moreover, claimed that statements of refusal are speech acts that occur as negative responses to other acts such as requests; refusal statements are commonly implied; and a statement of refusal poses an effect(s) to its speaker. It then revealed that refusal statements occur, predominantly, to refuse a request from another person, due to a speaker's adherence to particular conditions; Filipinos utilize more the indirect semantic formula; and the effect of refusal towards its deliverer can be perceived through the category of politeness that the speaker has established.

**Keywords:** refusal; Filipino; workplace; politeness

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In a typical Filipino setting, more often it is that a statement is more than the act of its expression; often do Filipinos deliver a message with a goal to shape forms of concepts toward their hearers, instead of just simply conveying a line of communication, of plain reference to verbalized lexical items.

With the past civilization of which Filipino natives are etched of, including the immensely increasing regard of the country's youth of today to the ideology in which popular culture is carved upon—reading between the lines, for Filipinos, is slowly becoming a normative custom, wherein the passage of

giving meaning from the bones of an utterance is of a notable trail.

Furthermore, Filipinos are greatly known for being deeply established with their inherent culture. Philippines is branded as a nation with a number of practices that the whole country is taking root and part of.

It is also to highlight that the people of this country are of significant cognizance to the firm interrelatedness of their shared beliefs and practices and their native language, that go complementary



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with each other, to intricately broadcast the customs of the archipelagic territory.

Accordingly, the aforementioned primary elements of the nation, upon scrutiny, are the conditions in which a speaker relates after—to be understood and to transpire an expanded route of meanings.

Considerably, in the event of Filipino natives, being after the need to turn down a particular request or a form of invitation, or to negate being part of a collective idea—messages driven of indicators pertaining to reluctance and a number of refusal strategies are of a notable existence within the borders of intentionally crafted utterances.

According to Brown and Levinson (1978), a refusal is a face threatening act. The concept of *face* was introduced by which it is to be denoted as a *shame interface*. In this light, Brown and Levinson (1978) distributed the face into positive and negative partitions: it is the desire of an individual to be accepted or appreciated by others that the positive face intends to levy, while the negative face refers to the individual's will to not be forced or imposed by another person.

Face threatening acts in the form of refusal poses a risk of causing the *face* of the speakers and the listeners—either positive or negative—to be at the point of menace. Due to its posited features, refusal has often become a cause of conflicts.

Beebe (1990) described refusal as a complex speech act as it could potentially threaten the *face* of both parties—the speaker and the listener. However, in this particular occasion, the listener is more likely to be at place for greater effect than the speaker, as the listeners are the ones to receive the answers that they are apparently not anticipating to hear—for they desire to be reciprocated. Therefore, of reference to the inherent culture of the Filipinos towards having an attentive demeanor when it comes to the manner of delivering messages that contain refusal, statements that are perceived to be offensive or offending in a way, are often subjects to the act of beating around the bush—to avert meeting certain conflicts.

In this context, a *yes* may not necessarily mean "yes," as the word *yes* could also mean "maybe," "I guess that is what you want to hear," "perhaps someday," "I have no idea," or "no" (Herderson, 1999).

Also, there is a wide range of subtle cues to deviate from the exact utterance of a refusal; some are non-verbal and some are in Filipino, like that of *mamaya*, which implies "later today," while *saka na* means more like, "sometime later" but "later" could be tomorrow, next month, or in some cases—next year. The unwillingness toward a particular request or offer, often comes with the mentioned expressions, considerably—to convey refusal.

Moreover, Houck and Gass (1999) said that due to the nature of refusal that is complex, lengthy negotiations are frequently of observed existence. The parties involved in the communication will seek to reach an agreement that would also extend the duration of the conversation. There are particular instances, in a typical Filipino setting, that a refusal is aimed at decreasing the tendencies of extensive exchanges—hence, their occurrence to identified situations.

Significantly, of regard to the manner of Filipinos, in stating their statements of refusal, it is of likelihood that expressions which are implied in subtle ways, are involved. For example, the expression "Pwede na rin" (roughly equivalent to 'satisfactory' or 'acceptable') points to liking something, however, of much reluctance.

"Sige na nga" (agreeing, but of clear reluctance), "Okay na rin" (can be 'somehow' acceptable), and "Andyan na 'yan eh" (it is already of occurrence, so let it be) are also some of the common Filipino expressions to note for that transcend approval but are of ostensible reluctance or negation to particular situations. These statements serve as means to imply refusal but of posited indirect account, according to its presented lexical items.

In the context of the Filipino culture, moreover, it is observably not polite to be direct in expressing one's dislike of something. If someone does not like something, it is better to express it in a delicate approach, most often, through the use of alibis or excuses.

To illustrate a typical Filipino scene, consider this example: if one is offered of food but does not feel the need to eat, the speaker's statement usually goes like, "Busog pa po ako" (I am still full) or "Mamaya na lang po" (I will eat later). The use of 'po' in the mentioned sentences makes it polite or formal; stating



a refusal in an indirect but respectful manner. That way, the person saves his *face* as well as the person who was offering the food, from embarrassment or rejection.

Furthermore, according to Rubin (1983) speech acts reflect basic cultural values that may be specific to certain groups of speaker. He posited that these are held of social norms and contextual implications that act as framework towards its effect and implementation. Inadequate awareness about cross-cultural speech acts and insensitivity to the forms and strategies in its implementation, of accord to the speech where there is refusal, can lead the communication between groups, affected.

Therefore, it is important to know the signs or features to which specific sociolinguistic representations are of belongingness within a society, in order to decode meanings in a particular speech, accurately and effectively. A number of studies related to refusal can be manifested in many languages, whether among native or non-native speakers (Moaveni, 2014; Allami and Naeimi, 2011; Felix-Brasdefer, 2006). In addition, means of refusal have already been studied as well, through cross cultural comparison in different languages. Most scholars compared refusal in English to other languages such as Vietnamese-Arabic (Nelson et al., 2002), Spanish (Felix-Brasdefer, 2003), and others. Additionally, other studies have examined how English language learners deliver refusal strategies as native-speaking people of particular countries, such as Iran (Babai and Sharifian, 2013), China (Chang, 2011), and others.

However, until today, there are no recorded empirical studies thus far, that practically examine the means of stating refusal among Filipinos, within the framework of their native language that is firmly intertwined with their culture. Therefore, this study is an effort to supplement to the number of journals and references in the field of cultural-linguistic arena for the purpose of investigating the refusal strategies that Filipinos are of usage.

Due to the foregoing, scrutinizing the situations, in which refusal statements are placed into the strategies of conveying implication, is of necessity to be highlighted, especially in the light of the current era, wherein multiple indirect lexical terms take root

to the stern core of the Philippines' culture; magnifying the numerous exemplifications of which the country is etched upon.

Refusals in common Filipino set-ups, consequently, can be perceived to be intricately mirroring the culture of which the Philippines is marking its margins from, with its systems of linguistic structures that take high regard to the customs of their origin.

Considerably, upon observation, it is with the country's forms of refusal, that a native can take identity, from the way reluctance is delivered—often, of manifestation of the Filipino people's regard towards their fellow speakers.

This study attempted to examine the occasions of when saying "no" becomes implied or indirectly stated. Specifically, it aimed to: determine Filipinos' occasions of refusal statements in particular workplaces; identify the elements (verbal and non-verbal cues) that refusal statements come with; and discover the effect(s) of refusal toward a speaker.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study, for the stated bases, therefore, has cored itself to Herbert Paul Grice's Theory of Implicature, wherein the total signification of an utterance is of an intended analysis through the means of implicature—in cases in which what the speaker said is distinct from what the speaker thereby meant or implied.

Moreover, Brown and Levinson's Theory of Politeness partook in the substantiation of this study. Brown and Levinson (1978) in their crafted theory, explored the idea of politeness as *face* rescue, wherein the *face* in this case, is not the front of the human head, but the dignity or the self-esteem of a person.

The two scholars made politeness in the representation of a buoy that serves to save one's face from suffocation and drowning by words that hurt. They explained that politeness, in its raw and subjected form, is a medium of emotional control that acts as an instrument to maintain a *face*.

This study used a descriptive-research design. It utilized a non-probability sampling method: purposive sampling. The researchers chose 15



respondents whom are people with the intended background and interest toward the study; five of whom were chosen to be of reference to, in providing the evidences for the succeeding claims.

In the data gathering, the conduct of interview was used as the data gathering tool, and five guide questions attended to its completion.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### Occasions of Refusal Statements

Based on particular circumstances, refusal statements are delivered toward their receivers to transcend messages which are fashioned and aimed to be implied. According to the respondents, refusal statements are of the following circumstances, in their respective workplaces:

*"When a situation does not merit the importance of ensuring the delivery of basic services."* (Female, 55, Community Head)

*"When something is being asked for in our department that does not fit the nature of our work."* (Male, 49, Police Officer)

*"When a colleague asks for my assistance and I am of circumstances that suggest the need to have it turned down."* (Female, 29, Establishment Supervisor)

*"When clients request an increase of interest deduction, more than the allowed rate."* (Male, 28, Banking and Finance Officer)

*"When clients insist demands, but the company has a set of rules I am in need to adhere to."* (Female, 30, Account Officer)

These statements entail that refusal statements are delivered of due regard to particular requests, in situations when a person is made to deliver. Refusals, according to Gass and Houck (1999), are speech acts occurring as negative responses to

other acts—requests, invitations, offers, and suggestions.

#### Elements of Refusal

Beebe et al. (1990) concluded that in their taxonomy, refusals can occur with semantic formulas—of direct and indirect categories.

- [1] *"We say that we can't, and refer them to the agency of appropriateness to their concerns."* (Male, 49, Police Officer)
- [2] *"I deliver refusal statements in an unoffending manner; I apologize."* (Female, 55, Community Head)
- [3] *"I commonly use 'I'm sorry' to express sympathy."* (Female, 29, Establishment Supervisor)
- [4] *"I use: 'I'm sorry,' 'I understand you,' or I will have their request suggested to the upper level."* (Female, 30, Account Officer)
- [5] *"In delivering refusal statements, I provide alternative solutions like reconstruction programs."* (Male, 28, Banking and Finance Officer)

A refusal is explicitly expressed in the direct category; [1]. Meanwhile, under the indirect category, refusals are delivered through expressing regret, sympathizing, providing a reason for the non-acceptance, and negotiating alternatives; [2], [3], [4], and [5].

The statements above entail lexical items which are presented and delivered of the speakers' intent to transcend fellow feeling towards their respective hearers, or to at least, avoid the incidences of getting the receiver of the message, offended.

In another study, Kanemoto (1993) asserted that avoiding a clear negation falls to the prominent features of refusal(s)—to avoid hurting the feelings of its receiver(s).





## Effects of Refusal to a Speaker

A statement of refusal, in its subjected form, does not just pose an effect to its receivers. Its delivery also posits an effect or more, towards the person who have realized its verbalized utterance, hence their interrelation to the scope of refusal upon sending through an effect.

Brown and Levinson (1987), in their theory of Politeness, considered that an individual's *face needs* motivate the application of politeness strategies, within the borders of refusal statements. Their framework proposed three kinds of politeness systems to manifest refusal strategies: difference, solidarity, and hierarchical.

*"Statements of refusal affect me. Delivering gratification to clients is rewarding, after all."*  
(Female, 30, Account Officer)

In the difference system one participant intends to respect the other individual's will to not be imposed; participants see themselves as being at equal social level with a distant relationship.

The statement reflects the difference politeness system, wherein its participants used independence strategies to respect each other's negative faces; the speaker does relate to the person whom the refusal has been said to.

*"We would feel at ease, as particular requests would be aligned with their corresponding agencies."* (Male, 49, Police Officer)

In the solidarity system, participants use involvement strategies to value each other's desire to be accepted; participants see themselves as being of an equal social position and having a close relationship. The statement intended the speaker's maintenance of a *face* that is positive and of the same reflection to the other.

*"It does not affect me as I provide an explanation on why I have refused."* (Female, 29, Establishment Supervisor)

*"Stating a refusal does not affect me. It is already an accepted culture and ethics at work."* (Male, 28, Banking and Finance Officer)

In the hierarchal system, participants see themselves at different social levels: one participant is higher (speaker) than the other (receiver). The participant in the higher status position uses solidarity (or involvement) strategies, whereas the participant in the lower-status position uses independence strategies. The relationship of the participants can be close or distant.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

1. Refusal statements occur, predominantly, to refuse a request from another person—due to a speaker's adherence to particular conditions.
2. In a workplace, as far as what this study has discovered is concerned, Filipinos utilize more the indirect semantic formula, with refusal statements expressing regret, sympathy, reason for the non-acceptance, and negotiating alternatives.
3. The effect of a refusal towards its deliverer relies on the category of politeness that the speaker has established.

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