

Politeness Strategies in Refusal Speech Acts among Gen Z Javanese Female EFL Learners: A Sociopragmatic Analysis across Power and Social Distance

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ABSTRACT

Refusal is considered a face-threatening act, particularly in cultures that value social harmony such as Javanese society. This study examines the politeness strategies employed in refusal speech acts by Generation Z Javanese female EFL learners, who are situated at the intersection between traditional cultural expectations and contemporary communication styles. This research aims to analyze how social variables, specifically power and social distance, influence the initial refusal strategies used in different interactional contexts. A descriptive qualitative approach was applied, with data collected through a Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT) and semi-structured interviews from 25 Javanese female university students. The responses were categorized based on Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz's refusal taxonomy. The findings reveal clear patterns across sociolinguistic conditions: apologies were predominantly used when refusing interlocutors of higher power and greater social distance, while expressions of appreciation and gratitude were more common in interactions involving peers or closer social relations. Additionally, indirect strategies were consistently preferred across all contexts, indicating the strong influence of Javanese politeness norms that prioritize maintaining social harmony and mitigating face threats. These results suggest that despite generational shifts, Javanese cultural values continue to shape the sociopragmatic behavior of Gen Z speakers, especially in performing face-sensitive speech acts such as refusals.

Keywords: refusal speech act; politeness; Javanese culture; sociopragmatics; Generation Z; power and social distance

INTRODUCTION

Refusal is a complex speech act that requires careful linguistic and sociocultural consideration. It is often face-threatening because it potentially disrupts social harmony and interpersonal relations between interlocutors (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For language learners, refusals become even more challenging, as they must negotiate linguistic competency and cultural norms simultaneously (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). In contexts where hierarchical relations and collectivist values are strongly embedded, such as in Javanese culture, refusals must be constructed in ways that maintain *rukun* (social harmony) and *tepa selira* (empathy and consideration for others) (Susanto, 2014). This cultural emphasis may influence how speakers employ politeness strategies to minimize imposition and maintain mutual respect during interactions.

Previous research in interlanguage pragmatics has extensively examined refusal strategies among second language learners using frameworks such as Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz's (1990) refusal taxonomy, which categorizes semantic formulas and adjunct strategies. Studies have shown that refusal strategies vary according to sociolinguistic factors such as social distance, power, and the level of imposition (Felix-Brasdefer, 2008; Trosborg, 1995). However, most studies have focused on general learner populations rather than specific sociocultural groups, and only a limited number have examined refusal behavior within distinct cultural subgroups in Indonesia.

The younger generation, commonly referred to as Generation Z, presents a unique sociolinguistic profile. They are digitally embedded, highly expressive, and often negotiate hybrid identities influenced by both local cultural norms and global communication styles (Prensky, 2001; Putri, 2020). This raises questions regarding the extent to which Gen Z Javanese speakers retain

traditional Javanese politeness norms when performing face-threatening speech acts such as refusals. Since politeness is culture- dependent and socially transmitted, shifts in generational values may result in modified linguistic behavior, including the use of apologies, gratitude expressions, mitigators, and indirect strategies.

The present study examines the refusal speech acts of 25 Javanese female university students belonging to Generation Z. Using a Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT) and interviews, refusal strategies are analyzed across sociolinguistic variables of power, social distance, and imposition. Preliminary findings indicate patterned preferences: apologies are dominant when refusing interlocutors with higher power and greater social distance, while expressions of appreciation and gratitude are more frequent when interacting with peers or close relations. For example, when responding to a high-power request, participants often began with explicit apologies such as “I’m sorry Sir, I can’t attend the event...” or “I’m so sorry, I already have another schedule.” These choices reflect an effort to maintain politeness and avoid threatening the interlocutor’s positive face.

However, despite growing literature on refusals among EFL learners, there is limited research that specifically addresses how Javanese cultural politeness norms interact with Gen Z identity in shaping refusal strategies. The negotiation between traditional cultural expectations and contemporary communication patterns remains underexplored. Thus, this study aims to fill this gap by providing a sociopragmatic analysis of refusal strategies employed by Gen Z Javanese female learners across different social conditions.

METHOD

This section details the research design, participant characteristics, data collection procedures, and analytical framework employed to investigate the refusal strategies of Gen Z Javanese females, ensuring robust and replicable findings. The descriptive qualitative approach adopted for this study allowed for an in-depth exploration of the complexities and contextual nuances inherent in refusal acts, providing rich insights into the socio-pragmatic competence of the participants. This methodology is particularly suited for capturing the subtle variations in language use influenced by social dynamics and cultural norms, which are central to understanding refusal phenomena. Specifically, it facilitated an examination of how different social variables, such as power and social distance, influence the pragmatic choices made by Gen Z Javanese females when refusing requests. The focus on Javanese females from Generation Z provided a unique demographic lens through which to observe the evolving nature of politeness strategies in a rapidly modernizing yet culturally rooted society (Rahardi et al., 2023). The selection of this specific demographic allows for an understanding of how traditional Javanese politeness norms intersect with contemporary communication styles influenced by global trends and digital interactions. This research design also allowed for the identification of potential shifts or continuities in refusal strategies among a generation often characterized by distinct communicative patterns (Zulkhairiyah et al., 2023). The qualitative approach, further enhanced by methods such as those outlined for investigating pseudo-directive pragmatics in Javanese (Rahardi et al., 2023), ensured a comprehensive understanding of the participants' refusal behaviors within their natural socio-cultural context.

The employment of a descriptive qualitative methodology facilitated a granular analysis of the linguistic features and pragmatic functions embedded within their refusal utterances. This rigorous qualitative approach enabled a nuanced interpretation of how Gen Z Javanese females construct their refusals, considering both the explicit linguistic forms and the implicit social meanings conveyed (Hasanah & Sari, 2021; Purnomo, 2019). This methodology allowed for a detailed examination of how contextual factors, such as the relationship between interlocutors and the nature of the request, shaped the participants' strategic deployment of refusal acts. The research specifically sought to describe the modes and meanings of these refusal utterances, aiming to contribute significantly to the development of pragmatics theory from a culture-specific perspective (Rahardi et al., 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The primary findings of this investigation illuminate distinct patterns in the initial refusal strategies employed by Gen Z Javanese females, categorized by varying levels of power, social distance, and imposition. Specifically, the data revealed a nuanced deployment of various semantic formulae and adjuncts, indicating a strategic adaptation to different relational contexts. For instance, when confronted with a higher-power interlocutor with whom there was also a significant social distance and a high imposition, apologies were the predominant initial refusal strategy, occurring in 60% of cases. Here are the refusals.

1. "I'm sorry Sir, for this time I can't attend the event because I have a pragmatic task that I need to finish."
2. "I really sorry, but I have to complete my pragmatic task on Sunday morning too."
3. "I'm so sorry, I can't help you. I already have another schedule on Sunday morning."

Conversely, for high-power interlocutors with low social distance and high imposition, adjuncts of gratitude were frequently employed, accounting for 72% of initial refusal acts, highlighting a shift towards appreciation rather than direct apology (Kamsinah et al., 2024). These findings suggest a cultural preference for indirectness and face-saving maneuvers, especially when navigating requests from individuals in positions of authority, a characteristic widely recognized in Javanese communication (Rahardi et al., 2023). Here are the refusals.

4. "I'm flattered by your offer but I'm afraid that I will not be able to fit into my schedule."
5. "I appreciate your ideas about my ability to handle this project. But, I can't do it because I won't be able to give a good presentation due to the very short time to prepare"
6. "Thank you for considering me to present the material, but I think I can't do that with the short preparation on only three days because it's difficult to me to handle that."

Moreover, when faced with a lower-power interlocutor, the Gen Z Javanese females still maintained indirect strategies, demonstrating that indirectness is not solely reserved for high-power individuals but is a pervasive politeness strategy within the culture (Rahardi, 2022). This consistent application of indirect refusal across different power differentials underscores the deeply ingrained nature of politeness in Javanese communicative practices, often prioritizing relational harmony over directness (Sharoufi, 2025; Basis, 2024). This avoidance of directness and preference for non-directive linguistic forms resonates with observations on pseudo-directive speech acts in Javanese, where underlying intentions are conveyed subtly (Rahardi et al., 2023). Such strategic employment of indirectness serves to mitigate potential face threats for both the requester and the refuser, thereby preserving social equilibrium (Chintawidy & Sartini, 2022). Here are the refusals:

7. "I'm so sorry bro, but right now I'm too busy, I can't help you maybe later yaa."
8. "Sorry, I have a busy and crazy day."
9. "Hi, Sorry. I'm busy right now"

When responding to requests from lower-power interlocutors with whom there was significant social distance and high imposition, semantic formulae of apology still prevailed as the most frequent initial strategy, at 48%. Similarly, for lower-power interlocutors with minimal social distance and high imposition, adjuncts of appreciation were predominantly used as the initial refusal strategy, accounting for 44% of responses. Here are the refusals.

10. "Thank you so much for thinking of me but so sorry I have tight schedule lately so I can't help you."
11. "Thank you for inviting me. It sounds like a wonderful event. I'm sorry I can't be there, but I'm confident you'll find excellent judges."
12. "I appreciate the offer but due to my schedule, I can't help it"

These variations underscore the intricate interplay between contextual factors and pragmatic choices, demonstrating a sophisticated awareness of social dynamics among the participants. This

strategic variation in politeness strategies among Javanese speakers, particularly in refusal acts, aligns with broader research on cross-cultural pragmatics, which emphasizes the impact of cultural norms and social structures on communication (Nkirote, 2024). This highlights how Javanese Generation Z females adeptly navigate complex social landscapes, employing a range of polite refusal strategies to maintain harmony and respect within their interactions (Rahardi et al., 2023).

Further analysis reveals that the prevalence of apology and gratitude strategies in refusals by Javanese Gen Z females aligns with established Javanese cultural values emphasizing indirectness and maintaining social harmony (Prayitno et al., 2018; Rahardi et al., 2023). This intricate balance between expressing refusal and preserving relational rapport is a hallmark of Javanese linguistic politeness (Rahardi et al., 2023), further elucidated by the high frequency of these nuanced initial refusal strategies. These findings provide critical insights into the sociopragmatic competence of Gen Z Javanese females, demonstrating their skillful deployment of indirect communication strategies to navigate complex social interactions while upholding cultural expectations of politeness (Rahardi et al., 2023). This intricate system of politeness, particularly evident in the use of honorifics and speech etiquette, is a cornerstone of Javanese communication and influences the selection of refusal strategies (Farhansyah et al., 2025).

The findings further suggest that gender and generational factors also play a significant role, as Gen Z Javanese females exhibit a refined ability to balance traditional politeness norms with modern communicative demands (Fernández & Izquierdo, 2013). This nuanced approach to refusal, marked by high degrees of indirectness, suggests a sophisticated pragmatic competence rooted in the Javanese cultural framework (Kamsinah et al., 2022). The consistent use of indirect strategies by the participants, regardless of the power dynamics, underscores the deeply ingrained nature of politeness in Javanese communication and its role in maintaining social equilibrium (Rahardi et al., 2023). This pervasive indirectness in refusal acts among Javanese Gen Z females aligns with observations in cross-cultural pragmatics, where politeness strategies are often culture-specific and influenced by native language (AlBugami, 2020).

Further examination reveals that the specific semantic formulas employed within these broader categories of apology and gratitude vary, reflecting subtle differences in the intensity of mitigation and the speaker's perception of obligation (Zhang, 2019). For instance, while apologies generally acknowledge an imposition or inconvenience, the specific wording and elaboration of the apology can signal differing levels of regret or responsibility (Zhang, 2019). Similarly, expressions of gratitude can range from simple thanks to more elaborate acknowledgments of the effort or consideration involved in the request, further demonstrating the strategic depth of their refusal acts (Adyawardhani, 2015; Zhang, 2019). This detailed differentiation within refusal categories points to a sophisticated understanding of pragmatic nuances, allowing these participants to finely tune their responses to the specific interpersonal dynamics of each interaction. The intricate relationship between power distance and the choice of politeness strategies is particularly salient, as participants demonstrate deference to higher power interlocutors through formal language and elaborate mitigating devices (Nkirote, 2024). This strategic adaptation showcases how Gen Z Javanese females navigate complex social hierarchies by meticulously crafting their refusal acts to uphold social harmony and minimize face threats (Akmal et al., 2022; Prayitno et al., 2018). Moreover, the observed variations in refusal strategies among Gen Z Javanese females, particularly the nuanced deployment of apologies and gratitude, illustrate a high degree of sociopragmatic awareness and adaptability in navigating complex social interactions (Hosseinpur & Mousavi, 2021). This adaptability is critical for maintaining relational equilibrium, particularly within a cultural context where indirectness and politeness are highly valued in communication (Zhang, 2019). This nuanced approach to refusal underscores the importance of indirectness as a core communicative strategy within Javanese culture, particularly for younger generations engaging in face-threatening acts (Zhang, 2019). Such findings align with broader linguistic observations concerning phatic functions in Indonesian communication, where various pragmatic meanings, including politeness and avoidance, contribute to the intricate web of social interactions (Rahardi, 2022). The strategic

selection of these initial refusal formulas also functions to mitigate potential negative impacts on the interlocutor's face, thereby preserving positive social relations (Imai, 2023). This careful consideration of face aligns with Arundale's relational and emic perspectives on face as a research focus in interpersonal pragmatics (Rahardi, 2022).

The findings of this study, therefore, illuminate how these young Javanese women navigate social interactions by strategically employing various refusal tactics that prioritize relational harmony and deference, especially within a high-context communication culture (Shen et al., 2024). This intricate dance of linguistic negotiation underscores the enduring influence of Javanese cultural values, such as **empan papan**, which mandates context-sensitive and appropriate speech acts to maintain social equilibrium (Santoso, 2019).

Furthermore, the observed strategic deployment of indirect refusal acts, such as apologies and gratitude expressions, reflects a sophisticated pragmatic competence in preserving social face and mitigating potential conflict, a key aspect of Javanese communication ethics (Rahardi et al., 2023; Aji et al., 2019). These strategies resonate with the concept of **unggah-ungguh**, a Javanese code of conduct emphasizing proper social behavior and respectful language use, even when delivering unfavorable responses (Rahardi et al., 2023). This aligns with broader patterns in Javanese communication where linguistic choices, including levels of honorifics, are meticulously adapted to social hierarchies and contextual nuances (Farhansyah et al., 2025). The participants' consistent use of indirect refusal strategies across different power differentials highlights the deeply ingrained nature of politeness within Javanese communicative practices, often prioritizing relational harmony over directness (Rahardi et al., 2023). This pervasive indirectness in refusal acts among Javanese Gen Z females aligns with observations in cross-cultural pragmatics, where politeness strategies are often culture-specific and influenced by native language (Barzani, 2023; Rahardi et al., 2023). The adeptness of these young women in navigating complex social landscapes through nuanced refusal strategies showcases their sophisticated understanding of sociopragmatics and cultural norms (Nkrote, 2024). Moreover, these findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how politeness is enacted within specific cultural contexts, particularly among younger generations who often blend traditional values with contemporary communicative styles (Sultan & Manaf, 2023; Nkrote, 2024). This demonstrates an ongoing accommodation of communication strategies within families across generations, particularly in how traditional Javanese values concerning politeness and respect are transmitted and adapted (Wahyuningtyas et al., 2023; Rahardi et al., 2023).

Indeed, the prevalence of indirect speech acts among Javanese females, even within the Gen Z demographic, underscores the persistent influence of Javanese cultural values that privilege harmonious social interaction and respect for interlocutors, aligning with broader findings on pseudo-directive speech acts in Javanese society (Rahardi et al., 2023). This continuity suggests that while generational shifts may introduce new communicative modalities, fundamental cultural pragmatics, particularly those related to refusal and politeness, remain deeply embedded within linguistic practices (Pasaribu et al., 2021; Gusnawaty et al., 2022). The strategic employment of apologies and gratitude in refusal acts by Javanese Gen Z females further illustrates a culturally nuanced approach to social interaction, where maintaining relational harmony often takes precedence over direct confrontation, even in situations of power imbalance (Musniati, 2019). This intricate linguistic behavior underscores a pragmatic sophistication that allows these individuals to navigate delicate social situations with deference and respect, thereby preserving the social fabric (Rahardi et al., 2023). This behavior is consistent with the findings from other studies on refusal strategies in various cultures, where indirectness is often employed to mitigate face-threatening acts (Shishavan, 2016). Furthermore, the specific distribution of apology and gratitude strategies across different power and social distance contexts provides a granular understanding of how these young women adapt their pragmatic choices to maintain equilibrium and respect within varying social configurations.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate the refusal strategies employed by Gen Z Javanese females, specifically focusing on the initial refusal utterances in various social contexts. The research revealed distinct patterns in their use of semantic formulae, such as apologies and expressions of gratitude, which were strategically deployed based on power dynamics and social distance (Rahardi et al., 2023). Specifically, the findings indicated that apologies were predominantly utilized when refusing interlocutors with higher power and greater social distance, whereas gratitude expressions were more frequent in situations involving lower power and closer social ties (Putikadyanto et al., 2025). This nuanced differentiation in strategy highlights a sophisticated pragmatic awareness among Gen Z Javanese females, allowing them to effectively manage face-threatening acts while upholding cultural politeness norms.

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