

Young Women's Refusals in the post-"Just Say No" Era

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Introduction

"Just Say No" was the slogan for an advertising campaign prevalent in the 1980s initially meant to discourage young people from illegal drug use but later spread to include behaviors such as premarital sex among others. The campaign was championed by former first lady Nancy Reagan. The phrase itself spread to mainstream speech and was often parodied by speakers giving advice to friends, family members and acquaintances. At about the same time, during the women's movement for equality, assertiveness training emerged as a behavior therapy to help people, particularly women, stand up for themselves as they entered the workforce in greater numbers. Assertiveness is considered a balanced, appropriate course of behavior between passivity and aggression. For women, assertiveness training was deemed useful in empowering them to communicate their minds without disrespecting the boundaries of others and as a way of defending themselves against aggressors. Assertiveness trainers often admonished the trainees to be like a broken record with their "no"s, and to never give lengthy, winded explanations why the refusal was being made. (Phelps & Austin, 1987 in Kitzinger & Frith, 1999).

Refusals, however, are not that simple it seems. The usefulness of the "Just Say No" approach is limited as there is much more going on in the interaction (Alberts, Miller-Rassulo, & Hecht, 1991). Ifert-Johnson (2007), explains that often there is more at stake than just the instrumental outcomes, but the effect on on-going relationships is often at play. According to Brown and Levinson (1987) refusals are mostly not direct, longer speech acts which are delayed in the transmission of the message.

What are refusals?

Refusals are when a speaker directly or indirectly says *no* to an offering, a request and/or an invitation. Refusals are considered to be face-threatening acts to the listener (offerer, requester or inviter) because they contradict his/her expectations and are also responded to through indirect strategies. Socio-cultural variables like authority, social distance, and situational setting influence the appropriateness and effectiveness of politeness strategies used. It is easier to make a refusal when, for example, you may

really want to honor the offering, request, or invitation but you have a real reason why you can not. It becomes harder when you really do not want to honor it, but have no real reason why you can not. Often, the refusal takes on an impersonal tone, such as citing lack of availability, or inability to comply (Folkes, 1982; Ifert & Roloff, 1986).

Politeness and refusals

People don't always say what they mean because they are not only concerned with the information aspect of the message, but also how their message will affect the person they are talking to. They want to maintain a good relationship and avoid imposing. Even when an offer, for instance, is rather insignificant, refusing the offer requires the person refusing to consider many factors and choose an appropriate way to carry out the refusal because it serves an affective function. Goffman (1967), and Brown and Levinson (1987) use the term 'face' to define politeness as showing concern for other people and that most interactions people have with each other are threatening to someone's face.

We can find two different kinds of politeness: negative politeness and positive politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Both types aim at putting the interlocutors at ease. The first type is concerned with paying respect and avoiding intruding on others and the second type is concerned with friendliness and shared ideas (Holmes, 2008). Thus, negative politeness strategies are used in speech acts which are formal, and where the social distance between the speakers is greater, and positive politeness strategies are used in less formal situations and where the social distance between the speakers is closer.

Refusals are particularly challenging to carry out in a polite manner. By nature, they are face-threatening which means that they are contrary to the notion of politeness right from the beginning since they are disagreeable and will make the hearer feel ill at ease from the beginning. Acceptance, of course, is the preferred response. In order to be polite in such a situation, a speaker must somehow lessen the degree of offensiveness in delivering the refusal. According to the literature on politeness strategies of refusals, refusals are typically indirect, longer, mitigated, hedged, and are often accompanied by apologies (Eslami, 2010, Holmes, 1995, Levinson, 1983,). Using modal expressions as a linguistic strategy to soften the refusal and reduce the face threat has also been documented (Turnbull & Saxton, 1997; Nelson, et al, 2002; Ifert-Johnson, 2008).

Study

Purpose

Ideally, collecting data from naturally occurring speech would tell the best story of how women refuse. Human participants would be asked to carry a recording device and keep it running throughout their day. This is impractical and intrusive on the participants' and their conversation partners' lives. Research up to this point has included some of the following alternatives to data gathering. One method is to use discourse completion tasks asking participants to respond to situations of how they think they would respond. Others are to devise a situation and ask participants to act out the situation in a role-play or to rate the politeness of refusals of an interaction or to extract refusals from corpus data. While these are all valid data collection methods, I would like to get closer to naturally occurring speech to find out how people, particularly young adult women, refuse others' requests, offers and invitations. In this research, I will collect data from movies, vicariously listening in on and watching the lives, albeit fictional, of several women. Thus, the purpose of this research is to provide a description of the refusals of women and investigate how they carry out their refusals.

Data

The data for this study most closely resembles using corpus data of spoken language. However, movies also provide visual input. Data has been collected from 18 movies released from the years 1997 through 2009. Scenes in which women were refusing an invitation, an offer or a request were collected and coded. All the data comes from a single genre of movie: romantic comedy. This genre was chosen because the scenes in them represent the most common daily activities; shopping, dining, dating, meeting new people, work scenes, telephoning, hanging out with friends, etc.

Participants

There are no participants per se. However, the characters whose speech I collected are all young American women in their 20's to early 30's.

Procedure

Scenes in which someone is requesting something, making an offer, or inviting a female character and her refusal were collected and recorded. These were then coded according to refusal strategy/ies.

Results

A total of 100 interaction samples were collected from 18 current movies. However, there are 111 refusals. Often, the person offering, requesting, or inviting

persisted even though they had been refused. For the refusal to be completed, it may have taken two or three turns. This is consistent with the literature. Previous studies found that requesters, offerers and inviters often persist with their desire for compliance (Ifert & Roloff, 1996). In turn, refusers whose refusals were ineffective must provide further explanation until their refusal is accepted or they give in. Table 1 shows both the variety of refusal types and how often that type was used in response to an offer, a request or an invitation.

Table 1

Refusal type					
	Offering 30 samples	Request 43 samples	Invitation 27 samples		
				total	percentage
Refusal “no”	5	11	3	19	17.1%
silence	3	4	6	13	11.7%
Refrain	5	0	0	5	4.5%
With reason	14	8	13	35	31.5%
With reason and postponement	0	1	4	5	4.5%
Insinuation	4	10	1	15	13.5%
Change the topic	1	3	1	5	4.5%
Clarification	1	2	1	4	3.6%
Clarification Plus silence	0	2	0	2	1.8%
Clarification plus reason	0	2	1	3	2.7%
Gesture/non-linguistic	0	4	1	5	4.5%
total				111	100%

Clearly, at 31.5%, the most preferred strategy for refusing is to give a reason with the refusal.

Example 1.

A: Do you want to go ahead of me?

B: No, that's fine. You just have one thing, so...

However, two other strategies which are more mitigated include giving a reason for the refusal. The first includes a postponement. We can find this most often when an invitation was proposed. Whether the refuser truly intends to follow up and comply at a later date is not clear. However, it softens the refusal at the time for the inviter or requestor.

Example 2.

A: Hey, let me buy you a cup of coffee.

B: Oh, I can't. I'm late for um..., but I'll call you.

The second which includes a reason starts off with the refuser seeking clarification.

Example 3.

A: C'mon.

B: What?

A: No, c'mon.

B: No, no the doctor said "no stress". I'll stay here.

If we consider all these together, then the strategy of giving a reason with the refusal rises to 38.7%.

Some interesting strategies were discovered from the characters' refusals. The first, at 13.5%, is insinuation. Insinuation is when the speaker says something that suggests to the listener her refusal.

Example 4.

A: Can I give you a ride?

B: I only live 29 blocks from here.

Another interesting strategy is that the characters refused by saying nothing at all which accounted for 11.7% of the refusals. Their silence said it all. Sometimes, the strategy was paired in the interaction with a clarification of "what?" first which accounted for 1.8% of refusals. Together, a total of 13.5% of refusals included silence.

Example 5.

A: I don't know. Get some coffee or something?

B: (no response)

Changing the topic and other gesture or non-linguistic vocal response also served to send the message of refusal each at 4.5% of the total.

Example 6.

A: Hey, I need your registry list.

B: I thought you were gonna wait downstairs.

Example 7.

A: So, does that mean we can't get her autograph?

B: (laughs)

Direct refusals with “no” accounted for 17.1% of the total. In addition, most of those refusals were in response to a request.

Example 8.

A: Can I sniff around?

B: Actually, no.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research set out to explore the ways that young women refuse offers, requests and invitations. While “no” did serve to accomplish the refusal, these “no”s may have been uttered in scenes where the characters were arguing or where the woman in the interaction was clearly not interested in having a relationship with the other party.

It was not surprising to find a high percentage of refusals carried out with reasons. People usually give reasons which explain that they are unable to accept the offer or invitation or carry out the request. These reasons have an unavoidable sense to them which takes blame away from either party and deflects any unpleasantness maintaining a harmony between the speakers.

Strategies such as insinuations, clarifications, silence, gestures or non-linguistic laughs, for example, further support that the “Just say no” approach is too simplistic and not real. Interactants are very much in-tuned to more sophisticated ways of conveying and understanding refusals. For example, a request is made that is clearly a strange or surprising request to the listener. Instead of saying, “That’s just too strange. No.”, the listener asks for clarification, “What?”

In this exploratory research I wanted to find out how women refuse. There are

many more ways to refuse than I anticipated. The silent refusal is most interesting. What was going on before that led to that type of refusal and then for the refusal to be acknowledged and accepted. Additionally, it would be worthwhile to compare data from the *pre*-"Just Say No" era to discover how/if the women's movement motivated language change. Other possibilities include comparing women's refusals with men's, and are they the same or different with same sex or mixed sex.

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Appendix

List of movies

<u>Movie Title</u>	<u>Production Company</u>	<u>Release date</u>
<i>Bride Wars</i>	Fox Pictures	January, 2009
<i>Failure to Launch</i>	Paramount Pictures	March, 2006
<i>He's Just Not That Into You</i>	New Line Cinema	February, 2009
<i>How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days</i>	Lynda Obst Productions Paramount Pictures	February, 2003
<i>Just Like Heaven</i>	Dreamworks	September, 2005
<i>Just My Luck</i>	Twentieth Century Fox	May, 2006
<i>Monster-in-Law</i>	New Line Cinema	May, 2005
<i>Picture Perfect</i>	3 Arts Entertainment Twentieth Century Fox	August, 1997
<i>Serving Sara</i>	FTM Productions	August, 2002
<i>Shallow Hal</i>	Twentieth Century Fox	November, 2001
<i>The Devil Wears Prada</i>	Twentieth Century Fox	July, 2006
<i>The Family Stone</i>	Twentieth Century Fox	December, 2005
<i>The Lake House</i>	Warner Bros.	June, 2006
<i>The Ugly Truth</i>	Lakeshore Entertainment	July, 2009
<i>The Prince & Me</i>	Paramount Pictures	April, 2004
<i>27 Dresses</i>	Fox Pictures Spyglass Entertainment	January, 2008
<i>You, Me and Dupree</i>	Universal Pictures	July, 2006
<i>What Happens in Vegas</i>	Twentieth Century Fox Regency Enterprises	May, 2008

要旨

“Just Say No”の時代以降における若い女性の断り

デロジェー ロリアン

1980年代に“Just Say No”(ただ、Noと言いましょう)という表現が人々の間に広がりました。この表現は例えば、違法な麻薬などを使うような行為に加わらないよう、個人がきちんと自分で拒否できるようにするために作られたものです。この表現は普段よく使われる言葉のなかに素早く浸透していき、例えば勧誘や要請などを求められても断れるように、家族や友人たちになんらかの助言をしている人々によって使われるようになりました。この調査は、最近の映画の中から100の会話の部分を取り上げ、実際に若い女性が拒否をする際に使うかどうかを調べました。その結果は、拒否として、ただNoとだけ言うのは、得策ではないと示しています。