

*Politeness in Mexico and the United States: A contrastive study of the realization and perception of refusals.* J. César Félix-Brasdefer. Amsterdam / Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2008. 195 pp.

Reviewed by Holly R. Cashman

In *Politeness in Mexico and the United States*, Félix-Brasdefer presents a well-argued, well-written analysis of refusal speech act sequences and perceptions of refusals in two languages and cultures — Spanish in Mexico (Tlaxcala) and English in the United States (Minnesota). It is an important contribution to the field of cross-cultural politeness research, and it is a valuable resource for sociolinguists who work on and in Spanish. The book has six chapters plus an introduction. In the introduction, in addition to providing an overview of his study and a brief outline of his analytical framework, Félix-Brasdefer argues persuasively for the need for more cross-cultural politeness research and more research on politeness that seeks to uncover the culture and cultural values behind politeness rather than search for politeness universals. He also comments on the more specific need for deeper understanding of Mexican and American cross-cultural communication due to the entwined sociopolitical, demographic and geographic realities of the two countries.

The first chapter is a thorough and thoughtful review of approaches to politeness from Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle and Goffman's (1967) notion of 'face' to critiques on Brown and Levinson's (1987) universal model of linguistic politeness and beyond. Félix-Brasdefer reviews the distinction between first-order politeness, or 'politeness-as-practice' (4), and second-order politeness, or a (universal) theory of politeness, and he explains that his interest lies in the former. He further details that his interest in first-order politeness includes both expressive and metapragmatic aspects of politeness, or the doing of and evaluation of politeness. Félix-Brasdefer explains in the first chapter that he follows Arundale (2006) in seeing face as both relational and interactional, and that he follows Spencer-Oatey (2007) in seeing face as co-constructed and negotiated by interlocutors in interaction. Further, he describes his adoption of Scollon and Scollon's (2001) notion of two aspects of face (independence and involvement), and three face systems (hierarchical, deference and solidarity). Finally, he details that his approach recognizes Locher and Watts' (Locher 2004, 2006; Watts 2005; Locher & Watts

2005) view of politeness as one small, positively marked part of a continuum of all interactional behavior called relational work, from the overly polite to the rude.

In Chapter 2, after providing a brief background on Speech Act Theory, Félix-Brasdefer does two main things: first, he describes the notion of 'speech act sequences' as the object of his interest in this study; and, second, he reviews the literature on the speech act of refusals. Félix-Brasdefer traces his interest in *speech act sequences* rather than single utterances from Edmondson's (1981) examination of the sequential order of speech acts to Schiffrin's (1994) study of speech acts in interaction. He describes that in addition to the head of the speech act, the part that expresses the act's illocutionary force, the speech act sequence may include external modifications, or supportive moves (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989), and internal modifications, such as epistemic markers (e.g. mental state predicates, degree modifiers, tag questions). In his description of the speech act of refusals, Félix-Brasdefer points out that they are commissives, they are responsive rather than initiative in nature, and they are dispreferred in interaction. He notes that refusals may be expressed directly or indirectly, and that indirect refusals may include a variety of strategies including: giving indefinite replies, providing reasons or explanations for refusing and suggesting alternative plans or activities. The refusal sequence, Félix-Brasdefer explains, may also be accompanied by adjuncts such as: positive remarks, expressions of willingness and partial agreements. Finally, Félix-Brasdefer closes the chapter with a review of empirical studies on refusals, providing a comprehensive table of 51 studies of refusals over more than three decades of research, and a summary of research on Spanish and English refusals; Félix-Brasdefer points out that there has been no systematic research on refusals in Mexican Spanish.

Chapter 3 describes and defends Félix-Brasdefer's methodological choices for the study of Spanish and English refusals. The study is complex in that it examines three different types of refusals (of invitations, advice/suggestions and requests), with different levels of status (higher, equal) in two language varieties (Mexican Spanish, American English). This complexity is balanced by limiting the participants to university-aged, male speakers of (lower- to middle-) middle class backgrounds. Félix-Brasdefer opted to use an open role play technique to elicit refusals, and he argues that this method provides the researcher access to more naturalistic data than, for example, a discourse completion questionnaire or a closed role play, while still allowing the researcher access to a sufficient frequency of the speech act and control over other variables. In addition to the open role play, Félix-Brasdefer chose to employ the retrospective verbal report as a technique to collect complementary data on the evaluation of the speech act of refusals. Félix-Brasdefer provides detailed instructions and prompts used for the role plays in English and Spanish, as well as the questions used for the retrospective verbal reports. The

author closes chapter three with descriptions and examples of direct and indirect strategies of refusals, adjuncts to refusals and expressions of epistemic modality.

Félix-Brasdefer presents his analysis of refusal strategies across six situations in a total of 240 role plays in Spanish and English and the evaluation of refusals in Mexico and the U.S. in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively. Chapter 4 presents a brief description of the corpus and an analysis of the broad differences between the two groups (Mexican, American), as well as individual variation among participants in the same groups, before breaking down the data to analyze variation according to face system (hierarchical, deference or solidarity), situation (invitation, advice, request) and internal modification. The detailed analysis of the refusal strategies employed in the role plays, which is too extensive to summarize here, is presented in a clear and concise manner with useful examples from both languages. Chapter 5 presents Félix-Brasdefer's findings regarding the cross-cultural differences in the perception of the role-play situations, including degree of directness and indirectness, and insistence as a second step in the negotiation of refusals of invitations (cf. García 1992, 1999). The analysis of the retrospective verbal reports is both qualitative and quantitative, with many examples from interviews of speakers of both groups about different situations and face systems.

In Chapter 6, Félix-Brasdefer summarizes the findings of his study as well as their implications for relational work. By considering the results of the analysis of the expressive politeness data in light of the analysis of the metapragmatic politeness data, the author draws out the cultural differences in the performance of refusals in Mexican Spanish and American English. The chapter closes with considerations for future research.

Félix-Brasdefer's study of refusals in Spanish and English is an important and valuable study of cross-cultural politeness, essential for anyone interested in Spanish language variation and linguistic politeness. A particular strength of the book is its clarity, both in the description of the methodology and in the articulation of the analysis. The study is innovative in its combination of several important elements. First, the study focuses on the interactional, sequential nature of refusal speech act sequences, making use of the comparatively rich data obtained through open role plays. Second, the study complements an excellent, detailed analysis of the realization data with an equally compelling analysis of the perception data elicited through retrospective verbal reports. Finally, the incorporation of both the individual and the cultural elements is key to the value of this study. While a great deal of linguistic politeness research has favored a focus on politeness universals, Félix-Brasdefer's study both recognizes in greater detail the individual variation among members of cultural groups and seriously examines the cultural orientations of the participants with regards to the concepts of directness and indirectness, involvement and independence.

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