

***Politeness in Mexico and the United States: a contrastive study of
the realization and perception of refusals.***

J. Cesar Felix-Brasdefer (2008)

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Reviewed by Wei Ren

This newly released monograph by Felix-Brasdefer is definitely a welcome one in the present literature of cross-cultural pragmatics. The book aims at examining the similarities and differences in the realization patterns and the perceptions of refusals in Mexican Spanish speakers and American English speakers from a cross-cultural perspective. It is the first cross-cultural research which examines the realization of refusals and the perceptions of politeness among Mexicans and Americans. Existing studies of speech acts by far can be divided into two strands: on the one hand, those which examine native speakers' speech acts realization, either focusing on one language or two languages; on the other, those which investigate characteristics of non-native speakers' speech acts in comparison to native speakers'. Compared with certain speech acts which have received more attention than others such as requests and apologies, refusals are still one of the more under-researched areas. Among all the studies on refusals, American English has been by far the most commonly investigated language of comparison for studies on native and non-native refusals, followed by Japanese as a first and a second language (p. 168), in terms of the languages examined. Methodologically, the majority of the studies employed a single method to elicit data, of which a written questionnaire or a role-play ranks as the top two. This

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book enriches the literature by investigating Mexican Spanish and by employing a combination of role-plays and verbal reports as elicitation measures.

In chapter 1, Felix-Brasdefer starts with the etymology of the word *politeness* and the origin of polite behavior. He distinguishes two layers of politeness: the first-order politeness and the second-order politeness. The first-order politeness (or Politeness 1) is defined as politeness ‘perceived by members of different sociocultural groups’ and the second-order politeness (or Politeness 2) as ‘a theoretical construct or the scientific conceptualization of Politeness 1’ (p. 10). Politeness 1 consists of three types: expressive (politeness encoded in speech, in other words, speakers’ linguistic politeness); classificatory (categorical tool which encompasses the hearers’ judgment), and metapragmatic (people’s perception and evaluation of being polite). Of these, the book restricts its scope to investigate expressive and metapragmatic politeness 1. Since the current study is based on the assumption that interlocutors want to communicate appropriately and politely, Grice’s cooperative principle and the maxim of politeness are discussed. After that, eleven models related to politeness are reviewed. Felix-Brasdefer rationalizes his decision to employ Scollon & Scollon’s face systems (2001) to examine the negotiation of a refusal. This section provides an extremely comprehensive discussion of the existing models related to politeness in the literature of cross-cultural pragmatics and interlanguage pragmatics.

The second chapter provides an overview of speech act theory and existing empirical studies on refusals. Felix-Brasdefer addresses speech act theory from its origin to its contributions to pragmatic and communication studies. Many concepts are introduced in this section, including Austin’s classification of illocutionary forces, Searle’s taxonomy of speech acts, and the notion of directness-indirectness continuum. In communication, refusals usually involve several turns to reach a final outcome. It is better to study refusals in interaction rather than as a single speech act. Thus, Edmondson’s speech act sequence (1981) is introduced and adopted in the book for analyzing refusals. After explaining the important role of context during the negotiation of face in communication, Felix-Brasdefer briefly describes some influential studies on refusals, particularly Beebe *et al*’s, followed by studies on English and Spanish refusals. A table summarizing 51 studies on refusals in numerous languages from early 1970s to 2007 is provided, offering information as types of refusals examined, author and year of publication, language/variety examined, elicitation task employed, and focus of study (pp. 46–50). Although the table only outlines studies on refusals with a focus on realization, excluding all the studies focusing on instruction (implicit/explicit), it is extremely informative for all the readers interested in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics.

In Chapter 3, Felix-Brasdefer describes four data collection methods in pragmatics research: ethnographic data, production questionnaires (mainly

Discourse Completion tasks), role plays and verbal reports, and he provides the rationale for his methodological decisions to employ role plays to elicit speakers' production data and retrospective verbal reports to elicit data regarding to speakers' perception of refusals. Forty male university students participated in this study: 20 monolingual Mexicans and 20 Americans. Besides four distractor items (two apologies, one compliment, one complaint), the role-play set for the investigation was comprised of six experimental refusal prompts, which included situations of higher status and equal status (for details, refer to Appendix IA and IB in the book). The description of each refusal situation was based on two variables: social power (+P or -P) and social distance (+D or -D). The retrospective verbal reports were administered shortly after the role-plays. The preciseness of the researcher is embodied in his displaying audio facilities out of participants' sight to avoid the observer's paradox, his carefulness of choosing interlocutors in role-plays and his meticulousness of interlocutors' suitable dressing to approximate the simulated natural environment. This set-up is a model for future research.

After introducing the methodology and organization of the study, the author analyzes pragmatic strategies of refusals. Refusals are speech acts that normally function as second pair parts, as a response to another speech act: request, invitation, offer, suggestion. In this study, Felix-Brasdefer explores refusals in response to requests, invitations and suggestions. However, offers are not included in the investigation. After stating the methodological issues, Felix-Brasdefer discusses pragmatic strategies that comprise refusals. He divides refusals into direct refusals, indirect refusals, and adjuncts to refusals. However, some key terminology might have been defined for the reader at this stage such as *speech act set*, *head act* and *adjunct*. Interestingly, except the conclusion chapter, chapter 3 is the only chapter without a section of concluding remarks which is very helpful for readers to recast the main ideas of each chapter.

Findings related to expressive politeness 1 (linguistic realizations of refusals) and metapragmatic politeness 1 (cultural values of refusals) of the two communities are displayed and discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively. In Chapter 4, Felix-Brasdefer adopts Watt's relational work (2005) as a model to analyze refusals. Nevertheless, it would be helpful if he had clarified it in his discussion of Watt's model in chapter 2. The two groups' refusal strategies are presented under Scollon & Scollon's model (2001). Their relational work and expressive politeness are discussed in the light of Hierarchical face system (+P, +D), Deference face system (-P, +D), and Solidarity face system (-P, -D), with examples from each group to illustrate. The findings indicate that the refusal behavior of Americans and Mexicans show similarities and differences during the negotiation of a refusal in symmetric (-P, [+/-D]) and asymmetric (+P, [+D]) relationships. The findings in the current study reveal that the prefer-

ence for the pragmatic strategies varies not only cross-linguistically between two groups but also within each group, and for the three face systems. The expressions of epistemic modality are highlighted in the last part of chapter four as well.

Chapter 5 reports the data related to the perceptions of refusals of the two groups. Retrospective verbal reports were administered immediately after the role-plays and the audio-recorded role plays were played back to the interviewee during the verbal reports. Questions related to the speaker's attention to linguistic and sociocultural information during refusals were asked. Felix-Brasdefer discusses the results according to the three face systems: hierarchical, deference, and solidarity. Then, speakers were interviewed about their perception of directness or indirectness and their perception of the addressees' insistence in the act of declining an invitation. The data provide insight into metapragmatic politeness 1 in the Mexican and American communities, i.e. their social perceptions regarding refusals. Generally speaking, the notions of directness and indirectness convey various cultural values. The notions of insistence reveal that each group express relational work with different expectations. In contrast to Mexicans who perceive an insistence as a cultural expectation and socially appropriate behavior, Americans find it unexpected and consider it as an imposition and a violation of the invitee's independent face.

The findings from the analysis in Chapter 4 and 5 are summarized in Chapter 6 ('Conclusion and Discussion'), presented in the following order: the negotiation of a refusal and face systems, insistence as a discourse strategy, perceptions of politeness. The notion of 'face' in Mexico is highlighted and general findings of refusals across languages are analyzed, followed by discussion of methodology issues, practical implications of the current research findings, and suggestions for future research. An important methodological issue pointed out by Felix-Brasdefer is that all findings of the current study must be interpreted in light of the instrument employed to collect the data (p. 171). In cross-cultural pragmatics and interlanguage pragmatics studies, interpretations of findings should be put forward with caution to avoid overgeneralization.

Overall, despite a couple of weaknesses as indicated above, the book makes important contributions to the field of cross-cultural pragmatics. It enriches the languages being studied in the field and it presents a carefully designed and implemented research. In a nutshell, it is recommended to researchers and students who are interested in cross-cultural pragmatics and cross-cultural communication.