Swearing as a Refusal Marker in Algeria: Variant Dialectal Use or One Cultural Reality?

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Abstract :

This paper focuses on the study of the refusal speech act in Algeria, considering different dialects spoken in different regions and provinces. The study was conducted through the use of a discourse completion task, and it was distributed via google forms. Answers of 220 respondents speaking different dialects were analysed qualitatively. The results revealed that Algerians, whatever the region they belong to or the dialect they speak, analogously use swearing as an adjunct to the refusal speech act. Their use of swearing, however, is affected by the type or refusal be it a refusal to invitations, requests, offers or suggestions, and the power status between interlocutors.

Key words: refusal adjunct, speech acts, swearing, dialects, Algerian culture.

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القسـم كعامـل مسـاعد لفعـل رفـض الكـلام   فـي الجزائـر: اختـلاف فـي اللهجـات أو واقـع ثقافـي واحـد

ملخـص: يركز هـذا البحـث علـى دراسـة قانون رفض الكلام في الجزائر، مـع الأخذ بعين الاعتبـار اللهجـات المختلفـة المنطوقـة فـي مختلـف المنـاطق والولايات. أجريت الدراسة من خلال استخدام مهمة إكمـال الخطـاب تـم توزيعـه عبـر google Forms. تـم تحليـل إجابـات 220 مسـتجيباً يتحدثون لهجـات مختلفة نوعياً. أظهرت النتائج أن الجزائريين، بغض النظر عن المنطقة التي ينتمون إليها أو اللهجـة التي يتحـدثون بهـا، يسـتخدمون علـى نحـو مماثـل القسـم كعامـل مسـاعد لفعـل رفـض الكـلام. ومـع ذلك، فـإن استخدامهم للقسم يتأثر بنوع الرفض سواء كان ذلك رفضًـــا للـــدعوات أو الطلبـــات أو العـــروض أو الاقتراحات، وحالة السلطة بين المحاورين.

الكلمـات المفتاحيّـة: مسـاعد الـرفض، أفعـال الكلام، القسم، اللهجات، الثّقافة الجزائريّة.

1. Introduction:

The interconnectedness between language and culture has been long ago manifested by Sapir and Whorf in the theory of 'Linguistic Relativity' (Kramsch, 1998). They posited that language users perceive and deal with

experiences differently stimulated by the linguistic code they have. In other words, language influences the way its speakers do think and perceive things, yet, language expresses, embodies, and symbolizes cultural reality. Hence, language is a constituent of culture, and culture is found in all language levels and structures including language discourse patterns. Then, shedding light on the study of everyday realized speech acts would reveal a lot about the nature of the speakers' culture.

Henceforth, the present empirical study attempts to find out what characteristics of the Algerian culture may appear in the realization of the refusal speech act? Does it differ from one dialect to the other? how frequent swearing appears when refusing, and in which types of refusals swearing appears more? and whether it is affected by the power status of the speaker over the hearer or not? Answering such questions would help in a better understanding of the Algerian culture (and subcultures), comparing it to other cultures, facilitating communication and interaction, and avoiding stereotypes and prejudice.

2. Literature review

Culture has been referred to as a "collective mental programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (Hofstede, 2011 p.03). Individuals of the same community share ways of perceiving and interpreting products; they share meanings. The latter provide solid frameworks for interaction and make communication possible, but also cause disagreements within the members of the same community and intercultural conflicts between individuals belonging to different communities (Shaules, 2007). Conversely, the ethnography of communication posited that culture is constituted through talk (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz, 2007), i.e. cultures are the result of interaction and communication. Thus, internal interaction within the individual helps in establishing a world view, while

communication with others allows for the transmission of knowledge (Žegarac, 2007).

However, investigating the relation between culture and communication revealed that it is circular; communication fails in case the actual and the intended meaning do not meet. In other words, miscommunication may occur if the addressee interprets the message according to a different context and new meanings may occur through communication. Thus, culture has a dynamic nature in the sense that it changes over time because of political, economic and historical events, the interaction with other cultures, and the emergence of new cultural constructions within its members (Barrett et.al., 2013). Yet, both communication and culture need language to take place and survive.

Accordingly, a particular culture can be described based on its members' everyday communication and speech. For instance, in contrast to the English culture where 'God' is used in very formal situations and oaths, the Algerian culture is a religious one because references to 'God' are very frequent and appear almost in every situation to perform different speech acts such as requests, offers, invitations, complaints, refusals, etc.

Refusals are among the most frequently used speech acts of everyday life. A refusal is a speech act that falls under the class of commissive defined by Searle (1996) as speech acts which commit the speaker to do or not to do something. An act of refusing, meaning 'No', may appear as a follow-up speech rejection to a request, invitation, offer or suggestion. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), refusals are amongst the most familiar face threatening acts (FTAs). FTAs are a class of speech acts whose production risks losing the face of the speaker, hearer or both. In this sense, refusals constitute a major threat to the hearer's face because they contradict with the desire of not impeding actions (Brown and Levinson 1987). The production of such a FTA might thus be a sensitive matter that requires the use of some smoothening devices and face saving

strategies. Therefore, to redress the face threat and avoid possible conflicts and misunderstandings, refusals are often performed indirectly. However, to do so, a high level of pragmatic competence is required (Chen, 1996). Furthermore, knowledge of some underlying social norms, which define acceptable refusals, is also necessary especially that correct ways of realizing appropriate refusals may manifest significant variation across cultures (Rubin, 1983).

Brown and Levinson (1987) suggested five possible ways to perform a FTA including refusals: to go baldly on record, to use positive politeness, to use negative politeness, to go off record and not to do the FTA at all. These strategies are ordered from the least polite to the politest correlating negatively with directness. By this token, the more direct the FTA is, the less polite it sounds. Choosing which strategy to use depends on a systematic evaluation of three significant social variables: the distance between interactants, the social power exerted by one of them over the other, and the rank of imposition of the speech act itself as estimated by the interlocutors. Except for the first and last strategies, the speaker can use various mitigating devices to redress the face threat caused by the speech act. While positive politeness strategies emphasize closeness and solidarity via using kinship names, jokes, claiming shared common background, etc., negative politeness strategies stress the distance between interlocutors mainly through employing modals, apologies, reasons and excuses, explanations, etc. Mitigation of face threat using off record strategies takes place when flouting one or more of the Gricean maxims by giving hints, using metaphors, being sarcastic, etc.

Refusals have been a very inducing subject for researchers due to their frequent daily appearance. Rubin's (1983) research, for instance, was concerned with the possible forms a request might take. She noticed that forms of refusals vary considerably from one culture to another. She proposed a nine-way taxonomy of refusals, the production and reception of which requires three levels of competence: form-function relation, social parameters of refusing, and underlying values. Beebe et al. (1990) also suggested another taxonomy of refusals. In their classification, they divided the production of refusals into three phases: first, a preparatory stage for the refusal containing pre-refusal strategies; second, the production of the refusal including the semantic formulas, which may be direct or indirect refusals; third, the post-refusal phase in which post refusal strategies comprising adjuncts to refusals are added to justify or mitigate it.

Many subsequent researches (e.g. Al-Eryani, 2007; Mughazy, 2003) investigated realizations of refusals across different languages and cultures with the aim to spot cross-cultural similarities and/or differences since understanding what constitutes appropriate behaviour in a given culture is necessary to preserve the other's self-image, maintain social relationships, and avoid communication breakdowns. The main aspects dealt with in studies of refusals include: the level of directness associated with refusals, polite vs impolite refusals, the main politeness strategies used in their production, and the possible culture-specific features associated with them. In this respect, a large number of studies dealt with Asian vs Western cultures. According to Liao and Bresmahan (1996), cultural considerations of individualism versus collectivism were reflected in the refusals made by Americans and Chinese respectively in the sense that Americans are more direct than Chinese. In an EFL context, Nguyen (2006), found that Australians were more direct in phrasing their refusals compared to the Vietnamese who redressed the face threat using various adjuncts such as address terms, reasons, excuses and explanations. Baresova (2008) asserted that the level of directness associated with requests abides to various degrees of social distance although Americans are flexier in accepting refusals than Japanese.

As far as Arabic cultures are concerned, cross-cultural researches proved that refusals do not only differ in terms of levels of directness but also in their form. Al Eryani (2007), for example, found that Yemeni learners of English use reasons and excuses as adjuncts to refusals whereas American natives place such expressions before the actual speech act. According to Al Issa (1998), Americans tend to refuse in more direct ways than the Jordanians who also use longer, vaguer and less specific excuses as adjuncts. He added that reference to God was an outstanding feature of the Jordanian refusals.

Reference to God in Arabic cultures is achieved by using /allah/ الله or /rab'i/ ربي in two different ways. First, by using discourse conditionals meaning God willing /insha allah/ ان شـاء الله which Fraghal (1993 p. 49) defined as "those conditional clauses that are frequently pegged to segments of Arabic discourse in order to mortgage the realization of the relevant speech act, e.g. a promise, to the will of Allah." Such discourse conditionals are as adjuncts to refusals when promising to fulfil the refused act later on. The second way by which the Arabs mention God in their refusals is by swearing that the act will be done later, or by emphasizing that the speaker is really unable to meet the other's expectations. This is achieved by using the discourse particle /wallahi/ والله at either the beginning or the end of the speech act. According to Abd Almajid (2000 p. 218), swearing is "the speech act by which a person binds himself to do or not to do a certain specific physical or juridical act, by invoking the name of God or one of the divine attributes (cited in Zainal Arif and Mugableh 2013). According to Mughazy (2003, p.12), swearing to Allah is a politeness particle which does not only provide justifications for the refusal but it also asserts politeness as it "stems from the interlocutors' knowledge of a cultural system of expectations known as Qasham." (cited in Lounis 2019).

3. Methodology

Investigating refusals in the Algerian culture, data were collected using a Discourse Completion Task (DCT) adapted from Beebe et. Al. (1990). It contains 12 situations divided into four refusal types: three refusal situations to requests, three to invitations, three to suggestions, and other three to offers. Each three situations vary in terms of power status between the interlocutors: equal, high-to-low, and low-to-high as described in the table below:

Table: The Discourse Completion Task Situations

Type of refusal	DCT situations	Power status
Refusal to Requests	1-A friend's request to borrow a notebook a day before the exam 2-An employee's request for a raise 3-A boss' request to stay for extra hours in office	- equal -high-to-low -low-to-high
Refusal to Invitations	1-A friend's invitation for dinner in the presence of someone you do not like 2-A sales man invitation for lunch 3- A boss' invitation for dinner, bringing wife	- equal -high-to-low -low-to-high
Refusal to Offers	1-A friend's offer of another piece of cake 2-A poor house keeper offer to pay for breaking a vase 3-A boss' offer of a raise, moving to	- equal -high-to-low -low-to-high

	another city.	
Refusal to Suggestions	1-A friend's suggestion for exercising rather than diet 2-A student's suggestion to add more sessions for practice 3-A boss' suggestion to use memos	- equal -high-to-low -low-to-high

The DCT was distributed using google forms via the link: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLS cjHB4X6DHqcDz0NH2Rac4kGOqBx2uoCst HeE81ZVdRkQFPYw/viewform?usp=pp_url. 220 people responded including 68.18% females and 31.82 males. They belong to different regions in Algeria: East, West and South, they all speak Arabic as the official language and the dialect spoken in their regions in addition to other languages such as French, English, Spanish, Italian, and German.

4. Discussion of the results

After the analysis of the obtained results, it has been noticed that there was no significant difference between the answers of respondents belonging to different regions in Algeria: East, West, and South as far as the use of swearing as a refusing particle is concerned. Therefore, the analysis of the results will consider the type of refusals, the power status and the swearing frequency without linking it to a particular region.

a) Swearing in refusals to requests

In the first situation of refusing the request, the interactants are equal in power. The respondents used different refusal strategies including direct, indirect refusals, excuses, suggestions, apologies and offers. Swearing appeared in some instances such as:

والله يا خويا ما نقدر نحتاجو / والله مانقدر نحتاجو بش نراجع

In the second situation where the speaker is high in power than the hearer, the respondents used direct and indirect refusals, excuses, and promises for alternative solutions. Very few instances of swearing as a refusing particle appeared as in the example:

والله لازم تصبر شوية/ والله غير ممكن الايام هادو

In the third situation where the speaker is lower in power than the hearer, respondents avoided using direct refusals, they tended to use indirect ones including apologies, excuses and alternative suggestions. Swearing was remarkably present as an adjunct to refusals as shown in the following examples

والله ربـي يسـترك لازم نخـرج/ اسـمحلي والله مانقـدر عندي ارتباطات/ يلزمني نمشي والله ما ننجم نقعد

Shifting from one situation to the other, and due to considerations of variation in power relationships, participants in the third situation felt a need to back up their refusals with swearing mainly to put an emphasis on their inability to fulfill the request to convince the hearer that they are saying the truth. The use of swearing correlates negatively with the power status of the speaker. In other words, swearing appearance decreases whenever the power status is higher.

b) Swearing in refusals to invitations

When the interactants are equal in power status, as is the case in the first situation of refusing invitations, the respondents used direct refusals, apologies for refusal, excuses, promises and offer for alternative solutions. Swearing in this situation appeared frequently as illustrated by the examples:

اسـمحلي حبيبي والله راني مشـغول مانقدرش/ والله يكثر خيرك بصح المرة هادي مانقدرش/محال نريح مع هذاك بنادم

/والله مانقدر بببببا

The participants employed swearing because they felt a pression to refuse the invitation due to the fact that in the Algerian culture refusing invitations is perceived to be rude, as it may affect negatively intimate relationships. Then, it can be claimed that the

type of refusal stimulus contributes to the appearance of swearing as a refusing particle, even though the interactants are equal in power status.

Similar to the second situation of refusing requests, very few instances of swearing appeared in the second situation of refusing invitations where the speaker is higher than the hearer in power status, for example

والله ماعندي وقت خليها كانش نهار / والله مشغول حاليا

Instead, the respondents opted for the use of direct and indirect refusals together with excuses, suggestions, and offers for alternative solutions. They did not feel an urge to use swearing to refuse but tended to do it in more direct manners mainly because the invitations embed bribery which is forbidden in the Algerian Islamic culture.

In the third situation of refusing invitations, the speaker is lower than the hearer in power. The respondents used indirect refusals including apologies and promises, but most of them gave excuses mainly the illness of the wife which reflects the nature of the Algerian culture within which asking for meeting someone's wife is a taboo. Swearing appeared in some instances:

بـارك الله فيك بصـح والله مـا نقدر نجـي مشـغول/ والله المـدام أي غايبـة / اسـمحلي بصـح والله مانقدر نجـي/ والله مانقدر نجي عندي شغل بارك الله فيك

Again, power relationships correlated negatively with the use of swearing as a refusal adjunct.

c) Swearing in refusals to offers

The first situation of refusing offers represents a case where the interlocutors are equal in power status. Albeit the respondents used direct and indirect refusals together with excuses, they frequently used swearing as the following examples illustrate:

والله مـا نقدر نزبد شبعت خـلاص/ والله غيـر شـبعت مانقـدرش نزيـد/ لا والله غيـر بـزاف نخـاف تضـرني/ والله الحمد لله شبعت/ والله والو والله مانزيدها الحمد لله

Language use here is culturally shaped and reflects respondents' tendency to save face.

Along this line, it is an Algerian cultural norm not to refuse offers made by friends to avoid face loss for both interactants and maintain good interpersonal relationships.

In the second situation of refusing offers, respondents used direct and indirect refusals with excuses. However, unlike previously discussed situations which present high-to-low power status (requests and invitations), swearing appeared remarkably in refusing offer :

لالا والله والـو سبحان الله/ والله والـو مـاعليهش تكسرت تكسـرت/ لا والله مادقلبها بحـر عليهـا/ لا والله ماخسـرتك/ لنورمـال يـا يمـا تكسـرت تكسـرت والله ماتخلّصـيها/ والله مانحكمهم عليك

This situation brings to the fore two important Algerian cultural norms which dictate that the behaviour of fining is detested and abhorrent, and the behaviour of showing solidarity with the poor woman to avoid embarrassing her is highly appreciated.

Besides, the third situation of refusing offers presents a variance compared to situations of refusing requests and invitations where the speaker is lower than the hearer in power status. The respondents in this case used indirect refusals by means of excuses, apologies, and thanks. But, swearing appeared only in some instances such as:

والله فرصة مليحة بصح مانقدرش نبعد/ صحيت بزاف بصح الله غالب والله مانقدر نروح عندي عايلـة/ والله مانقدر نقبل الترقية ظروفي ما تسمحش نروح

The respondents in this situation did not feel a pression since nobody refuses promotions unless he has reasonable reasons, then the speakers are not obliged to swear to show to their bosses that they are telling the truth.

d) Swearing in refusals to suggestions

In refusing suggestions made by persons of equal power, respondents mainly used direct refusals and excuses because the interlocutors are intimate. Only very few instances of swearing were noticed accompanied with excuses, for example: والله ما قادرة والوقت ما كانش

In the second situation of refusing suggestions, the respondents reflected through direct refusals, indirect refusals, excuses and promise for future action. However, this situation revealed a total absence of swearing due to the exertion of high-power relationships.

The last situation of refusing suggestions was from a low-to-high position. The participants varied in their refusals accordingly and used indirect refusals including excuses and promises for future actions. Swearing was present in only few instances such as:

والله جربتهم من قيل ما فادونيش هما بعد يتودرو

The low frequency of swearing in this situation may be rationalized by the fact that such a suggestion was taken for granted as an offense so that the respondents started defending themselves giving various excuses with no need to use swearing to back up their responses.

Conclusion

Swearing to Allah is used as an assurance to help people back up their refusals and save their self-image. In the Algerian culture, albeit people belong to different subcultures: East, West and South, they tend to employ swearing as an adjunct to refusals in the same manner. The use of swearing is triggered by the ultimate desire to save face and maintain interpersonal relationships.

In situations where the interactants are equal in power status, the use of swearing varied from one type of refusal to another. It was used frequently in refusing invitations and offers, less frequently in refusing requests and rarely in refusing suggestions. In situations of high-to-low power relationships, swearing was totally absent in refusing suggestions, almost absent in refusing both requests and invitations, but it was remarkably present in refusing offers. The latter was mainly due to the nature of the Algerian culture which emphasizes solidarity with the poor. In situations of low-to-high

power status, swearing was moderately used in refusals to offers, invitations, and suggestions alike. However, it was remarkably present in refusals to requests.

Henceforth, it can be concluded that the use of swearing correlates negatively with power status relationships. Generally speaking, the more the power status is, the less swearing is used except for the case of refusing offers where the Algerian cultural norms interfere to shape the behaviour of its speakers who show solidarity with the poor and detest fining. These findings seem to corroborate the view that the Algerian culture can be classified as a religious culture.

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