

Refusals in Face-to-face Haggling Exchanges by Algerian Male Vendors in the Market of Medina J'dida in Oran

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study is two-fold. First, it looks into the refusal strategies employed by Algerian male vendors when performing refusal in face-to-face haggling encounters. Second, it delineates the mitigation devices employed to dissipate any potential threat on buyers' self-image. The data were drawn from 115 naturally occurring haggling exchanges in the market of Medina J'dida in Oran. Findings revealed that Algerian vendors use two main categories, namely indirect strategies and combination strategies with a clear inclination toward the direct-indirect combination strategy. Besides, vendors employed five mitigational post-refusals, including apology, terms of address, grounders, invoking the name of God, and flattery in order to underpin their interpersonal links with buyers. The extensive use of elaborate refusals and various mitigation strategies underscores the postulate that a haggling encounter is not a mere transaction devoid of interpersonal concerns.

Keywords: refusal; haggling exchanges; combination; mitigation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Haggling or price negotiation is a frequent activity traditionally

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associated with public marketplaces in many societies. It often revolves around the topic of price. Put it other words, a haggling exchange is initiated when a vendor quotes a price for a product and the customer responds by either slashing the price or stating what s/he considers to be the appropriate cost. All sorts of products are subject to price negotiation except for grocery stores and meat markets as these items are sold at fixed prices and controlled by the authorities. Even more so, buying commodities without negotiation is considered as an aberrant behaviour (Canagarajah, 1995). Likewise, Algerian buyers customarily engage in price negotiations which sometimes last a few seconds or several minutes until the two parties reach an agreeable price.

The current study endeavours to examine the realisation of refusals as well as the selection of mitigating devices in haggling encounters by Algerian male vendors in the market of New Town in Oran, locally known as Medina J'dida. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

1. How do Algerian male vendors refuse price reduction in bargaining encounters?
2. Which mitigation strategies do Algerian male vendors employ in haggling encounters?

The researcher hypothesises that Algerian sellers pay attention to interpersonal work, especially in extended haggling exchanges through resorting to both indirectness and mitigation.

This study, therefore, lends support to the previous research into the speech act of refusal which has been sparsely studied in relation to marketplace discourse. To this end, 115 naturally-occurring haggling exchanges between salesperson and buyers were ethnographically observed in the Mdina J'dida market over several weeks and in separate periods in 2021 and 2022 .All exchanges were immediately recorded by hand or using a voice recorder and later coded by

semantic formulas; classified and subsequently analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively. In accordance with Duranti's (1997) postulate that "a researcher must find the appropriate place and the right demeanour for a given place" (p.101), the researcher in the present study acted as a passive participant in order to get as close as possible to the interactants and reach a rich description of the haggling encounters without falling into the trap of observer's paradox (see Labov, 1972a).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Refusals and mitigation

Refusals, as Chen, Ye & Zhang (1925) note, take place when the speaker fails to engage in a speech act proposed by the interlocutor. Refusal falls under the category of commissives in Searle's (1979) taxonomy since the speaker commits himself (not) to carry out a future action. Refusals hence threaten the addressee's positive-face wants and feelings (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987).

The negative effect of refusals can be reduced by either indirectness or mitigation. The latter is defined by Fraser (1980, p.341), as "the modification of a speech act." It denotes the attenuation of unwelcome effects of a speech act on the hearer and through using a set of mitigating devices. Moreover, Bella (2011) suggested that refusals can be formulated as head acts which can be modified internally and/or externally in order to assuage the unwelcome effect of an utterance. Internal modifiers are elements within the head act itself, the presence of which is not necessary for identifying the illocutionary force of it, but serve to upgrade or downgrade its potential positive or negative effects, respectively. External modifiers, on the other hand, are supportive moves which constitute pre-and-post sequences and primarily affect the context in which the utterance is embedded, and hence indirectly modify the

illocutionary force of the speech act (Faerch and Kasper, 1989).

2.2. Previous Studies

A great bulk of research has been conducted on refusal speech act from different perspectives, including, among others, (Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz , 1990; Kong, 1998; Felix-Brasdefer, 2006; Abdolrezapour Dastjerdi, 2012). These studies focused mainly on the appropriate use of refusal strategies with regard to age, social distance, and social status. Likewise, a plethora of studies have been conducted on refusals and mitigational devices in the Arab world, including, among others, (Abdel-Jawed ,2000; Nelson, Carson, El Batal & El Bakary 2002; Al-Eryani, 2007; Morkus, 2014; El-Dakhs, 2018; Al Kayed, Al-Zu'bi and Alakayid , 2020; Bennacer, 2021)

The aforementioned studies represent a small portion of the research into refusals. Nonetheless, there is still no ample research into refusals and mitigation in such naturalistic contexts as marketplaces.

Using recorded calls of salespersons-customers exchanges and two questionnaires, Samaali & Bayouli (2019) examined the frequent strategies British people use in response to a salesperson offers on the phone. Findings exhibited a range of refusal strategies which operate on a continuum of directness-indirectness. Additionally, Placencia (2019) explored refusals of offers on Mercado Libre -Ecuador, an online marketplace. She found out that most sellers tended to use verbal strategies like affiliative address, greeting, apologies, justifications, and expressions of thanks in order to mitigate the negative effect of refusals on the buyer-seller relationship.

With regard to studies investigating market discourse in Arabic, Kharraki (2001) demonstrated that Moroccan men use more solidarity markers than women as they look at bargaining as a face threatening act whilst women consider it as a sign of one's housekeeping skills. Furthermore, based on naturally-occurring speech data, Mudhafar &

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Ali Hussein (2013) identified 12 bargaining strategies that are used by Mosuli buyers and sellers like advice, warning, request, and swearing.

On the whole, if not performed appropriately, refusals could lead to unintended offence and communication breakdown between sellers and buyers.

3. Results

The transcribed data were coded drawing on an adapted version of Beebe et al.'s (1990) (see Appendix) categorisation of refusal strategies, in which one act was categorised as the head act and any other accompanying strategies were identified as supportive moves. However, by virtue of the fact that our data contained extended authentic face-to face haggling interactions, we applied this scheme to all the acts that can stand alone as refusal head acts, even within the same turn. For example, “No, there is not much profit in it”, which was coded as [direct refusal][Excuse, reason, explanation], comprises two head acts. Accordingly, two main types of refusal strategies were found to be produced by the Algerian vendors in response to customers’ price negotiations, namely indirect strategies and combination strategies.

3.1. Overall distribution of refusal strategies

Two direct strategies and seven indirect strategies were utilised by Algerian male vendors. Overall, 209 refusal strategies, including 61 direct strategies and 148 indirect strategies were reported in the data as depicted in Figure 1 below.

3.1.1. Direct strategies

The subjects opted for a negative particle *la* ‘no’, and a negative ability statement *manqadf* ‘ I can’t’ in order explicitly express their unwillingness or inability to accept their customers’ request or offer, as exemplified in (1) and (2), respectively:

- (1) *lla*, *mafihæf* ('no, there is not much profit in it'). [No+ excuse, reason, explanation]
(2) *manqadf*, *hedi hiya su:ma* (' I can't, that's the price ') [Negative ability +Confirmation]

Interestingly, all direct refusals attested in the data were either combined with indirect strategies or accompanied by mitigation devices in order to soften the blunt refusals.

3.1.2. Indirect strategies

1. *Excuse, reason, and explanation*: As presented in Figure 1 below, this strategy is the most frequently utilised by vendors in performing refusals. Vendors used such short explanations as *mafihæf* 'there is not much profit in it', and *raha promotion* 'it is already discounted'.

2. *Confirmation*: the response *hadi hiya su:metaha* 'that is the price', which alludes to a transactional norm, is used as a substitute to Beebe et al.'s 'statement of principle to convey that the price is fixed and unnegotiable, or to indicate vendors' inability to revise the price by quoting it again, as Examples (3) and (4) show, respectively.

(3) Seller: *150, kɔlfi 150*. [Confirmation]

'150, everything is for 150'

(4) Buyer: *matxalılı:f ? nedi çli:k zu:z*

'Can you reduce the price? I will take two.'

Seller: *200, hadi hiya su:metaha*. [Confirmation]

'The price is 200.'

3. *Swearing*: this strategy is identified in the present study as a separate refusal strategy. The following is a representative sample of utterances in which vendors use *wellah* 'I swear to Allah' in order to make buyers believe them:

(5) Buyer: *ha zi:d glaçli*

'Lower the price a bit?'

Seller: *wellah mafihæf*. *Mafihæf*. [Swearing + Avoidance (repetition)]

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‘I swear to God there is not much profit in it. There is not much profit in it.’

4. *Apology*: vendors tended to use the expression *smeħli* ‘sorry’ in order to apologise for their inability to comply with buyers’ request for price reduction, typically when addressing women. This strategy is used either in combination with other indirect strategies or as a supportive move.

5. *Avoidance*: is used by vendors, albeit moderately, to avoid price negotiation. It encompasses three sub-strategies.

a. *Repetition*: this strategy, which appears in Beebe et al. (1990) as ‘repetition of part of the request’, refers here to a repetition or re-statement of the reason for vendors’ inability to comply with the buyers’ offer/ request.

(6) Seller: wellah *bon prix*. *Gæç rana dejri:nelhom prix sbæb*. (Avoidance : repetition)

‘I swear, *the price is affordable. We are selling everything at an affordable price.*’

In (6) above, the seller expressed his refusal indirectly by re-stating the reason.

Only one case for both *joking* and *silence* has been identified in the data.

6. *Attempt to dissuade interlocutor*: this strategy comprises six sub-strategies. Only two of them were attested in our data:

a. *Self-defence*: two cases have been identified. Example (7) illustrates one of them.

(7) Seller: *wi:n tru:ħ, matelqahæf bəhæd su:ma*

‘Wherever you go, you will not find it at such a good price’

b. *Criticise the request/ requester*: two cases of unmitigated bluntness or clear criticism by vendors stand out in the data. The following is an excerpt from an interaction in which a customer

tried his best to knock off some dinars. In an edgy tone of voice, the vendor responded straightforwardly.

(8) Seller : maçendi menəqəslek menhə

‘I would no way cheapen the price.’

The refusal strategy employed in the above utterance can be attributed to the bad mood of the vendor who seemed exhausted. Besides, bargaining further for a price reduction may result in a loss on the part of the seller, especially when the profit margin is low. Notwithstanding, rarely were vendors found to be abrupt, rude and /or extremely negative. This happens only when customers haggle over already discounted prices or insist on negotiating the price of cheap commodities.

7. *Alternative or counter-offer*: the price quote in example (8) below is a counter-offer made by the buyer in response to a previous offer by the seller. The vendor indirectly turned down the customer’s offer through quoting an alternative amount:

(9) Buyer: *matkhaliheli:f b 110?* [Counter-offer made by the buyer]

‘Can I take it for 110?’

Seller: *çt’mi 120.* [Counter-offer made by the seller]

‘Give me 1200 da.’

In the following example, a rejection of a customer’s attempt to slash the price of “a deep fryer” is implied in a suggestion made by the seller which is a cheaper deep fryer than the one picked by the customer:

(10) Buyer: *Alla:h jxali:k hedi řçæl?*

‘May God bless you! How much is this?’

Seller: *Friteuse? 300 milles*

‘Deep fryer ? 3000 dinars’

Buyer: *Su:ma telja taħəha řçæl ?*

‘How much is its final price?’

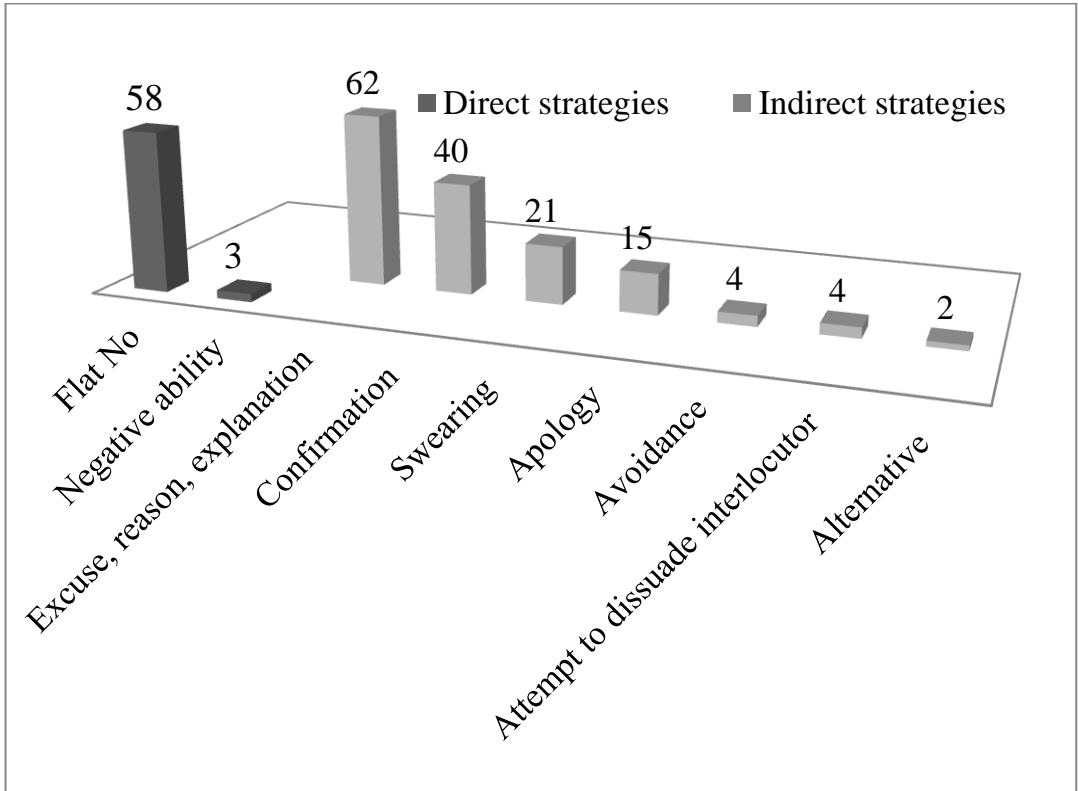
Seller : *Su:mət lbi:ç hadi:k hıja. kejna hadi b 200 milles.*
[Confirmation + alternative]

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‘This is the final price. There is another (deep fryer) for 2000 dinars’

Thus, counterstatement, including counter-offer or alternative, functions as a refusal strategy.

Fig. 1. Overall distribution of direct and indirect refusal strategies.



3.2. Refusal Realisation in Haggling Exchanges: Indirect Strategies and Combination Patterns

Refusals in bargaining exchanges were realised in two different ways. Some participants (24%) opted for indirect refusals whereas most of them (76%) opted for combination strategy. This is further elucidated in the subsequent sections.

3.2.1. Indirect strategies

Six plain indirect strategies were used by vendors, namely excuse, reason, and explanation, confirmation, swearing, attempt to

dissuade interlocutor, and alternative, comprising 24% of all instances of refusals. All these strategies are elucidated in section 3.1.2. above .

Table 1. Distribution of indirect refusal strategies

Indirect strategies	Frequency
Excuse, reason, explanation	10
Confirmation	10
Swearing	3
Attempt to dissuade interlocutor	3
Avoidance	2
Alternative	1
Total	29

3.2.2. Combination Patterns

Three combination patterns were employed by Algerian male vendors, including direct-direct (2%), direct-indirect (65%), and indirect-indirect (33%) combination patterns.

a. *Direct-Direct combination strategy*

Two instances of direct-direct combination strategy were identified in this study where vendors realised refusals with double negation, i.e., a flat *lla* ‘No’ co-occurred with negative ability *manqadf* ‘I can’t’. Consider the following example:

(11) Seller: *lla, manqadf*. Mafihæf. [No+ negative ability+ Excuse, reason, explanation]

‘No, I can’t. There is not much profit in it.’

When employed, direct-direct combination strategy is tended to be accompanied by a mitigating strategies such as a brief explanation.

b. *Direct-Indirect combination strategy*

In 59 responses, vendors employed a direct strategy first, and then used another head act, which is an indirect strategy as shown in Table 2 below.

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Table 2. Distribution of direct-indirect sub-category

Combination patterns	Frequency	%	Examples
No + Excuse, reason, explanation	36	61%	See Example (1) above.
No + Confirmation	17	29%	See Example (2) above
No + Swearing	5	8%	<i>lla, wellah mafihə</i> ‘No, I swear, there isn’t much profit in it.’
No + Attempt to dissuade interlocutor	1	2%	<i>lla, jla lqitəhə bəhəd su:ma neçt’i :k drahemhə</i> ‘If you find it elsewhere with such a price, I will give you back your money.’
Total	59	100	

c. Indirect-Indirect combination strategy

In 30 responses vendors used an indirect strategy in conjunction with another indirect one. The following table shows eight combination patterns of indirect strategies.

Table 3: Distribution of indirect-indirect sub-category

Combination patterns	Frequency	%	Examples
Confirmation+ Excuse, reason, explanation	6	20%	[...]su:ma hedi hijə, prix fixe. simenə zeja yədi jətbədəl, yədi tku:n t’lçə [...] “[...] that’s the price; it is fixed. Prices will rise anew next week [...]”
Apology+ Confirmation	5	17%	<i>Smehli hedi hijə sūmtəhə</i> ‘Sorry, that’s the price.’

Excuse, reason, explanation+ Apology	5	17%	<i>Rahi sold, səmhılınə.</i> ‘It is already discounted, sorry!’
Excuse, reason, explanation+ Swearing	5	17%	<i>mafiħæf , wollah mefiħə</i> ‘ There is not much profit in it. I swear, there is not much profit in it’
Apology+ Swearing	5	17%	<i>Smehli, wollah mefiħə</i> ‘Sorry, I swear, there is not much profit in it.’
Swearing + Avoidance	2	6%	See Examples (5) and (6) above.
Swearing+ Confirmation	1	3	<i>wollah mefiħə, hedi hiĵa səmetəħə</i> ‘I swear there is not much profit in it. The price is fixed. ‘
Confirmation+ Alternative	1	3	Consider Example (10) above.
Total	30	100	

With regard to realisation patterns of each strategy, excuse, reason, explanation; confirmation, apology and swearing are the most frequently used.

On the whole, our findings exhibit that direct-indirect combination strategy is the most commonly used strategy by vendors, indirect-indirect strategy is the second most frequent, whereas direct-direct combination is the least employed strategy.

3.3. *Accompanying mitigation devices*

Only external supportive moves were identified in the data. The five mitigational devices employed by vendors include apology, grounders, terms of address, invoking the name of God and flattery.

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1. *Apology*: is the mitigation strategy most frequently attested in the data. It represents 45% of all modifiers used by vendors. Algerian sellers tended to apologise immediately after performing refusals as shown in Example (12) below:

(12) Seller: Ila, *semħili*, hedi hija sometəhom [direct refusal+ apology+ confirmation]

‘No, sorry, that is the price.’

2. *Grounders*: vendors tended to give excuses, reasons, and explanations for rejecting the request or offer such as *raha promotion* ‘it is already discounted’. This strategy represents 19% of all mitigators.

3. *Terms of address*: participants accompanied their refusals with various terms of address (19%) in order to dissipate any potential threat to the customer’s face, such as **xəti** sister, **xu:ja** brother, **lħeza** ‘pilgrim’ and **ostæd** ‘teacher’. Consider the following example in which an old man addressed an old woman using the term “khti” sister to mitigate the impact of refusal:

(13) Seller: *semħili xəti* , ra :nə dejrinha sə:ld [Apology+ Term of address+ Excuse, reason]

‘Sorry *sister*. It is already discounted.’

4. *Invoking the name of God*: two instances of *Allah yaleb* ‘God almighty’ were used as mitigators comprising 10% of all mitigators.

5. *Flattery*: this mitigation device was used in one interaction between a man and a woman. The flattering statement is bolded in example (14) below.

(14) Seller: mafihæf. ***Nti lewla li baçtəhelek bhæd su:ma. Wellah baçtehə b 250***

‘There isn’t much profit in it. You are the first to buy it at this (cheap) price. I swear, I sold it for 250.’

As for the frequency of occurrence of mitigating supportive moves, apology, terms of address and grounders stand out as the three

most frequent ones, whereas the other strategies were used to a lesser extent.

4. Discussion

The main purpose of the study was to probe into the realisation of refusals and the selection of mitigation devices by Algerian vendors in face-to-face haggling exchanges in a well-known market in Oran, Algeria.

With regard to refusal strategies, findings revealed that vendors primarily resorted to two main categories of refusals, including indirect strategies and combinations strategies. The indirect strategies most frequently used are the excuse, reason, explanation and confirmation. As for combination strategies, vendors exhibited clear inclination for direct-indirect over indirect-indirect combination strategy. This can be arguably attributed to the fact that the market of Medina J'dida is a highly frequently area, where several hundred people pass every day in its narrow alleyways which militates against very careful speech. Another plausible explanation for the strong preference for direct-indirect combination pattern could be the low profit margin they get in buying their goods as this market seemingly provides all sorts of products at reasonable and affordable prices. More specifically, vendors favoured the combination strategy which encompasses a direct 'no' in conjunction with the excuse, reason, and explanation strategy. Therefore, vendors overwhelmingly used the excuse reason, strategy. This is consistent with Al-Issa (1998) and Al kayed, M, Al-zu'bi & Alkayid (2020) studies which revealed an overwhelming presence of the excuse, reason, explanation indirect strategy among Jordanians. Moreover, the fact that Algerian vendors displayed an orientation toward combination strategies to perform refusals sustains Feghali's (1997) postulate that Arabic communicative style is characterised by elaborateness.

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Interestingly, and in line with data reported by Al kayed, M, Al-zu'bi & Alkayid (2020), no one used a performative direct refusal, a flat 'no', or negative ability without mitigation. Further, analysis revealed that swearing has been extensively used in Algerian vendors' price negotiations as a way of convincing buyers that what has been said is true. This strategy has been reported in several other studies like Morkus (2009), and Bennacer (2021) which underscored the salience of swearing as a positive face enhancing device that seeks to maintain rapport between speakers.

Insofar as mitigation is concerned, Algerian vendors of the Medina j'dida market utilised five mitigation devices, namely apology, grounders, terms of address, invoking the name of God, and flattery which serve to smooth the possible offence or threat that their rejection may cause. Further, apology was instrumentally present, typically when addressing females. Besides, rarely were the vendors found to use noxious expressions, suggesting that Algerian vendors tend to maintain face and good rapport with buyers because they probably see all buyers as potential future customers. This is consistent with Palcencia (2009), and Kong (1998) studies which emphasised the pivotal role of expectation of continuity of buyer-seller relationship in determining appropriate politeness strategies in service encounters.

5. CONCLUSION

This study aimed at probing into the refusal realisations and mitigation devices used by Algerian vendors in face-to-face haggling exchanges. Findings demonstrated that Algerian vendors resort to two main refusal categories, namely indirect and combination strategies. The former, which alludes to brevity in response, has been mainly used in short conversations. The latter encompasses three sub-categories, including direct-direct, direct-indirect, and indirect-indirect

combinations. Vendors, however, exhibited strong inclination for the direct-indirect combination strategy. Specifically, the combination of direct 'no' and indirect 'excuse, reason, explanation' was the most frequent strategy.

Also noteworthy is the use swearing as a refusal strategy and invoking the name of God as mitigation device. The frequent reference to god reflects the great effect of religion of the Algerian society.

Ultimately, suggestions are made to expand the sample size in order to confirm the generalizability of the finding, taking into consideration the impact of age and gender on the selections of both refusal strategies and mitigation devices in face to face authentic refusal encounters .The use of non-verbal refusal strategies is also a topic worthwhile exploring in future studies.

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Appendix

Classification of refusal strategies (adapted from Beebe et al. (1990))

I- Direct

1. Non-performative “No”
2. Negative willingness/ability (e.g. *manqadf* ‘I can’t.’)

II- Indirect

- A. *Excuse, reason, explanation* (e.g., *mafiħæf* (‘there is not much profit in it’)
- B. *Confirmation* (e.g., *hedi hija su:ma* ‘that’s the price’)
- C. *Swearing* (e.g., *wollah mefiħə* ‘I swear, there isn’t much profit in it.’)
- D. *Apology* (e.g., *smehli* “I’m sorry...”)
- E. *Avoidance* (repetition of the reason) (e.g.,[...] *bon prix. Gæç rana dejri:nelhom prix fbæb* ‘[...] the price is affordable. We are selling everything at an affordable price.’)
- F. *Attempt to dissuade interlocutor* (e.g., *wi:n tru:ħ, matelqahæf bæhæd su:ma* ‘Wherever you go, you will not find it at such a good price.’)
- G. *Alternative* (e.g. *çt’ini 120* ‘give me 1200da’)