

Ways of Using Refusal Utterances: A Pragmatic Study of Refusal Speech Act in Manipuri

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Abstract

Communication can sometimes lead to misunderstanding if it is not used in an appropriate situation. So, caution must be taken while using refusal utterances. Since it is a rejection to offer, invitation, request or suggestion which can hurt someone's feeling. Manipuri employs various ways of using refusals because in Manipuri's culture, great importance is paid in maintaining respect to others. Communication should be done in a non-threatening way, saving each other's face to maintain harmony among them.

The present study aims to discover the different strategies of using refusal utterances in Manipuri. First, the paper starts with a general introduction of speech act along with an explanation of refusal speech act. Then, refusal speech act is described under two headings - direct and indirect refusals. Sub-sections under these headings are organized and studied thoroughly. Indirect refusals are studied here in a wider perspective since native speaker of Manipuri uses indirect refusals more frequently than that of the direct one. In this paper, refusals are also analysed under a small section, that is, substantive and ritual refusals. Then, conclusion ends the paper summing up the whole analysis.

Keywords: speech act, refusal speech act, direct refusals, indirect refusals, ritual refusals.

Introduction

To have a complete knowledge of a particular language does not mean knowing only how to utter a number of grammatically correct sentences. One has to know its culture, appropriate context of usage and a total pragmatic competence to have a meaningful and a successful communication. It is very much important to know the various forms of speech act of that particular language.

In pragmatics, speech act occupies an important place. The major contribution to the study of speech acts was done by J.L. Austin, followed by Searle.

“To communicate we must express propositions with a particular illocutionary force, and in so doing we perform particular kinds of action, such as stating, promising, or warning, which have come to be called speech acts” (Cruse, 2004:345).

Here, in this paper, emphasis will be given to refusal speech acts in Manipuri. Refusals also occupy a major part in speech acts.

Refusal Speech Acts

It is the kind of utterance which is spoken out to perform the action of refusal. Refusals are performed frequently in our daily interaction. Proper care should be taken in using them as it is a negative response to requests, offers, suggestions, and invitations. It can lead to misunderstanding if it is used in an inappropriate situation mainly by non-native speakers since culture differs from place to place.

Presently, in this paper, various strategies of using refusal utterance will be analysed. The model employed in this paper has been referred to Ma Yingxin's paper entitled “The Study of the Chinese Speech Act” and Ghazandri, Bonyadi and Malekzadeh's paper entitling as “Investigating cross-linguistic differences in refusal speech act among native Persian and English speakers”. However, the model employed here is somewhat modified in this present paper. It is classified under two criteria - direct and indirect ways. But, more frequently, indirect ways of using refusal forms are used in Manipuri, since it is very significant for the native speakers of Manipuri, most of the time, to pay great importance to maintaining respect in every speech they utter.

This paper describes the topic concerned, that is, the various forms of refusals, the factors which concern their usage and so on.

1. Direct Refusals

Direct refusal is the type of refusal where the speaker declines the offer, request or suggestion of a person directly, without showing much concern about the feelings of the speaker. For example, ‘no’, ‘I can't’, ‘I don't want to’ in English.

In Manipuri, there are also direct forms of refusal but these are used in limited number, because, in Manipuri culture, it is considered highly offensive or impolite to refuse someone's offer or request right away. But such kind of usage still exists in certain situations.

1.1 The forms of direct refusals are –*ṇəm-moi*, *təl-li*

For example: a refusal for a suggestion to read books after dinner

- i) *əy ṇəm-moi* 'I won't be able to do it'.
 I able-neg.
- ii) *əy təl-li* 'I cannot do it'.
 I lazy-prog.

1.2 Offers or requests are also declined by adding –*niṇ* 'wish' and –*de* 'negative marker' to the verb form. For example:

- iii) *pa niṇ-de* 'I don't want to read.'
 read-wish-neg.
- iv) *ca-niṇ-de* 'I don't want to eat.'
 eat-wish-neg.
- v) *təw-niṇ-de* 'I don't want to do it.'
 do-wish-neg.

Slight difference exists between example i, ii and iii, iv, and v. Insertion of '-*niṇ*' in such direct forms lightens the refusal. However, it is to be noted that such kind of refusal still comes under direct way of rejecting requests or offers.

These kinds of refusals are used among those persons where there is high solidarity between them, that is, between persons of close relationship and of equal status. Younger people are not allowed to use these when expressing their refusal to the elders, but elders can use the same to express refusal to the younger ones. Sometimes, in certain cases, younger person does use such type to elders only if there is a very close association between them, for

example, a child using direct refusal variety to his father because of the close association between them.

Generally, in Meitei (Manipuri) custom, it is found out that usages of indirect forms are higher than direct usage of refusals as they won't offend their requester.

2. Indirect Refusals

Indirect refusal is the kind of refusals where the speaker declines the offer, request or invitation, indirectly. In Meitei culture, to decline an offer or invitation without hurting their feelings is regarded very essential because using the indirect type reflects the refined and cultured nature of the individual. Therefore, indirect refusals are used more frequently than direct forms.

There are many strategies of using indirect refusals which are studied below.

2.1 Wish

For example:

- i) mateṇ-di jam paṇ-niṇ-bə-ni-ne
 help-part-very assist-wish-NMZ-cop-emp.
 'I wish to help you a lot.'

In the above example, some word like 'ədubu' 'but' can also be further added plus giving the reason for the rejection. For example:

- ii) mateṇ-di jam paṇ-niṇ-bə-ni ədubu əy jam t^heṇ-ṇe
 help-part. very assist-wish-NMZ-cop. but I very late-perf.
 'I wish to help you a lot but I am very late.'

This can be used among those of same status, but if it is often used in relation to an elder or a person of higher status or stranger, '-jə' a polite marker is inserted between 'paṇ' and 'niṇ'. For example:

- iii) maten-di jam pan-jə-niŋ-bə-ni adubu əy jam t^hen-ŋe
 help-part. very assist-pol.-wish-NMZ-cop. but I very late-perf.
 ‘I wish to help you a lot but I am very late.’ (Polite form).

2.2 Excuse, Reason, and Explanation

By giving excuses, reasons or explanations, one can refuse an offer of invitation. For example:

- i) əy-həjen-se ərubə t^həbək əmə ləy-re
 I tomorrow-det important work one have-perf.
 ‘I have got an important work tomorrow.’

If it is used to in relation to elders, address terms like ‘khura’, ‘tadə’, ‘mamə’, etc. are added to it, which itself contains a way of expressing politeness.

For example:

- ii) əy-həjen-se ərubə t^həbək əmə ləy-re, tadə.
 I tomorrow-det important work one have-perf. brother
 ‘I have got an important work tomorrow, brother.’

2.3 Statement of Principle

In this condition, the speaker manifests his or her rule or principle to the requester or to the one who is making the suggestion, showing that he or she is not that type to accept such offer or suggestion.

For example:

- i) əy-di mi-ŋon-də hai-jə-də-bə mi-ni
 I-part. Person-towards-loc. Say-refl-neg.-NMZ person-cop.
 ‘I am not the type of person to ask favour to anyone.’

2.4 Promise of Future Acceptance

Here, the speaker turns down an offer by giving a statement of acceptance of doing the present request in the future whether he will do it or not. But as for the present request, it is considered as declining.

For example:

- i) məthəŋ-də-di soi-də-nə təw-rə-ge
next-loc.-part. mistake-neg.-adv. do-dur-inten.
'I will surely do it next time.'

2.5. Conditional 'yes'

In this refusal, the speaker will first show an interest of accepting but gives a condition where it fairly shows that it is a rejection.

For example:

- i) nəŋ-gi-do ja-bə-di ja-bə ədudə əy-se p^hərək ta-re
you-gen-elip. agree-NMZ-det agree-NMZ but I-det problem fall-perf.
'I do agree with your statement but I have got a problem.'

In the above example, the marker – 'do' shows that a previous known statement is embedded in it which makes –'do' an ellipsis marker.

2.6 Statement of Alternative

In this situation, a request or suggestion is being made to a person, where the person replies to the requester by giving him an alternative way, that is, extending the offer or request to a third party, thus declining the suggestion or offer.

For example:

- i) tombə-də oi-nə hai-bi-u
Tomba-loc. be-alt-say-pol.-comd.
'Please say it to Tomba.'

2.7 Formal Refusal Form

Generally, to a higher status person, elders, strangers or acquaintance ‘warəwbibə jade’ ‘please don’t mind’, and ‘ɲakpiɡəni’ ‘pardon me’ are used to reject. Such forms are also considered very formal. It can be used in a formal occasion like public meeting, TV show, radio program, etc.

For example:

- i) məjam ɲak-pi-ɡəni, mədu-gi wap^həm-du konə k^hən-nə-bə-nə cum-ɡəni k^hən-jə-i
everybody support-pol-un.asp that-gen statement-det later think-rec-NMZ-adv
true-un.asp think-refl.-smp.
‘I beg your pardon, but it will be of much better if it is discussed later on.’
- ii) warəw-bi-bə ja-de məjam, t^həwrəm-si ɲəhak lep-cə-ru-re
disappoint-pol.-NMZ agree-neg everybody program-det awhile stop-pol-
comd-perf.
‘Please don’t mind as our program had stopped for a while.’

2.8 Lack of Enthusiasm

In direct refusal forms like ‘təwniŋde’, and ‘caniŋde’, the morpheme -da is added to it making them indirect forms. Because adding the marker ‘-da’ in it raises a question of confusion, whether to do it or not, making the person to hesitate in accepting the request. So, it is a hesitation marker. Therefore, it is considered as one of the indirect refusal forms.

For example:

- i) təw-niŋ-de-da
do-wish-neg-hes.mk
‘I don’t feel like doing it’.
- ii) ca-niŋ-de-da
eat-wish-neg-hes.mk
‘I don’t feel like eating it.’

Again in forms like ‘təwniŋde’, and ‘caniŋde’ the morpheme ‘kəja’ can be added to it turning them into indirect refusal forms. ‘Kəja’ signifies the meaning of the degree of emphasis, where the degree is of lesser quantity.

For example:

- i) kəja ca-niŋ-de ‘I don’t feel like eating.’

In this example, the speaker shows his or her lack of enthusiasm in accepting an offer or request, thus turning it down.

2.9 Criticize the Requester

Here, in such refusals, the request or suggestion of a person is being criticized. Some of the examples are provided below:

- a) mədu natəi cadəbə wanida
- b) nappu cadəbə wanida
- c) nap cadəbə wanida
- d) nappu tade
- e) məwoŋ cade
- f) jugot wajon cade

The meanings of the above examples mean the same, that is, ‘it is not a suitable statement.’ These different forms are used according to different factors like age, person, and community.

2.10 Acceptance Functioning as a Refusal

Here the speaker refuses by giving an unspecific or indefinite reply.

For example:

- i) əy k^həŋ-de-ne əy-bu kərəmkan-də ŋəmdoi-no
I know-neg-emp I-acc when-loc able-intr
I don’t know when I will be able to do that.’

2.11 Avoidance

a) **Postponement:** Here, an offer or suggestion is declined by postponing it by the speaker.

For example: k^həl-lək-k^hi-ge ‘I will think on it.’
think-start-def.-inten.

b) **Non-verbal:** Refusals are also done by gesture like nodding head, eye gesture or simply by maintaining silence.

c) **Repetition of past request:** The word ‘kəi haibə’ (what) is added before the same request in this kind of refusal. Here, the speaker avoids the request or offer pretending not to hear it and then, repeats the same request. It can be also a kind of mockery resulting in the decline of the offer or request.

For example:

- A: həjeŋ t^həbək əmtə təw-min-na-si ‘let us do a work together.’
Tomorrow work once do-together-rec.-let
- B: ha! kəy hai-bə, t^həbək əmtə təw-min-nə-se-ba
what what say-NMZ work once do-together-rec.let-NMZ
‘what did you say, do a work together, huh?’

d) **Topic Switch:** Normally, ‘ŋaikho’ or ‘ədo’ are put in the beginning of the response where the responder usually avoids an offer or request by just switching off the topic. For example:

1. ŋaikho, nəhan-gi-do kəmdəw-k^hra-ge
wait day before yesterday-gen-det how-intr-inten.
‘Wait, how did it go about that previous thing?’ OR
2. ədo, nəhan-gi-do kəmdəw-k^hra-ge
that day before yesterday-gen-det how-intr-inten.
‘How did it go about that previous thing?’

‘ṅaikho’ and ‘ədo’ are the forms which are used to switch a topic, so they are called as a ‘topic shifter.’

e) **Jokes:** Telling a joke by the responder when a request is made to a person is also considered as one of the indirect refusals.

For example:

- (i) həre həre nəŋ wari-si-di ‘what a statement’
interj-interj you story-det-part.

- (ii) ont^hok- ont^hok-pə wa-ta-ni ‘what a statement’
interj-interj-NMZ statement-mode-cop.

3. Substantive and Ritual Refusal

Refusals can be classified under two headings - substantive refusal and ritual refusal. When a speaker refuses an offer or invitation, if he or she means it ‘no’ from inside and outside, then these are known substantive refusals. Different types of direct and indirect refusals are under substantive refusals.

In ritual refusal, the speaker refuses in its surface form but internally wants to accept it. In Manipuri culture, to accept an offer or invitation right away is considered highly unrefined. So, at first the invitee usually declines the invitation or offer but comes to accept it at the end. Such kind of refusal is known as ritual refusal. The forms are - jare, ja-jə-re, ja-jə-re-da, ja-rə-ni-da, meaning ‘it is okay’. It carries a negative meaning of declining in its surface form but internally it carries a meaning of an acceptance. The one who invites normally knows that it is not a refusal but a mark of deference of acceptance, so he or she insists on them resulting in acceptance later on.

For example:

A: ja-rə-ni, pi-rək-lə-nu ‘it is okay, please don’t give anymore.’
Agree-cop give-start-proh.

B: pi-rək-ke pi-rək-ke, puk^ho ‘I’ll give some, just take it.’
give-start-smp give-start-smp take-comd.

Sometimes, in certain situations, these forms can also be under substantive refusal. It can be used to refuse indirectly, both internally and externally.

Conclusion

From the above study, it is found that refusals can be classified under two headings - direct refusal and indirect refusal. The study has confirmed that using direct refusals in Manipuri is considered highly offensive. So, various strategies of using indirect refusals like giving excuses, avoiding, formal forms, statement of principle, etc., are used more frequently by the native speaker. Factors like age, status, and degree of solidarity are considered as important criteria when studying refusal speech.

Again, the paper shows that refusals can be discussed under substantive and ritual refusals. All the varieties of direct and indirect refusals come under substantive refusal. The base form ‘jare’ and its variants come under ritual refusal, which is a type of refusal where there is acceptance inside its speech and refusal in its surface form.

The Meitei community pays great regard to certain social and moral codes. These general norms are laid great importance as the community believes these codes to be inevitable in the progress and social harmony of the whole community. These moral codes shape the personality development of individuals maintaining peace and tranquillity.

Language being the primary medium for social discourses has greatly been influenced by these values. For instance, the honour and respect paid to elders are chiefly manifested through hand-picked, exquisite words. No doubt the Meitei community has been able to conserve a rich heritage of culture and tradition and the chief medium being proper training and love of using refined, courteous language.

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