

Linguistic politeness in Mexico: Refusal strategies among male speakers of Mexican Spanish

J. César Félix-Brasdefer*

*Indiana University, Department of Spanish and Portuguese, Ballantine Hall 844,
1020 East Kirkwood Ave., Bloomington, IN 47405, USA*

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Abstract

This study investigates the linguistic strategies employed by monolingual native speakers (NSs) of Mexican Spanish of one community in Mexico in refusal interactions in formal/informal situations. The study focuses on three aspects of politeness: (1) degree of formality; (2) politeness systems and strategy use; and (3) politeness and the notion of face in Mexico. Twenty Mexican male university students participated in four role-play interactions; each participant interacted with two NSs of Spanish, with one NS in formal situations and with a different interlocutor in informal situations. The production data were supplemented by verbal reports to examine speakers' perceptions of refusals. The findings show that in this community politeness is realized by means of formulaic/semi-formulaic expressions employed to negotiate face (Watts, 2003). An analysis of the refusal interactions indicates that among these speakers, the negotiation of face is accomplished largely by various indirect attempts at (re)negotiating a successful resolution. Also, face needs are oriented towards the group, emphasizing involvement over independence (Scollon and Scollon, 2001). Finally, the notion of negative face, as proposed in Brown and Levinson (1987), is re-examined in light of the data.

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1. Introduction

Current research based on politeness theory has critically re-examined previous accounts of politeness phenomena and offers an alternative for investigating politeness in interaction (Bravo and Briz, 2004; Eelen, 2001; Locher, 2004; Locher and Watts, 2005; Márquez Reiter and Placencia, 2005:chap. 4; Mills, 2003; Watts, 2003; Wierzbicka, 2003). During the course of

* Tel.: +1 812 855 9551; fax: +1 812 855 4526.

E-mail address: cfelixbr@indiana.edu.

social interaction, interlocutors engage in a negotiation of face relationships (Scollon and Scollon, 2001) and employ strategies to express a series of communicative acts in conversation such as requesting, complaining, or refusing. Politeness is a form of social interaction that is conditioned by the sociocultural norms of a particular society; it can be expressed through communicative and non-communicative acts. The present study investigates the linguistic strategies employed by male native speakers of Mexican Spanish to maintain the equilibrium of interpersonal relationships in the course of refusal interactions in formal and informal situations.

According to Watts (2003), linguistic politeness may be realized by means of both formulaic and semi-formulaic utterances.¹ Formulaic utterances are linguistic expressions that are used in ritualized forms of verbal interaction and comprise forms of address, expressions commonly used in specific speech acts such as thanking, apologizing, or refusing, and ritualized expressions of leave-taking. On the other hand, semi-formulaic expressions are conventionalized forms that “carry out indirect speech acts appropriate to the politic behavior of a social situation” (Watts, 2003:169) and may include linguistic forms that internally modify a speech act to soften the illocutionary force of a statement (e.g., *I don’t think, maybe, probably*), solidarity markers that support mutual knowledge of the participants (e.g., *you know*), and sentential structures containing specific modal verbs (e.g., *May I ask you to open the door?*). It should be noted that although no linguistic expressions are inherently polite or impolite, some expressions may be open to a polite or impolite interpretation in a given context.

Empirical work on linguistic politeness has focused on various aspects of pragmatics in different varieties of the Spanish-speaking world. Bravo (2003), Bravo and Briz (2004), and Placencia and Bravo (2002) provide collections of studies that examine theoretical and empirical issues related to the realization of linguistic politeness, including an analysis of various speech acts in different varieties of Spanish from Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, Spain, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Other studies have examined linguistic politeness and the notion of politeness in various varieties of Spanish and with different speech acts: compliments in Peninsular Spanish (Lorenzo-Dus, 2001); directive speech acts in Colombian and Peninsular Spanish (Delgado, 1995); face-work and face-threatening acts in Cuban (Ružičková, 1998), Ecuadorian (Placencia, 1996), and Peninsular (Hernández-Flores, 1999) Spanish; invitations and refusals to invitations in Peruvian, Venezuelan, and other Latin American varieties of Spanish (Félix-Brasdefer, 2003a; García, 1992, 1999); perceptions of politeness in Mexican and Peninsular Spanish (Curcó, 1998; Curcó and De Fina, 2002); refusals in Puerto Rican Spanish (Ramos, 1991); requests in Uruguayan and Peninsular (Márquez Reiter, 2002), Ecuadorian and Peninsular (Placencia, 1998), and Mexican (Félix-Brasdefer, 2005) Spanish; requests and apologies in Argentinean and Uruguayan Spanish (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Márquez Reiter, 2000); reprimanding and responding to a reprimand in Peruvian and Venezuelan Spanish (García, 2004); requests and reprimands in Peruvian Spanish (C. García, 1993, 1996); and suggestions and requests in Mexican Spanish (Koike, 1994), among others.

In general, the focus of the studies mentioned above has been on linguistic politeness, that is, a description of the most commonly employed linguistic expressions utilized to perform different speech acts in various regions of the Spanish-speaking world. Further, most of these studies examined various aspects of mitigation, an important aspect of linguistic politeness; mitigation serves to attenuate the negative effects of speech acts that may threaten the speaker’s negative face, such as direct refusals or requests (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Caffi, 1999; Félix-Brasdefer,

¹ The term ‘utterances’ is taken from Watts’ (2003, chap. 7: “Structures of linguistic politeness”) original definition of ‘formulaic, ritualized utterances’ and will be used in the current study to refer to linguistic expressions or routines.

2004, 2005; Fraser, 1980; García, 1992, 1999; Márquez Reiter, 2000). Yet, while most research on linguistic politeness has focused on analyzing apologies and requests (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Holmes, 1995; Márquez Reiter, 2000; Mills, 2003; Trosborg, 1995, among others) and compliments, using tools of conversation analysis (Golato, 2005) or Wolfson's (1988) 'Bulge theory', to date no study has examined the realization of linguistic politeness during the speech act of refusing in social interaction in a Mexican sociocultural context. With the exception of several studies on refusals in English (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 1991; Beebe et al., 1990; Nelson et al., 2002; Smith, 1998), studies on refusals in Spanish are limited to the Peninsular, Peruvian, Puerto Rican, and Venezuelan varieties (García, 1992, 1999; Margalef-Boada, 1993; Ramos, 1991).

Refusals are face-threatening acts (Brown and Levinson, 1987) and belong to the category of commissives because they commit the refuser to (not) performing an action (Searle, 1977). Refusals function as a response to an initiating act and are considered a speech act by which a speaker "[fails] to engage in an action proposed by the interlocutor" (Chen et al., 1995:121). From a sociolinguistic perspective, refusals are important because they are sensitive to social variables such as gender, age, level of education, power, and social distance (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Fraser, 1990; Smith, 1998). Overall, refusals are complex speech acts that require not only long sequences of negotiation and cooperative achievements, but also "face-saving maneuvers to accommodate the noncompliant nature of the act" (Gass and Houck, 1999:2).

2. Theoretical framework

Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed a universal model of linguistic politeness and claimed that politeness is realized linguistically by means of various strategies across cultures. Central to this model of politeness is the concept of 'face', derived from Goffman (1967), which Brown and Levinson (1987:61) define as "the public self-image that every member [of a society] wants to claim for himself", and the authors recognize that everyone has similar face wants. The authors distinguish between two aspects of face that they claim to be universal: positive and negative. While positive face refers to the hearer's desire to be appreciated or approved of (e.g., by seeking agreement, solidarity, reciprocity), negative face "represents the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction, i.e., freedom of action and freedom from imposition" (Brown and Levinson, 1987:61) (e.g., by being indirect, giving deference, being apologetic). According to Brown and Levinson, face is invested; it is something that can be lost, and it must be constantly attended to in interaction.

Further, Brown and Levinson argue that during social interaction a speaker must rationally assess the nature of a face-threatening act (FTA) (e.g., a refusal). This assessment of the seriousness of the act involves three independent and culture-sensitive factors: the social distance (D) and social power (P) between a speaker and a hearer, and the absolute ranking (R) of imposition in a particular culture. Although D and P are universal, Brown and Levinson acknowledge the fact that diverse cultures will interpret them differently; as to R, it is culture-specific since the imposition of the act may vary according to the culture. Once the degree of the FTA has been assessed, the speaker must select from a set of five strategies which allow him/her to avoid or to minimize a FTA (1987:69). These strategies are based on a hierarchy of binary choices and are ordered with respect to the degree of politeness or face-work involved: first, the speaker has to decide whether to do or not to do the FTA; if he decides to do it, then he must decide to do it either on record or off record (e.g., by using irony, understatement, rhetorical

questions). If the decision is to go on record, the speaker must perform the act with or without redressive action (e.g., ‘turn off the light, please’ versus ‘turn off the light’). Finally, if the speaker chooses to perform a FTA with redressive action, he/she must do it using positive or negative politeness strategies (e.g., ‘Nicky, honey, turn off the light’ versus ‘Could you please turn off the light?’). Overall, Brown and Levinson view linguistic politeness as a means of conflict avoidance; in their framework, the emphasis is placed on the speaker, not on the hearer, as an independent member of a society (by negative politeness).

In order to avoid the confusion that might result from the use of the terms ‘positive’ and ‘negative’, the notions of positive and negative face were examined by Scollon and Scollon (2001), taking into account individual and group needs. These authors used the term *involvement* as a way of reminding us that the emphasis is on the common ground and highlights the “person’s right and need to be considered a normal, contributing, or supporting member of society” (2001:46). Involvement is realized by such discourse strategies as paying attention to others, claiming in-group membership, using first names, or to show that the speaker is closely connected to the hearer. On the other hand, they use the term *independence* to emphasize the individuality of the participants. Independence is shown by such discourse strategies as making minimal assumptions, using formal names and titles, or by giving options to the interlocutor. As observed by these authors, the original meaning of the terms ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ “can easily be forgotten and readers can too easily begin to think of ‘positive politeness’ as good and ‘negative politeness’ as bad” (2001:47).²

Based on these observations, Scollon and Scollon classified face relationships into three politeness (or face) systems. According to this model of politeness, in a deference politeness system, the interlocutors see themselves at the same social level with no interlocutor exerting power over the other (–Power), but with a distant relationship (+Distance). As a result, both interlocutors use independence strategies, including expressions that minimize threat to avoid the risk of losing face. In a solidarity politeness system, interlocutors see themselves as being of equal social position (–Power) and with a close relationship (–Distance); in this system, the interlocutors use involvement strategies to assume or express reciprocity or to claim a common point of view. Finally, in a hierarchical politeness system, one participant is in a superordinate position (+Power) and the other is in a subordinate position (–Power). In this asymmetrical system, where the relationship may be close or distant (–Distance or +Distance), Scollon and Scollon observed that while the participant with power may use involvement strategies, the participant in a lower position may employ independence strategies to minimize threat or to show respect to the interlocutor. In particular, the independence aspect of face shows that “a person may act with some degree of autonomy and that he or she respects the rights of others to their own autonomy” (Scollon and Scollon, 2001:47).³

² Cf. Scollon and Scollon (2001:chap. 3). In their view, the term ‘involvement’ is preferred over ‘positive politeness’, and ‘independence’ over ‘negative politeness’. These terms were adopted in this study since it is believed that the terms ‘involvement’ and ‘independence’ create fewer analytical complications for the reader. As pointed out by one reviewer, Scollon and Scollon’s model of politeness is mainly based on an analysis among middle class members of Chinese society in Hong Kong; yet, their model offers an insightful alternative for examining politeness and interpersonal communication in social interaction.

³ Although the hierarchical politeness system described in Scollon and Scollon (2001) may be more representative of Chinese society in a professor–student relationship, one reviewer noted that this pattern (i.e., ‘the participant with power uses involvement strategies’) may not be as common in the United States where places of employment are concerned with issues of sexual harassment.

It should be noted that neither aspect of face, involvement or independence, should be considered as an absolute expression. Instead, in any communication both aspects of face are projected simultaneously to show the appropriate degree of involvement or independence toward the interlocutor. Most importantly, the primacy of involvement or independence in a society is subject to the sociocultural norms and cultural expectations established by the members of a particular culture.

2.1. Cultural considerations and the notion of ‘face’

Unlike Brown and Levinson’s (1987) universal notion of ‘face’, in which the speaker is regarded as an independent member of a society, empirical research has shown that in certain societies a group orientation rather than an individual orientation is the expected norm of behavior (Gu, 1990; Ide, 1989; Matsumoto, 1988; Nwoye, 1989, 1992; Strecker, 1993, among others). For example, through an examination of the norms of interaction in Igbo society, Nwoye (1992:313) was among the first researchers to draw the distinction between individual and group face, emphasizing that *group face* conforms to the “culturally expected norms of behavior that are institutionalized and sanctioned by society.”

Empirical research on Spanish politeness has re-examined the notion of ‘face’, as originally described in Brown and Levinson, and has shown that linguistic politeness is realized differently according to the cultural values ascribed to by the group. Using Spanish colloquial conversations in Peninsular Spanish among relatives and friends, Hernández-Flores observed that unsolicited advice in her interactions was realized in the form of clear assertions and was not interpreted as a FTA by the members of the group. She argued that the sociocultural values of self-affirmation (the desire to be seen by others as someone with good social qualities) and *confianza* (sense of deep familiarity), are two components of the social ideology of Spaniards in colloquial interactions (1999); these values, in turn, represent the interlocutors’ need for autonomy and affiliation (Bravo, 1999; Fant, 1989). Using telephone conversations, Placencia showed that deference, realized by strategic lexical choices in her corpus, is an important sociocultural value present in Ecuadorian face. In this social context in Ecuadorian society, deference is not due to the desire to protect one’s individuality or territory (i.e., negative politeness as in Brown and Levinson), but rather to “conform to the social norms of the group . . . and dictate respect to the elderly and parents” (Placencia, 1996:21). Some societies in the Spanish-speaking world appear to have more of an orientation towards positive politeness or expressing involvement towards the interlocutor (Argentinean, Peninsular Spanish, Uruguayan, Venezuelan); in others, both positive and negative politeness appear to have equal importance (Ecuador, Peru) (Márquez Reiter and Placencia, 2005). However, linguistic politeness and the notion of interpersonal relationships in Mexico have received little systematic attention (e.g., Covarrubias, 2002; Curcó, 1998; Curcó and De Fina, 2002; Félix-Brasdefer, 2004, 2005; W. García, 1996); as a result, the notion of ‘face’ needs to be examined further in this context.

Overall, in view of the limited scope of Brown and Levinson’s (1987) universal model of linguistic politeness and their notion of face, the current study has instead adopted Scollon and Scollon’s (2001) politeness systems (deference, solidarity, hierarchical) and both aspects of face: involvement and independence. Rather than following Brown and Levinson’s model of politeness, in which the notion of ‘self’ in western cultures is highly individualistic, the current study utilizes Scollon and Scollon’s model because it better fits the notion of ‘self’, projected by Mexicans as collectivistic and more related to membership in a group such as a family, friends, or

a working group. In addition, the current study uses Watts' (2003) concept of linguistic politeness as realized by means of formulaic and semi-formulaic expressions. Accordingly, the objective of the present study is to investigate the linguistic strategies employed by male, university-educated native speakers of Spanish in one community in Mexico in formal and informal situations in the course of refusal interactions, and how these strategies are employed to mitigate the negative effects of a refusal. In particular, three aspects of politeness will be analyzed: (1) the degree of formality and overall strategy selection; (2) the politeness systems and strategy use; and, finally, (3) politeness and the notion of face in Mexico.

This study is organized as follows. First, I describe the method and design of the study and data collection procedures. Then, I analyze the results in two main sections: the degree of formality and overall strategy selection and an analysis of the role-play refusal interactions in light of the three politeness systems: solidarity, deference, hierarchical. After an analysis of the role-play data in each politeness system, I present the verbal report data (speakers' perceptions of refusals). Finally, I discuss the results in light of the existing literature, followed by the limitations of the study, directions for future research, and the conclusion.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Twenty Mexican male university students participated in the study. Participants were native speakers of Spanish and were pooled from one community in Mexico. All participants were natives of the state of Tlaxcala, Mexico, shared the same regional Mexican dialect, and were monolingual Spanish speakers. Participants were undergraduate students at the *Universidad Autónoma de Tlaxcala*, Mexico at the time of data collection in the School of Philosophy and Letters. Some students lived in the city of Tlaxcala and others came from nearby towns. All students filled out a consent form before agreeing to participate in the study and were remunerated for their participation. Ages of the participants ranged from 21 to 26 years (mean age: 22.3 years). With respect to social class in Latin America, it has been observed that this variable is quite complex as members of rural areas often commute to urban areas for job and educational purposes, making it hard to pinpoint the social class of a particular city (Caravedo, 1999; Moreno Fernández, 1998). For the current study, the informant population included students who lived in the city of Tlaxcala, but the majority came from smaller towns nearby in order to attend the state university. Thus, the population in this study may best be described as representing a continuum from middle to lower middle class, but all of them belonged to the same community of practice, the university (Wenger, 1998).

3.2. Role-plays

The data for the present investigation were collected at the *Universidad Autónoma de Tlaxcala* using open role-plays, supplemented by retrospective verbal reports. To obtain natural speech act performance, Wolfson (1981:9) pointed out that data need to be gathered "through [direct] observation and participation in a great variety of spontaneously occurring speech situations." However, Cohen (1998) noted some disadvantages with respect to gathering naturalistic data. Based on his observations, the following might pose a problem for the present study if the data had been collected ethnographically: (1) age and gender may be difficult to control; (2) data may

not yield enough or any examples of target items (e.g., selection of politeness strategies in responding to a refusal); and, (3) collecting and analyzing data is time-consuming. For the present study, collection of natural data would not have allowed the researcher to control the following variables: age, gender (male), level of education (university), speech act type, and situation type.

For the current study, an open-ended role-play was used to collect the production data, as this method allows the researcher to control the variables mentioned above and to examine the inventory and frequency of linguistic strategies employed by male university participants in refusals in both formal and informal situations. While role-plays do not provide the researcher with authentic data, it has been shown that they represent an approximation of spoken discourse (Cohen, 1998, 2004; Félix-Brasdefer, 2003b; Kasper, 2000), as they show high indices of pragmatic features (e.g., politeness, mitigation, indirectness), openings and closings of conversations (Scarcella, 1979), various attempts at the negotiation of a refusal, a variety of discourse markers (Schiffrin, 2001), as well as repetitions, hesitations, and vagueness (Lakoff, 1982). Finally, a role-play was selected because of the following three advantages: (1) it enables the researcher to obtain complete conversational interactions, that is, data include openings and closings of conversations; (2) it allows the researcher to exert some degree of control over the conversation; and, (3) it reflects a consciousness of the appropriateness of language use (Scarcella, 1979).

3.3. *Retrospective verbal reports*

In addition to role-play data, which comprise the primary corpus in this study, retrospective verbal reports were analyzed as complementary data in order to corroborate the findings of the production data. Verbal reports, conducted immediately after the role-play task, are commonly used in pragmatics research after performing a speech act to reconstruct the psycholinguistic processes of speakers (Cohen, 2004). In the current study, verbal reports were used in conjunction with the role-play data because it has been observed that such reporting has the potential to provide insights into the production and perception of speech acts (Cohen, 1998). Thus, while participants listened to their responses in the role-play situations, they were asked to comment on the following: perception of politeness, directness, indirectness, level of formality, and selection of linguistic information used during the refusal interaction. Most importantly, as observed by Cohen (2004:321), by examining verbal report data, one “may learn what the respondents actually perceived about each situation (e.g., what they perceived about the relative role status of the interlocutors) and how their perceptions influenced their responses.”

3.4. *Data collection and procedures*

The role-play set was comprised of four experimental refusal prompts and two distracter items (one apology and one complaint). The description of each refusal situation was based on two social variables: power (+P or –P) and social distance (+D or –D). Based on these variables, the four refusal situations used in the current study were classified according to the three politeness systems proposed by Scollon and Scollon (2001), including refusals to two invitations (Farewell, Birthday), to one suggestion (Advisor), and to one request (Notes). (See Appendix A for a description of the role-plays). The classification of politeness systems and the four refusal situations employed in the current study are described in Table 1.

Table 1
Politeness systems in four refusal situations

Politeness system	Initiating act	Power	Distance
Hierarchical	Invitation: Farewell	+ P	+ D
Hierarchical	Suggestion: Advisor	+ P	+ D
Solidarity	Invitation: Birthday	– P	– D
Deference	Request: Notes	– P	+ D

Two of the role-play situations included interactions between status unequals in a hierarchical politeness system: (i) an employee refuses a boss's invitation to attend a farewell party (Farewell), and (ii) a student refuses a professor's suggestion to take a class (Advisor); the other two situations involved equals: either (iii) in a solidarity politeness system, where a friend refuses a friend's invitation to a birthday party (Birthday), or (iv) in a deference politeness system where a student refuses to lend his notes to a classmate with whom he rarely interacts (Notes). In these situations, distance is understood in terms of the degree of familiarity between the participants, either close (–Distance) or distant (+Distance), as specified in the role-play descriptions; power, on the other hand, refers to the “vertical disparity between the participants in a hierarchical structure” (Scollon and Scollon, 2001:52).

During the role-play interviews, each participant interacted with a Mexican speaker for each level of formality: a professor from the *Universidad Autónoma de Tlaxcala* (age: 45) for the two formal situations (Farewell, Advisor) and a student (age: 23) from the same university for the two informal situations (Birthday, Notes). The professor and the student were also natives of Tlaxcala, Mexico. All role-play interviews took place at an office at the same university in Mexico, and the data were tape recorded and fully transcribed according to a modified version of the transcription conventions established by Jefferson (2004) (See Appendix B).

Immediately after the role-plays took place, retrospective verbal reports were conducted by the researcher with each participant in order to examine social perceptions of politeness. After participants listened to each refusal interaction, they were asked questions regarding the use of directness, indirectness, politeness, and the selection of linguistic information utilized in formal and informal situations in an effort to produce a refusal according to the cultural norms of the Mexican culture. In general, each interview, including both the role-play and verbal report tasks, lasted between 35 and 40 min.

3.5. Data analysis

The 80 role-play interactions were examined according to a modified classification of refusal strategies proposed by Beebe et al. (1990), including direct and indirect refusals, and adjuncts to refusals (See Appendix C for the classification of refusal strategies used in the present study and examples of each strategy). This classification system has been widely used and adapted to examine refusals among native and non-native speakers in different languages (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 1991; Gass and Houck, 1999; Lyuh, 1992; Nelson et al., 2002; Ramos, 1991). While direct refusals included instances where the speaker expressed his inability to comply by means of negative propositions (e.g., “no”, “I can't”), the indirect refusals used in the current study included various linguistic strategies by which an invitation, a request, or a suggestion were indirectly refused; these encompassed eight different strategies: mitigated refusal, reason/explanation, indefinite reply, promise to comply, regret/

apology, alternative, postponement, and set condition for future acceptance. Next, adjuncts to refusals comprised four strategies that expressed involvement with the interlocutor: positive opinion, willingness, expression of gratitude, and agreement. The analysis of the refusal interactions in this study included an examination of both the speaker and the addressee's speech behavior.

The classification of the refusal data into direct and indirect refusals and adjuncts to refusals was performed by the researcher and verified by two trained raters, who were native speakers of Mexican Spanish. Both raters independently verified the researcher's coding of the data in its entirety. Overall, the coding of both raters coincided with the researcher's original classifications in nearly 95% of the analyzed data. In cases where discrepancies were noted, the researcher discussed each case with each rater and a consensus was reached. Finally, the data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS), version 14.0.1. Paired samples *t*-tests were employed to analyze strategy use and levels of (in)directness in the four refusal situations. For all analyses the alpha level was set at 0.05.

4. Results

4.1. Degree of formality and overall strategy selection

The distribution and frequency of strategy selection varied for each level of formality and for each situation. Fig. 1 displays the percentages of direct and indirect refusals and adjuncts to refusals produced by the 20 Mexican participants in each of the four refusal situations, and Table 2 shows the numeric results for these strategies with respect to the frequency (*f*), means (*M*), and standard deviations (S.D.) (See Appendix C for examples of direct and indirect refusals, and adjuncts to refusals.)

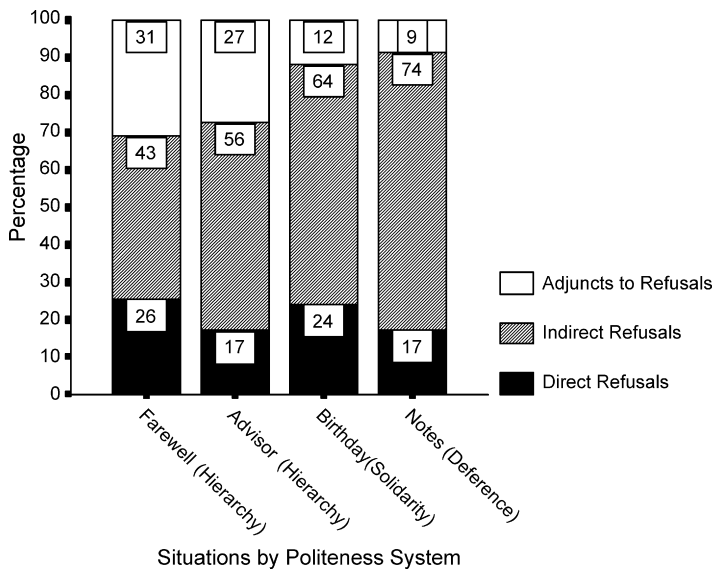


Fig. 1. Direct and indirect refusals and adjuncts to refusals produced by Mexican speakers in three politeness systems (hierarchical, deference, solidarity) in four refusal situations in percentages ($N = 20$; $n = 830$).

Table 2

Overall frequency (*f*), means (*M*), and standard deviations (S.D.) of direct and indirect refusals, and adjuncts to refusals across the four situations

	Direct refusals		Indirect refusals		Adjuncts to refusals		Total
	<i>f</i> (<i>M</i>)	S.D.	<i>f</i> (<i>M</i>)	S.D.	<i>f</i> (<i>M</i>)	S.D.	
Farewell	63 (3.15)	2.08	107 (5.35)	2.30	76 (3.80)	2.24	246
Advisor	37 (1.85)	2.03	121 (6.05)	3.76	59 (2.95)	2.37	217
Birthday	53 (2.65)	2.23	139 (6.95)	2.80	26 (1.30)	1.21	218
Notes	26 (1.30)	1.90	110 (5.50)	2.11	13 (0.65)	0.67	149
Total	179		477		174		830

Overall, 830 strategies were produced across the four situations; 56% ($n = 463$) of these strategies were found in situations of formal status (Farewell, Advisor), while 44% ($n = 367$) were observed in situations of informal status (Birthday, Notes). A paired samples *t*-test comparing strategy use at the two levels of formality was significant, $t(19) = 2.87$, $p < 0.05$, revealing that in formal situations, the Mexican speakers in the current study employed a significantly higher number of linguistic strategies than in informal situations (formal situations [$M = 23.1$; S.D. = 9.84]; informal situations [$M = 18.3$; S.D. = 5.59]). As shown in Fig. 1 and Table 2, in all four situations, the Mexican speakers showed a preference for indirectness (57%; $n = 477$) over directness (22%; $n = 179$) and adjuncts to refusals (21%; $n = 174$).

Differences were observed with respect to strategy selection in the use of direct and indirect refusals and adjuncts to refusals in formal (Farewell, Advisor) and informal (Birthday, Notes) situations. As shown in Fig. 1, a higher preference for indirectness was found in situations of informal status in both solidarity (64%) and deference (74%) politeness systems, and a lower percentage of these strategies was noted in situations of formal status (Farewell: 43%; Advisor: 56%); however, the difference was not statistically significant. With respect to a preference for directness, a higher number of direct refusals was found in situations in which an invitation was declined by an employee (Farewell: 26%; $n = 63$) or a by a status-equal friend (Birthday: 24%; $n = 53$), than when refusing a suggestion from a professor (Advisor: 17%; $n = 37$) or when refusing to lend notes to a classmate (Notes: 17%; $n = 26$). In the Advisor and Notes situations, since the degree of distance between the interlocutors was the greatest (+D), participants preferred lower levels of directness, as shown in the means in Table 2. On the other hand, the preference for expressions used as adjuncts to refusals was more pronounced in both situations of formal status (Farewell [31%; $n = 76$]; Advisor: [27%; $n = 59$]) than in the informal situations (Birthday [12%; $n = 26$]; Notes [9%; $n = 13$]). The results of a paired samples *t*-test comparing the means of adjuncts to refusals in both formal and informal situations was also significant, $t(19) = 5.97$, $p < 0.05$. Specifically, a significantly higher number of adjuncts to refusals expressing involvement was used when refusing a status-unequal interlocutor (Farewell, Advisor). Expressing involvement from a lower status person to an interlocutor in an asymmetric system (+P) was mostly accomplished by means of expressions of positive opinion, partial agreements, and expressions of gratitude that either preceded or followed a refusal response.

In the next section, the most frequent linguistic strategies (direct and indirect refusals, adjuncts to refusals) employed in each politeness system will be analyzed and compared across the four refusal situations. The analysis of the role-play data in each politeness system is followed by an examination of the verbal report data regarding the participants' perceptions during the refusal interactions. Examples are provided in Spanish followed by an English translation.

4.2. Politeness systems and strategy use

4.2.1. Informal status: solidarity (–P, –D) and deference (–P, +D) politeness

In the solidarity (Birthday) and deference (Notes) politeness systems, the common features characterizing these participants were the use of informal or colloquial language, such as the second person singular “tú” [“you”] form, and of various semi-formulaic linguistic expressions frequently utilized in colloquial speech among male university students of this Mexican community to express involvement with an interlocutor by means of in-group identity markers, given names, and nicknames.

As shown in Fig. 1, in the solidarity and deference politeness systems, differences were found with respect to the degree of directness and indirectness. The results of a paired samples *t*-test comparing the means of direct refusals in both politeness systems was significant, $t(19) = 2.54$, $p < 0.05$, with a significantly higher number of direct strategies used in a solidarity politeness system between status-equal friends ($n = 53$) than in the deference politeness system between two distant classmates ($n = 26$) (see means and standard deviations in Table 2). Further, while the preference for indirect strategies was slightly more pronounced in the solidarity ($n = 139$) versus the deference ($n = 110$) politeness system, the difference was not statistically significant. Finally, with regard to the use of adjuncts to refusals to express involvement with an interlocutor of equal status, a higher preference for involvement strategies was observed when refusing an invitation from a friend (Birthday, $M = 1.30$) and fewer strategies were noted when refusing to lend notes from a distant classmate (Notes, $M = .65$). In these situations, expressions of positive opinion and agreement were the most common involvement strategies used as adjuncts to preface a refusal response with an equal-status interlocutor.

Solidarity politeness (–P, –D): Birthday. In the Birthday situation, various in-group identity markers and indirect strategies (e.g., reason/explanation, mitigated refusal, promise to comply, set condition for future acceptance) often modified a direct refusal, as shown in the interaction in (1): refusing a friend’s invitation to attend a birthday party. In-group identity markers are shown in bold. The refusal head act is marked as HA, followed by supportive moves (the HA expresses the speaker’s main intent to refuse, whereas strategies used as supportive moves serve to mitigate the negative effects of a direct refusal).

(1) Birthday. F1: Friend inviting; F2: Friend refusing

- | | | | |
|-----|---|--|-----------------------|
| F2: | 1 | Este, hí:jole, no voy a pode:r hermano = | [Direct Refusal] - HA |
| F1: | 2 | = por qué: carnal ? | |
| F2: | 3 | mira, lo que pasa es que este - estoy trabajando en una pizzerí:a, güey , | |
| | 4 | y tú sabes que nos quedamos así ya muy tarde, | |
| | | | [Reason/Explanation] |
| | 5 | entonces pues no sería para mí conveniente ir. | [Mitigated Refusal] |

Insistence #1

- | | | | |
|-----|---|--|---------------------------|
| F1: | 6 | hí:jole, a qué hora sales? aunque sea tarde, te espero = | |
| F2: | 7 | = ves que ya salgo hasta como a las once y media o doce, y pues ya ves | |
| | 8 | que estoy desde a las, estoy como desde las diez de la mañana, y pues ya | |
| | 9 | es muy ta:rde, imagínate, salgo muy cansadí::simo. | |
| | | | [Reason/Explanation] - HA |

Insistence #2

- F1: 10 sí: pues, si quieres llegar a esa hora, ahí vamos a estar
 F2: 11 este, bueno, si tal vez yo podría ir, pues ahí te caería
 [Set Condition for Future Acceptance]
 F1: 12 pues, órale, vemos
 F2: 13 sale.

Translation

- F2: 1 Um, darn, I'm not going to be able to, **brother=**
 F1: 2 = why **bro**?
 F2: 3 look, the thing is that um - I'm working at a pizza place, **dude**,
 4 and you know that we end up staying really late,
 5 so for me it wouldn't be easy to get there.

Insistence #1

- F1: 6 darn, what time do you get off? even if it's late, I'll be expecting you=
 F2: 7 = you know I get off about eleven thirty or twelve, and well you know
 8 I'm there from, I'm there like from ten in the morning, and well
 9 it's really late, imagine, I get off work just exhausted

Insistence #2

- F1: 10 yeah well, if you want to come then, we'll be there
 F2: 11 um, well, if maybe I could go, well I'd show up
 F1: 12 well, fine, we'll see
 F2: 13 okay.

As shown in the conversational exchange in (1), the presence of in-group identity markers expressed involvement or camaraderie between the interlocutors (“hermano” [“brother”, line 1]; “carnal” [“bro”, line 2]; and, “güey” [“dude”, line 3]). Two semi-formulaic expressions in line 1 weaken the illocutionary force of the upcoming direct refusal: the hesitator “este” [“um”] introduces and delays the refusal and the discourse marker “hí:jole” [“darn”], with the lengthening of the first syllable, further mitigates the direct refusal head act (“no voy a poder” [“I am not going to be able to”]) and reinforces the closeness between the interlocutors. The use of solidarity markers, which show camaraderie between the interlocutors, attenuates the negative effects of a direct refusal.

After the invitation was declined with a direct refusal (head act) at the beginning of the interaction in (1) (line 1), the interlocutor asked the person refusing the invitation for reasons or justifications and used a similar solidarity marker at the end of the request for justification “por qué: carnal?” (“why bro?”) (line 2). The person refusing the invitation provided reasons to justify and soften his refusal (lines 3–4), followed by a mitigated refusal, using the conditional (“no sería” [“it wouldn't be”], line 5), which further attenuated the force of the direct refusal. The interaction continues with the interlocutor insisting that his friend make an attempt to attend the party (line 6), followed by another indirect refusal (reason/explanation) as a head act (lines 7–9) providing additional details to justify his refusal. Finally, after a second insistence on the part of the interlocutor that his friend attend the party (line 10), the friend attempts to end the interaction politely with a final indirect strategy (set condition for future acceptance) in line 11, prefaced by a hesitator (“este” [“um”]), a discourse marker (“bueno” [“well”]), and the modal adverb “tal vez” ([“maybe”]) that further mitigates the force of an indirect refusal. The effect of this indirect strategy is to express involvement on the part of the speaker by means of leaving the

possibility open for future negotiation and showing interest in the interlocutor's invitation. This final response is accepted by the interlocutor who accepts his friend's conditional response (line 12) and the interaction is ended successfully by the person refusing the invitation in the last turn (line 13).

In addition to reasons/explanations following the main refusal, other strategies included expressions of positive opinion and various indirect strategies such as promises to comply, mitigated refusals, and expressions of apology/regret. These strategies were most commonly used as supportive moves to end a refusal interaction politely. An example containing these strategies is shown in (2). The refusal head act is marked as HA, followed by supportive moves.

- (2) Birthday. F1: Friend refusing; F2: Friend inviting
- | | | | |
|-----|----|--|-----------------------|
| F1: | 1 | Pero no ma:nches, no puedo i:r, güey. | [Direct Refusal] - HA |
| F2: | 2 | por qué? | |
| F1: | 3 | es que tengo, voy a ir con una - una rorra. | [Reason/Explantion] |
| F2: | 4 | dile que no vas a ir, inventa un pretexto. | |
| F1: | 5 | voy a tratarle, | [Promise to comply] |
| | 6 | pero, pero no, no creo que vaya yo eh? | [Mitigated Refusal]. |
| | 7 | hijo, disculpa, | [Apology/Regret] |
| | 8 | pero sí, ya sabes, felicidades= | [Positive opinión] |
| F2: | 9 | =sale, si puedes, te espero eh? | |
| F1: | 10 | sí, voy a tratar de ir, pero - pues la verdad no te aseguro nada | [Promise to comply] |
| | 11 | porque sí, sí tengo que ir a ese negocio | [Reason/Explanation] |
| F2: | 12 | sale, nos vemos | |
| F1: | 13 | sale. | |

Translation

- | | | |
|-----|----|---|
| F1: | 1 | come on, I can't go, dude. |
| F2: | 2 | why? |
| F1: | 3 | look, the thing is that I have to go out with a - a chick. |
| F2: | 4 | tell her you're not going, make something up. |
| F1: | 5 | I'm gonna try, |
| | 6 | but, but no, I don't think I'll be able to go, ok? |
| | 7 | darn, I'm sorry, |
| | 8 | but yeah, you know, happy birthday= |
| F2: | 9 | =okay, if you can, I'll be expecting you, ok? |
| F1: | 10 | yeah, I'm gonna try to go, but - well the truth is I can't promise anything |
| | 11 | because I really have to take care of that business |
| F2: | 12 | okay, see you |
| F1: | 13 | alright. |

As seen earlier in Fig. 1 and Table 2, in the Birthday situation, negotiation of the refusal was mostly realized by means of various indirect strategies (64%; $n = 139$). In the interaction in (2) above, the refusal response is introduced by a direct refusal as the head act (line 1), followed by the interlocutor's direct request for an explanation (line 2). Negotiation of the refusal was accomplished by various indirect strategies including two promises to comply (lines 5, 10), one mitigated refusal (line 6), and one apology/regret (line 7), followed by an expression of positive

opinion (line 8). The purpose of these indirect strategies is to promote negotiation of the refusal and to smooth the conversational interaction. By using promises to comply, the refuser chooses not to make any commitment to accept the invitation, although he may try to comply. In particular, the use of this face-saving strategy was often employed among these participants to strategically end the interaction politely, freeing the speaker from a direct response and leaving the possibility of an acceptance open to the interlocutor.

It is worth noting the presence of two insistences in the interaction on the part of the interlocutor issuing the invitation: in turn # 4 (line 4), an insistence is realized by means of an unmitigated command “dile que no vas a ir” (“tell her that you’re not going”), expressing closeness and telling the interlocutor to make up something and to tell his girlfriend that he cannot take her out, and in turn # 6 (line 9), the second insistence is realized by means of an indirect refusal “sale, si puedes, te espero, eh?” (“ok, if you can, I’ll be expecting you, ok?”). The final outcome of the interaction is achieved successfully with leave-takings by both interlocutors (lines 12–13).

During the retrospective verbal report that took place immediately after the role-play session, most participants commented that they felt obligated to provide reasons or justifications to soften the negative effects of a direct refusal. Further, these Mexican speakers commented that an insistence or a series of insistences to the invitation did not bother them; on the contrary, an insistence was expected and was taken as a compliment, (“un halago”), as reported by the speaker in (2): “No me molestó que me insistiera. La insistencia significa sinceridad, que le gustaría mucho que lo acompañara. La sentí como un halago. [‘It didn’t bother me that he insisted with me. The insistence represents sincerity, that he would like it a lot if I were able to be there. I felt it was like a compliment.’] (Birthday).

Overall, the role-play and verbal report data from the situation representing the solidarity politeness system suggest that these Mexican speakers did not regard an insistence as an imposition or as a face-threatening act, but rather, as an expected response in this community that is necessary to strengthen the closeness between the interlocutors and to show sincere interest in the interlocutor and the shared relationship.

Deference politeness (-P, +D): Notes. With respect to a deference politeness system (Notes), as shown in Fig. 1 and Table 2, the refusal interactions in this system were also mostly accomplished by means of indirect strategies (74%; $n = 110$). Example (3) shows a representative interaction of a classmate refusing to lend his notes to another student. The refusal head act is marked as HA, followed by supportive moves.

- (3) Notes. C1: Classmate requesting notes; C2: Classmate refusing to lend notes
- | | | | |
|-----|---|---|---------------------------------------|
| C2: | 1 | Mira, te voy a decir la verdad - este, ahorita se los presté a Loli:ta, | |
| | 2 | y quién sabe, no ha venido: - y este quién sabe si venga, | |
| | 3 | me estaba diciendo su amiga que a lo mejor y no va a venir ya, | |
| | 4 | sí se los presté y hasta yo me quedo sin apuntes, | [Reason/Explanation] - HA |
| | 5 | pero si es que viene, pues te los doy = | [Set Condition for Future Acceptance] |
| C1: | 6 | = ajá, sí crees que venga hoy o mañana? | |
| C2: | 7 | pues a ve:r, | [Indefinite Reply] |
| C1: | 8 | nada más les saco unas copias y te los devuelvo, no? | |
| C2: | 9 | sí, pero pues quién sabe si venga, no te prometo nada. [Indefinite Reply] | |

- C1: 10 pues sale, yo te busco, eh?
 C2: 11 órale.

Translation

- C2: 1 Listen, the truth is - um, I just lent them to Lolita,
 2 and who knows, she hasn't shown up - and um who knows if she will
 3 her friend was telling me that she probably isn't coming.
 4 I did lend them to her and even I ended up without any notes
 5 but if she does come, I'll give them to you
 C1: 6 okay, so you think she'll come today or tomorrow?
 C2: 7 well, we'll see,
 C1: 8 I'll just make a copy and I'll give them back to you, okay?
 C2: 9 yeah, but who knows if she'll come, I can't promise you anything.
 C1: 10 okay, I'll try to find you, ok?
 C2: 11 alright.

As shown in the interaction in (3), the classmate refusing to lend the notes used various indirect strategies to negotiate a refusal response, employing reasons/explanations (lines 1–4) as the refusal head act, and one set condition for future acceptance (line 5). The classmate requesting the notes responded to the refusal by expressing a partial agreement and a request for confirmation (line 6). After that, the second refusal to lend the notes is realized indirectly in one turn by means of an indefinite reply (line 7). This indirect refusal is followed by an additional insistence on the part of the interlocutor who is attempting to borrow the notes (line 8), and his classmate's final response in which he vaguely refuses the request using an indefinite reply (line 9) to express hesitance. Finally, both interlocutors end the interaction successfully (lines 10–11).

Regarding the content of reasons/explanations, the person refusing to lend the notes provided reasons/explanations in the form of 'white lies' (Leech, 1983) and said that he had lent the notes to a third party. During the retrospective verbal report, most subjects commented that they made up excuses so as not to hurt the other person's feelings. They added that both parties knew that the excuse was a lie, and preferred using an excuse over a direct refusal so as not to appear rude to their classmate, as shown in the verbal report from this same participant in (4):

(4) Verbal report - Refusing to lend notes to a classmate (Notes) (–Power, +Distance)

Participant #17 Pensaba que mejor estudiara y él se metiera a clase en lugar de que me pidiera los apuntes y que si le interesa entrar que entre, si no, no
 'I was thinking that it would be better for him to study and go to class instead of asking me for the notes and if he wants to come, fine, if not, fine, too'

Researcher: y ¿le dijiste eso directamente?
 'And did you tell him that directly?'

17: no, sólo pensaba en eso, pero como no me llevaba con él, mejor le inventé una excusa.
 'no, I just thought about it, but since he wasn't really a friend of mine, it was better to make up an excuse.'

Overall, the role-play and verbal report data suggest that these speakers showed a preference for involvement mostly by means of indefinite replies and justification of the refusal to convey a

mitigated refusal response. By using indefinite replies, the speaker leaves the possibility open for further negotiation; in addition, giving reasons or justifications for the refusal is a means of signaling cooperation and support to the interlocutor.

4.2.2. Formal status: hierarchical politeness (+P, +D): farewell and advisor

In a hierarchical politeness system, Mexicans in this community recognized and respected the power difference (+P) between the interlocutors. It was found that all of the Mexicans who participated in the current study used various kinds of formulaic, ritualized expressions when addressing a status-unequal interlocutor. For example, the formal form of address “usted” [“you-FORMAL”] accompanied by its respective verbal morphology, was used when addressing the boss (Farewell) or the professor (Advisor). Also, the person in the position of lower status employed independence strategies in the form of titles to show respect, such as “profesor” ([“professor”], Advisor), “jefe” ([“boss”], Farewell), and “señor” ([“sir”], Farewell). On the contrary, the person in the superordinate position (boss or advisor) utilized the informal form of address “tú” [“you-INFORMAL”] with an employee or a student.

As shown in Fig. 1 and Table 2, differences were observed with respect to the use of direct and indirect strategies in a hierarchical politeness system (Farewell, Advisor). Within this politeness system, a relatively higher degree of directness was observed in the Farewell situation (26%; $n = 63$) and fewer instances of direct strategies occurred in the Advisor situation (17%; $n = 37$), as the academic relationship between a student and a professor in this Mexican community is perceived to have a higher degree of distance than that between an employee and a boss.

In addition to the use of formulaic expressions and a lower preference for direct refusals when addressing a person of higher status, the refusal interaction was mostly realized by means of various indirect strategies (Farewell [43%; $n = 107$; Advisor: 56%; $n = 121$]) and adjuncts to refusals (Farewell [31%; $n = 76$; Advisor 27%; $n = 59$]). Adjuncts to refusals were often employed to preface or to follow a refusal head act and served as markers of involvement to express positive opinion, gratitude, and willingness. The most frequent indirect strategies included reasons or explanations, indefinite replies, and promise to comply. Example (5) shows an interaction of an employee refusing a boss’ invitation (Farewell). The refusal head act is marked as HA, and is preceded or followed by supportive moves.

- (5) Farewell. B:Boss; E: Employee
- | | | | |
|----|---|--|---------------------------|
| E: | 1 | Hí:jole, señor, felicidades por el ascenso, | [Positive Opinion] |
| | 2 | pero tengo un compromiso en ese momento | [Reason/Explanation] - HA |
| | 3 | no sé, tal vez le pueda dar un espacio | [Indefinite Reply] |
| | 4 | y con gusto lo acompañaría, | [Willingness] |
| | 5 | pero necesitaría reorganizarme un poco, | [Reason/Explanation] |
| | 6 | pero no sé si me dé tiempo poderlo ver a esa hora. | [Indefinite Reply] |

Insistence #1

- | | | | |
|----|----|---|--------------------------|
| B: | 7 | pues a mí me encantaría que estuvieras por allá, si de alguna manera | |
| | 8 | puedes reorganizar tu tiempo y tus compromisos que tienes, y después | |
| | 9 | llegar con nosotros, pues con todo gusto te estaríamos esperando, no?=
= muchas gracias, | [Gratitude] |
| E: | 10 | | |
| | 11 | voy a tratar de hacerlo, y no no le aseguro nada | [Promise to comply] - HA |

- 12 voy a tratar por todos los medios de llegar aunque
 13 sea un momento, convivir con ustedes, [Promise to comply]
 14 y gracias de todos modos, no? [Gratitude]
 15 trataremos de estar allí [Promise to comply]

Insistence #2

- B: 16 te esperaría yo?
 E: 17 okay, claro, claro que sí. [Acceptance]

Translation

- E: 1 Shoot, sir, congratulations on your promotion,
 2 but I have plans at this time
 3 I don't know, maybe I could make some time
 4 and I'd be happy to join you
 5 but I'd have to reorganize things a bit
 6 but I'm not sure if I'll be able to make it at that time

Insistence #1

- B: 7 well it would be really nice if you could be there, if by any chance
 8 you can reorganize your schedule and the plans that you have, and then
 9 meet us, we'll be waiting for you, okay? =
 E: 10 = thanks a lot,
 11 I'm gonna try to make it, and I can't can't promise you anything
 12 I'm going to try to get there any way I can even if
 13 it's just for a short time, to celebrate with you all,
 14 and thanks again anyway, okay?
 15 we'll try to be there.

Insistence #2

- B: 16 should I be expecting you then?
 E: 17 okay, sure, sure.

As shown in the interaction in (5), the refusal is introduced by a common discourse marker in Mexican Spanish, “hí:jole” [“shoot”], which here expresses regret by its lengthened first syllable; the formal title (“señor” [“sir”]) expresses deference, followed by an expression of positive opinion that signals the speaker’s involvement with the interlocutor (line 1). The marker “hí:jole” [“shoot”] is used as a lexical mitigator to soften the negative effects of the upcoming refusal head act in line 2. The head act, realized as an indirect refusal providing a reason (line 2), is followed by a series of supportive moves (lines 3–6), including indirect strategies (lines 3, 5–6) and one expression of willingness (line 4).

In response to the boss’ indirect request (Insistence #1) for the employee to make an effort to attend the party, not only with the boss, but with other members of the group (lines 7–9), the employee’s second refusal sequence is introduced by an expression of gratitude (line 10). This is followed by vague refusals or promises to comply (lines 11–13, 15), indicating that the employee will make an effort to attend the party and be there not only with the boss but also with other members of the group, and by one expression of gratitude (line 14). Of these strategies, promise to comply was the preferred strategy used to end an interaction politely. By employing promises to comply for the purpose of closing the interaction, as in lines 11–13, 15, the speaker avoids a

direct refusal and leaves the option of attending open; this way, the speaker reinforces his involvement with the interlocutor. Then, upon the boss' second insistence (insistence #2), this time in the form of a direct question (line 16), the employee ends up accepting the invitation and expresses his involvement with the interlocutor (line 17).

As shown in the interaction in (5), the two final requests on the part of the boss, insistences that the employee attend the party, may be viewed as apparent impositions or face-threatening acts. During the retrospective verbal report for the interaction in (5), this participant commented that the insistence did not bother him and that after he had declined the boss' invitation an insistence was expected as shown in (6) below:

(6) Verbal report. Declining boss' invitation (Farewell) (+Power, +Distance)

Participant # 11: No me molestó la insistencia; esperaba la insistencia. Cuando me insistió, me sentí halagado porque sentía que para él [jefe] sí era importante que fuera yo, y a la vez sentía yo feo de que no podía yo ir. Con una segunda insistencia, le hubiera dicho: 'no, pues trataré; voy a tratar.'

'The insistence didn't bother me. I expected the insistence. When he insisted, I felt flattered because I felt that for him [the boss] it was important that I go and at the same time I felt bad because I couldn't go. With a second insistence, I would have told him: 'no, well I'll try; I'm going to try.'

Finally, high levels of indirectness were also found in the Advisor situation (56% [$n = 121$]). Example (7) displays an interaction in which a student refuses a professor's suggestion to take an extra class. The example below begins with the initial refusal response on the part of the student. The refusal head act is marked as HA, followed by supportive moves.

(7) Student response to Advisor. S: Student; A: Advisor

((10 lines of transcript omitted in 5 turns))

S: 11 Hijo, pero, en este caso como ya hice mi tira,
12 o sea, ya el tiempo no me lo permite ↓ [Reason] - HA

Insistence #1

A: 13 no habría ningún problema, nosotros podríamos platicar
14 en servicios escolares para que se hiciera la modificación,

S: 15 bueno, pero, pues - este, tendría que pensarlo también,
[Postponement] - HA

16 este, (0.4) tendría uno que ver primero, también

17 si me dan permiso allá, [Reason/Explanation]

18 y ya si la debo tomar, pues la tomo.

[Set Condition for Future Acceptance]

A: 19 bueno, entonces lo analizamos conjuntamente ¿te parece?

S: 20 sí.

Translation

S: 11 ooh, but, in this case since I already made up my schedule

12 I mean, time will not allow me to take it ↓ [Reason] - HA

Insistence #1

- A: 13 there wouldn't be any problem, we could talk
 14 to Student Services so that the change could be made,
 S: 15 well, but, then, - um I would really have to think about it,
 16 um, (4.0) one would have to see first, also
 17 if they give me permission there,
 18 and if I have to take it, then I'll take it.
 A: 19 well, then we'll look at it together, is that okay?
 S: 20 yes.

The refusal sequence in (7) is realized by means of various indirect refusals across turns. The initial refusal response is presented with a reason (lines 11–12) and is prefaced by two discourse markers that delay the refusal (“hijo” [“oooh”], “pero” [“but”]). After the advisor's response in which he attempts to persuade the student to take a class (13–14), the second refusal response on the part of the student is introduced by a series of discourse markers (“bueno” [“well”], “pero” [“but”], “pues” [“then”]), and a hesitator (“este” [“um”]), which function as semi-formulaic expressions to delay the refusal; this is followed by an indirect refusal (postponement) that functions as a refusal head act (line 15) that is internally modified by the conditional form to convey politeness (“tendría” [“I would have to”]). Notice that the refusal is further mitigated by a four-second pause (line 16), expressing the speaker's hesitance or uncertainty, followed by an additional indirect strategy (reason/explanation, lines 16–17), including two additional semi-formulaic forms: the conditional and an indefinite pronoun (“uno” [“one”]). The end of the refusal sequence in (7) is reinforced by another indirect strategy (set condition for future acceptance, line 18) to end the refusal sequence conditionally in order to show interest in the interlocutor's suggestion, followed by the terminal exchange (19–20).

Immediately after the completion of the role-play, the researcher and the participant in (7) listened to the interaction, and the participant was asked to report what he was thinking during his interaction with the advisor. He reported that he could not respond with a direct ‘no’ to a professor and opted for a sequence of elaborate indirect responses, as shown in the verbal report in (8):

- (8) Verbal report. Refusing suggestion from a professor (Advisor)
 (+Power, +Distance)
 ((Listening to the first part of the interaction))
 Researcher: ¿Qué estabas pensando en esta situación cuando tratabas de decirle que
 ‘no’ a tu profesor? ¿qué estaba pasando por tu mente?
 ‘What were you thinking in this situation when you were trying to say ‘no’
 to your professor? What was going through your head?
 Participant #1: pues es que como con decirle así en un ‘no’ seco, está fuera de lo (normal)
 o sea.. (...)
 ‘well its like telling him ‘no’ directly, is out of (line)
 I mean) .. (...)
 Researcher: ¿En qué te estabas concentrando?
 ‘What were you focusing on?’
 ((Listening to the rest of the interaction))
 Participant #1: o sea, en lo que me hubiese pasado en una situación verdadera, pues

darle vueltas, o sea no irme directo, o sea, encontrar por donde decirle que no . . . es que no estoy acostumbrado a hablar con un maestro directo, o sea como, por principio, o sea, uno no, no se ha acostumbrado a ver un maestro así, o sea directo; irme por las ramas. ‘well, in what would have happened to me in a real situation, I mean, to go around it, not tell him directly, that is, to find a way to tell him no . . . the thing is that I’m not used to speaking to a teacher directly, I mean that, as a rule, I mean, one is not is not in the habit of looking at a teacher that way, that is directly; to beat around the bush.’

As shown in (8), the speaker’s verbal report shows that a direct refusal in an interaction with a professor does not appear to be the expected behavior in this Mexican community. Instead, a preference for indirect and vague strategies is viewed as the unmarked cultural behavior during the negotiation of face with an unequal-status interlocutor in an academic setting.

5. Discussion

5.1. Preference for linguistic strategies and degree of formality

The results of the current study show that social power and social distance are conditioning factors in the selection of linguistic strategies in this Mexican community. In a solidarity politeness system (–P, –D), in this community a preference for direct refusals represents involvement or closeness with an interlocutor; that is, a direct refusal does not seem to impose on the interlocutor’s negative face. A direct refusal was often accompanied by in-group identity markers, diminutives, and given names between equal-status friends. Although this finding is not consistent with [Brown and Levinson’s \(1987\)](#) observation that an on-record strategy may threaten the hearer’s negative face, the results of the present study are in line with other studies in different cultures which concluded that directness does not express impolite behavior, but rather, a direct act may be seen as a way of expressing closeness or affiliation with an interlocutor ([Pavlidou, 2000](#); [Wierzbicka, 2003](#)). Using request data from Mexico City, [Curcó \(1998\)](#) found that the diminutive functions as a positive politeness strategy and increases levels of politeness; in the current study, diminutives were also used to soften a direct refusal. However, in a deference politeness system, the presence of +D (Notes) reduced levels of directness and increased levels of indirectness. Thus, it appears that the degree of perceived social distance (+D or –D) between status equals is a crucial factor influencing the selection of direct or indirect strategies.

The results of the role-play and verbal report data suggest that in Mexican society an insistence (direct or indirect) to an invitation between an equal-status friend and an unequal-status interlocutor does not constitute a face-threatening act, as claimed by [Brown and Levinson \(1987\)](#). This finding is consistent with [García’s \(1992:234\)](#) observation that in the Peruvian context an insistence is a cultural expectation: “not insisting would be considered rude and would make the person receiving the invitation think she was not sincere in her invitation.” An insistence to an invitation in other varieties of Latin American Spanish is also viewed as a cultural expectation and an act of politeness ([Félix-Brasdefer, 2003a](#)). Overall in this Mexican community, an insistence is considered an instance of involvement and is an expected cultural behavior that allows the interlocutor to negotiate his/her face needs across the interaction. In fact, by expressing an insistence, the speaker enhances the degree of politeness and allows the interlocutor to be involved in the conversation.

5.2. Wolfson's Bulge theory

The results of the present study regarding the frequency of strategy use in refusals among native speakers of Mexican Spanish will now be examined in light of Wolfson's Bulge theory (1988, 1989). Wolfson (1989:129) observed that there is a difference between "the speech behavior which middle-class Americans use to intimates, status unequals, and strangers on the one hand, and to nonintimates, status equal friends, co-workers, and acquaintances on the other". For example, in an examination of compliments in American English, Wolfson found that the great majority occur between status equals; for other speech acts, the author (1989:131) observed that inequality of status disfavors attempts at negotiation because "interlocutors know exactly where they stand with one another." In a boss–employee relationship (+P), for example, there seems to be less verbal negotiation between the interlocutors because their roles have been predefined in the context of the workplace. Following the predictions of the Bulge theory, in the current study one would expect different behavior to be observed between status-equal friends (Birthday, –P, –D), on the one hand, and status-unequals (Farewell, Advisor, +P, +D) and strangers (Notes, –P, +D), on the other.

In this study, all participants in all situations employed frequent and varied indirect strategies with different degrees of preference to refuse a person of equal or higher status. As shown in Table 2, when one examines the preference for indirect strategy use, it appears that the results of the current study are consistent with the Bulge theory in that refusals were mostly negotiated using indirect strategies between status-equal friends (Birthday: $n = 139$; $M = 6.95$). A lower preference for indirectness was seen in both situations of formal status (Farewell [$n = 107$; $M = 5.35$]; Advisor [$n = 121$; $M = 6.05$]). Regarding differences in the speech behavior among status-equal friends (Birthday [–D, –P]) and strangers (Notes [–P, +D]), the quantitative data from these Mexican speakers also support the Bulge theory (See Fig. 1 and Table 2). Specifically, greater attempts at negotiating a refusal were noted in a higher frequency of indirect refusals produced between the status-equal friends (–D) ($n = 139$; $M = 6.95$) than between two distant classmates (+D) ($n = 110$; $M = 5.50$). In general, when refusing a request for notes from a distant classmate, the speech behavior predicted by the Bulge theory was a brief refusal, and as anticipated, the speakers in this study used the lowest number of strategies in the corpus in the Notes situation.

Overall, these results should be interpreted with caution since Wolfson's Bulge theory was mostly based on the speech behavior of middle-class Americans, and used ethnographic data (mostly compliments) in a wide range of contexts; in contrast, the current study used role-play data in four restricted contexts in a speech community in which the majority of the speakers were of the lower-middle class. Therefore, a larger corpus of ethnographic speech-act data should be collected to further examine whether Wolfson's Bulge theory may be applicable to Mexican and/or Spanish-speaking sociocultural contexts.

5.3. Politeness and face in Mexico

Using a multiple-choice questionnaire in which participants were asked to rate the levels of (im)politeness of various situations, Curcó (1998) and Curcó and De Fina (2002) investigated the perception of requests between Mexicans and Spaniards. Unlike Spaniards, it was found that Mexicans rated unmitigated requests as less polite and interrogative requests prefaced by negation and accompanied by a diminutive marker as more polite ("oye, no por favorcito mueves tu coche" ["excuse me, won't you please-DIMINUTIVE move your car?"]). However, with

regard to the perception of social distance and social power, no conclusive findings were reported: a higher perception of social distance was significantly higher in one of the 12 situations in the study; in two of the 12 situations, the perception of social power was statistically higher among Mexican speakers. Unlike these studies, the results of the current investigation suggest that the Mexican speakers examined here recognized the differences of social distance and social power with an interlocutor of equal or unequal status in all situations. Further, with respect to the use of diminutives as a positive politeness strategy in Mexican society (Curcó, 1998), in the current investigation, a direct refusal was often accompanied by diminutives to express involvement with an interlocutor, and this increased levels of politeness and solidarity between equal-status friends.

The differences observed in each study may be related to the speech community of these Mexican speakers and the method used to collect the data. In Curcó's (1998) and Curcó and De Fina's (2002) studies, the findings were based on perception data collected from Mexican university students (Mexico City) by means of written simulations that were rated on a politeness scale (more or less polite), whereas the current study employed open role-plays to examine performance (production data) in formal and informal interactions among Mexican university students of Tlaxcala City. As a result, it may be possible that regional variation (Mexico City and Tlaxcala) influenced the preference for levels of social distance and social power. Also, since most of the speakers from Tlaxcala came largely from the lower-middle class, it may be possible that the distinction of social differences and expressions of respect are more pronounced among the speakers of Tlaxcala than in a metropolitan area such as Mexico City where interpersonal relations with an unequal-status interlocutor may be less deferential.

For the current study, although both aspects of face are present in the speech behavior of this Mexican community, the role-play and verbal report data appear to indicate an orientation towards involvement over independence. Involvement strategies included in-group solidarity markers, the use of the diminutive to signal solidarity, the use of colloquial language (same Spanish dialect) with a person of equal status, a willingness to respond to a (direct or indirect) insistence(s), frequent attempts to justify a refusal response to avoid a direct refusal with a professor, and frequent attempts to use expressions of positive opinion, agreement, and gratitude with an unequal-status interlocutor. On the other hand, independence strategies from a lower- to a higher-status person were realized by means of titles, the formal address form ("usted" ["you-FORMAL"]), the conditional, and impersonal expressions. Previous literature has shown that the conditional in Spanish is utilized to convey politeness and to express high levels of formality (Chodorowska-Pilch, 2004). Similarly, impersonal expressions distance the speaker from the content of the proposition and function as "distancing tactics" between the speaker and hearer, and thus increase levels of deference politeness between the interlocutors (Haverkate, 1994).

The politeness behavior in the Mexican data described in the current study has also been observed by other researchers in different cultures that stress a group over an individual orientation (Hernández-Flores, 1999; Ide, 1989; Mao, 1994; Matsumoto, 1988; Placencia, 1996). The notion of respect in the Mexican community examined implies perceived social status, as members of this community were aware of social differences and strategically employed the formal ("usted" ["you-FORMAL"]) or informal ("tú" ["you-INFORMAL"]) forms of address to mark different levels of respect during social transactions. In an in-depth examination of the concept of *respeto* in Mexican society at large, W. García (1996:152–153) observed that "[f]or Mexicans, status, intimacy, and distance are core factors in the formal and informal address. In these relationships, there is a mutual sense of *respeto* that is reciprocated between relational

partners.” Expressing *respeto* in the Mexican society does not mean that the speaker is protecting the hearer’s individual territory or self-image, but rather, showing *respeto* in accordance with the social rules established by a society, in which components of honor and dignity are incorporated into a culture-specific transactional norm (Ting-Toomey and Cocroft, 1994). In light of these results, it appears that the notion of negative face, as proposed in Brown and Levinson (1987), does not seem to operate in Mexican society because Mexicans do not emphasize the protection of their freedom of action, but rather stress their need to be included in the group and conform with the expected cultural norms of a community that recognizes social distance, social power, and closeness in given interactional contexts.

6. Limitations and future research

The results of the present study cannot be generalized to all native speakers of Mexican Spanish, as gender and age differences in speech act performance have been observed in previous studies on linguistic politeness (García, 1999; Márquez Reiter, 2000; Mills, 2003). Also, since the participants of the current study were pooled from Tlaxcala, Mexico at a public university, it is possible that the linguistic realization and social perception of politeness by students from private universities, uneducated adults, or people from other regions of Mexico may vary. It is also conceivable that politeness may differ among participants of different ages, educational levels, and socio-economic backgrounds, as well as among those speaking other varieties of Spanish. Also, it should be noted that some of the participants were familiar with the professor and/or the student with whom they interacted in the role-plays; this familiarity may have influenced their interactions.

Finally, although the reliability and validity of role-play data have been positively documented (Cohen, 2004; Félix-Brasdefer, 2003b; Kasper, 2000), ethnographic data are needed to examine politeness phenomena in natural settings. Since the present study focused on linguistic strategies that may be open to a polite interpretation, future studies need to examine impoliteness phenomena, that is, the selection of communicative strategies which attack human face. These are important issues to consider in a comprehensive account of politeness, and are left open for future research.

7. Conclusion

In this study, linguistic politeness was investigated in one Mexican community, Tlaxcala, Mexico, by examining the linguistic strategies and perceptions of politeness among male university students during refusal interactions in three politeness systems: solidarity, deference, and hierarchy (Scollon and Scollon, 2001). The results of this empirical study showed that social factors such as power (+P or –P) and distance (+D or –D) play a crucial role in determining appropriate degrees of politeness in Mexican society. Overall in this Mexican community, politeness is accomplished largely by means of formulaic and semi-formulaic expressions that utilize ritualized linguistic forms to convey *respeto*, and by means of various linguistic forms that weaken the illocutionary force of a refusal. In addition, among these speakers the negotiation of face is mainly achieved indirectly by means of constant attempts at (re)negotiating a successful resolution politely. Finally, so as to broaden our understanding of politeness in Mexican society, it is hoped that future studies conduct additional research on sociopragmatic variation in different regions of Mexico using rigorous methods of data collection and analysis.

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Appendix A

Invitation – Farewell [+Power, +Distance]

Usted ha estado trabajando en la compañía de productos de computación IBM como supervisor de ventas en la ciudad de Tlaxcala desde hace cinco años. Usted lleva una buena relación de trabajo con su jefe, aunque no interactúan socialmente fuera de la oficina. Su jefe siempre lo ha apoyado en sus ideas y le ha ayudado a subir de puesto últimamente. Después de trabajar para él por tres años, ahora han ascendido de puesto a su jefe y tendrá el puesto de Director General de la Compañía Latinoamericana de Ventas y será re-ubicado en la Ciudad de México el próximo mes. Su jefe ha organizado una fiesta el próximo sábado a las 7:00 p.m. en un restaurante y lo está invitando a Ud. y a otros miembros de la sección de ventas a celebrar su nuevo puesto, y además como despedida. Desafortunadamente, Ud. no puede asistir.

English Translation:

You have been working at IBM as a sales representative in Tlaxcala City for the last five years. You have a good working relationship with your boss although you do not socialize together outside the office. Your boss has always been supportive of your ideas and has been instrumental in your receiving a recent promotion. After you have worked for him for three years, he has recently been promoted and will become the Manager of the Latin American Sales Division, which will require his relocation to Mexico City next month. He is having a party next Saturday evening at 7:00 p.m. at a restaurant and is inviting you and other members of his sales group to celebrate his promotion and as a farewell. Unfortunately, you are unable to attend.

Suggestion – Advisor [+Power, +Distance]

Usted es un estudiante universitario en la Universidad Autónoma de Tlaxcala y como la matriculación es la próxima semana, está organizando su plan de estudios para el último semestre. Usted ya tiene planeadas tentativamente las materias que piensa tomar el próximo semestre, pero necesita discutirlo con su asesor y recibir su aprobación. Aunque Ud. tomó una clase con este profesor en su primer semestre, no ha tenido otro contacto con él mas que durante sus asesorías una vez por semestre. Usted tiene una reunión en su oficina con él para revisar las materias que Ud. ya tiene planeadas para tomar el próximo semestre. Cuando Ud. llega a la oficina, su profesor está revisando la lista de materias, y durante la conversación, le sugiere que tome otra clase en _____, pero Ud. no quiere.

English Translation:

You are a university student at Universidad Autónoma de Tlaxcala and since registration is next week, you are planning your schedule for your final semester. You have already put together a tentative schedule, but you need to get your advisor's approval. Although you took one course with this professor during your freshman year, you haven't had any contact with him other than in advising sessions once a semester. You have a meeting with him in his office to review the schedule that you have planned for next semester. When you arrive at his office, your advisor is reviewing your transcript and during the course of the conversation, he suggests that you take an additional course in _____, but you don't want to.

Invitation – Birthday [–Power, –Distance]

Vas caminando por el departamento de tu universidad cuando te encuentras con un buen amigo a quien no has visto por casi un mes. Los dos han estado estudiando en el mismo departamento por tres años y han estudiado y hecho trabajos de clase juntos antes, pero ya no toman clases juntos este semestre desde que has estado haciendo tu servicio social fuera del departamento. Tu amigo, que va a cumplir 21 años, te invita a su fiesta de cumpleaños en su casa el próximo viernes a las 8:00 p.m. Te dice que varios de tus amigos, a quienes no has visto desde que comenzó el semestre, también van a estar ahí. Sabes que será una buena oportunidad para ver a todos de nuevo y para celebrar esta ocasión especial con tu amigo. Pero desafortunadamente, no puedes ir.

English Translation:

You are walking across campus when you run into a good friend of yours whom you haven't seen for about a month. You and he have been studying in the same program at the University for three years, and have studied and written papers together in the past, but you don't have any classes together this semester since you have been doing an internship off-campus. Your friend, who is going to be 21, invites you to his birthday party at his house next Friday night at 8:00 p.m. He tells you that a group of mutual friends that you both used to hang out with and whom you haven't seen since the semester started will also be there. You know that this would be a good opportunity to see everyone again and to celebrate this special occasion with him. Unfortunately you cannot make it.

Request – Notes [–Power, +Distance]

Estás tomando un curso de (____) este semestre. No has faltado a esta clase ni una vez este semestre y te consideras un estudiante responsable. Hasta el momento, tienes un buen promedio en la clase, no porque la clase sea fácil para ti, sino porque has trabajado mucho. Entre tus compañeros, tienes la reputación de tomar muy buenos apuntes. El profesor acaba de anunciar que el primer examen del semestre es la próxima semana. Uno de tus compañeros de clase, que toma la clase contigo este semestre por la primera vez, y quien ha faltado a la clase con frecuencia, te pide tus apuntes. No llevas una relación con él fuera de clase, pero en ocasiones han hecho trabajo en clase juntos. Al terminar la clase, él se dirige a ti para pedirte tus apuntes, pero no quieres prestárselos.

English Translation:

You are taking a course in (____) this semester. You haven't missed this class once this semester and consider yourself a diligent student. So far you have a good average in the class, not because it is easy for you, but because you have worked very hard. Among your classmates, you have a reputation for taking very good notes. The professor has just announced that the first exam of the semester is next week. One of your classmates, who is taking a class with you for the first time this semester and who has frequently missed the class, asks you for your notes. You haven't

interacted with him outside the class, but have occasionally done small group work together in class. When the class ends, he approaches you for your notes, but you don't want to lend them to him.

Appendix B

(Jefferson, 2004)

A. Contiguous utterances

= Equal signs indicate no break up or gap. They are placed when there is no interval between adjacent utterances and the second utterance is linked immediately to the first.

B. Overlaps

[A left bracket indicates the point of overlap onset.
] A right bracket indicates the point at which two overlapping utterances end, if they end simultaneously, or the point at which one of them ends in the course of the other. It is also used to parse out segments of overlapping utterances.

C. Intervals

() Parentheses indicating the time in seconds and placed within an utterance mark intervals or pauses in the stream of talk.
- A dash marks a short untimed pause within an utterance.

D. Characteristics of speech delivery

↑↓ The up and down mark sharper rises or falls in pitch.
: A colon marks a lengthened syllable or an extension of a sound.
:: More colons prolong a sound or syllable.
word Underlining is used to indicate some form of stress or emphasis, either by increased loudness or higher pitch.
. A period marks fall in tone.
, A comma marks continuing intonation.
? A question mark signals rising intonation.

E. Other markings

(()) Double parentheses are used to mark transcriber's descriptions of events.

Appendix C

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

I. Direct strategies

1. Flat 'No' - No
2. Negation of a proposition - *No puedo venir a la fiesta* ('I can't come to the party')

II. Indirect strategies

1. Mitigated refusal
 - *Creo que no es posible* ('I don't think it's possible')
 - *No podría asistir* ('I wouldn't be able to attend')
 - *No se puede* (Not PASSIVE-SE can-3rdSING ['It's not possible'])

- | | | |
|----|-------------------------------------|--|
| 2. | Reasons/Explanations | - <i>Tengo planes/Tengo un compromiso</i>
(‘I have plans/I have a commitment’) |
| 3. | Indefinite reply | - <i>No sé si tendré tiempo</i> (‘I don’t know if I’ll have time’) |
| 4. | Promise to comply | - <i>Voy a tratar de estar ahí, pero no te prometo nada</i>
(‘I’ll try to be there, but I can’t promise you anything’) |
| 5. | Regret/Apology | - <i>Discúlpame</i> (‘Forgive me’)
- <i>Lo siento mucho</i> (‘I’m really sorry’) |
| 6. | Alternative | - <i>¿Por qué no salimos a comer la próxima semana?</i>
(‘Why don’t we go out for dinner next week?’) |
| 7. | Postponement | - <i>Prefiero tomar esta clase el próximo semestre</i>
(‘I’d rather take this class next semester’)
- <i>Voy a pensarlo y luego le digo</i>
(‘I’ll think about and tell you later’) |
| 8. | Set Condition for Future Acceptance | - <i>Si tengo que tomar la clase después, pues la tomo</i>
(‘If I have to take the class later, I’ll take it then’) |
- III. Adjuncts to Refusals
- | | | |
|----|------------------|---|
| 1. | Positive Opinion | - <i>Felicidades por su ascenso. Me da mucho gusto!</i>
(‘Congratulations on your promotion. I am very glad!’) |
| 2. | Willingness | - <i>Me encantaría, pero ...</i> (‘I’d love to, but ...’) |
| 3. | Gratitude | - <i>Gracias por la invitación</i> (‘Thanks for the invitation’) |
| 4. | Agreement | - <i>Sí, de acuerdo, pero ...</i> (‘Yes, I agree, but ...’) |

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J. César Félix-Brasdefer is Assistant Professor of Spanish and Linguistics at Indiana University. He specializes in the areas of pragmatics, spoken discourse, and cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics. His publications have appeared in *Language Learning*, *Multilingua*, *Proceedings of the Hispanic Linguistics Symposium*, as well as book chapters. He is the co-editor of *Pragmatics and Language Learning*, vol. 11 (2006). He is currently working on a website for the teaching of pragmatics in the Spanish Foreign Language classroom.