

## REFUSING AN OFFER IN BUSINESS BY THE AMERICAN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE

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**Abstract:** *This study explores the intricacies of refusing offers in business settings, comparing strategies used by English and Vietnamese speakers. Grounded in speech act theory, politeness theory, and concepts of offers and refusals, the research examines both direct and indirect refusal methods, offering a more focused analysis than previous studies on general refusals. The findings reveal a wide array of refusal strategies employed by speakers of both languages. Direct approaches include explicit refusals and non-performative statements, while indirect methods encompass apologies, excuses, alternative suggestions, and statements of conditions or principles. These indirect strategies often serve to mitigate the potential negative impact of declining an offer. The study contributes significantly to the field of intercultural business communication by highlighting the distinct refusal approaches in different cultural contexts. It emphasizes the need for further research to explore specific factors influencing strategy choices and to identify potential cultural variations within these approaches. By providing insights into these nuances, the research aims to enhance intercultural communication skills in business environments.*

**Keywords:** *Business, English, offer, refusing an offer, speech act, Vietnamese.*

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### 1. PROPOSED ISSUE

Throughout the history of mankind, people have always needed to communicate. Whether it is to maintain relationships, carry out work, or foster growth, communication, and information exchange are an essential part of our daily lives. However, in the process of communication, refusing and being refused can happen, regardless of whether we are the giver or receiver. Refusal is a common speech act that is intricately woven into the fabric of our everyday interactions.

Similarly, in the realm of business, where negotiations, transactions, and relationship-building hinge on the ability to convey intentions and navigate delicate interactions, refusal is also common especially when refusing an offer. Refusing an offer in general has been a popular topic when previous studies have explored various aspects of intercultural communications, shedding light on the strategies employed by individuals. These studies have examined different languages and cultures, providing valuable insights into the complexities of refusal behaviors and their cultural underpinnings.

A study conducted by Mehmet, A. (2013) compared the refusal strategies used by pre-service English teachers from Turkey, Poland, and Latvia [1]. The findings indicated that all three groups employed a variety of refusal strategies, including both direct and indirect approaches. However, the preference for indirect strategies was more prominent across all groups. Furthermore, there were no significant differences observed in the appropriate use of refusal strategies among the four groups.

In another study by Naimah, A. and Yasser Al. (2020), the role of social status in the speech act of refusal was examined between Americans and Yemenis [2]. The study revealed that Americans tended to be less direct than Yemenis, particularly in interactions involving individuals of lower or equal social status. The social status of individuals significantly influenced the selection and utilization of refusal strategies among both Yemenis and Americans.

On the topic of refusing in business, there is limited research available. However, in a study by Polina M. and Svetlana N. (2017) [3], the expression of refusals in business communication between Bulgarian and English speakers was examined. The results revealed that Bulgarian native speakers tend to utilize particular strategies, including expressions of regret, and providing facts, reasons, and explanations, when performing the speech act of refusals.

Similarly, Polina M. (2018) [4] conducted a study focusing on refusal strategies in business communication among native English speakers. The research findings showed that native English speakers tend to employ specific strategies, such as the use of reasons, expressions of regret, and stating facts, when performing the speech act of refusals.

There are numerous studies on the speech act of refusing in Vietnam. One notable study is: “Frequency Employments of Direct Refusal Strategies of Offers by the Native Speakers of American English and the Vietnamese” by Yen Vuong, Thi Hai (2023) [5]. The findings showed that there are 7 direct strategies of refusing offers used by the Vietnamese and Americans: Statement of frank speaking, Statement of offensive speaking, Statement of using polite words, Set condition for future or past acceptance, Statement of paying attention to the interlocutor’s benefit, Statement of reason, Statement of personal principle. Additionally, American people tend to use direct refusal strategies more than Vietnamese ones. They prefer most strategies of using polite words; frank speaking; and Statement of reason whereas The Vietnamese prefer Statement of reason, Using polite words, Statement of personal principle

Numerous studies conducted both internationally and in Vietnam, have focused on examining the strategies employed in refusing an offer. These studies have explored various strategies and factors that influence the act of refusal. However, a specific gap exists in the research regarding the refusal of offers in the context of business communication. There is a lack of investigation into which refusal strategies are commonly used by English and Vietnamese speakers in business settings.

This study aims to provide brief information about the speech act of refusing an offer in business between English and Vietnamese speakers. The writers focus on discovering some theoretical background as well as giving examples related to the topic.

## 2. CONTENT

### 2.1. The speech act, the speech act sets of refusal, and politeness theory

#### 2.2.1. *The speech act*

A speech act set is a group of different speech actions that, when combined, form a complete speech act, as described by Murphy and Neu (1996) [7]. Austin (1962) [8] added to this definition by stating that a speech act is not just an expression of information, but also an action in itself.

Speech acts are typically created with specific intentions, and when multiple speech acts are put together, they form a speech act set. These activities are differentiated based on the various elements of the speaker's purpose, and some common speech acts include offering, requesting, and complaining. According to Searle (1976) [9], speech acts can be divided into five fundamental categories: Declaratives, Representatives, Expressives, Directives, and Commissives.

##### *a. Declarative*

Declarative are speech acts where the spoken words bring out immediate changes in the state of institutional state of affairs. These type of speech acts often rely on established non-linguistic institutions or conventions to give them authority. These institutions can be legal systems, religious practices, cultural norms, or organizational policies.

Declarations tend to be difficult to revoke or undo once they have been made. When a declaration is made, the speaker asserts something that has a significant impact and consequences in the specific context or institution involved. For example: “You are fired!” is a declaration. The utterance itself, in this case, holds the power to change the dynamics of the relationship (firing an employee).

##### *b. Representatives*

Representatives are speech acts that involve the speaker committing to the truth of a proposition they express. These types of speech acts also reflect what the speaker believes to be true or not. For example, when someone says “Taylor is smart”, it represents the speaker’s belief about Taylor. The statement can be based on the facts or just give his or her own opinion about a person.

##### *c. Directives*

Directives are speech acts used by a speaker to prompt or persuade others to take a specific action. These speech acts encompass various forms of communication, such as requesting, questioning, commanding, ordering, or suggesting.

When someone says “Why don’t you try the seafood pasta? It’s delicious”, it is a directive. The speaker is suggesting the hearer proposing that they should consider taking a specific action which is trying the seafood pasta due to its deliciousness.

##### *d. Commissives*

Commissions are speech acts where the speaker’s utterances commit them to a future course of action. Commissives will indicate whether the speaker accepts or refuses a responsibility or task. These types of speech acts involve making promises, threats, offers, refusals, or pledges.

For example, “I will buy you this dress next month” is a commissive. In this statement, the speaker is making a promise that they will buy that dress later. The phrase “I will” indicates the speaker’s commitment to a future action. By uttering this phrase, the speaker is expressing intention and assurance that they will fulfill this promise.

*e. Expressives*

Expressives are types of speech acts where the words spoken reflect the speaker’s emotional or psychological state. These acts encompass various expressions such as gratitude, apologies, greetings, and celebrations.

For example, “Welcome to our show today” is an expressive. It conveys the speaker’s welcoming sentiment.

### **2.1.2. The speech act set of refusals**

Refusal is the art of gracefully expressing one’s reluctance to undertake, extend, or embrace a certain action or proposition. It is a common speech act intricately woven into the fabric of our everyday interactions.

The act of refusal serves as a response to various speech acts such as offers, invitations, suggestions, or requests. It allows individuals to convey their disinclination to partake in a particular course of action.

According to the influential work of Brown and Levinson (1987) [10], refusals can be considered delicate acts that potentially threaten one’s social standing. By declining to provide the expected response, the speaker inadvertently challenges the listener’s sense of self or social identity. When refusing, the speaker artfully communicates their intent to reject, implying a clear stance of non-acceptance. Both direct and indirect approaches can be employed to gracefully navigate the terrain of refusals.

For instance, consider a situation where someone kindly asks, “Would you prefer coffee or tea?” The speaker intends to extend a warm beverage option to the listener. Responding with finesse, one might say, “Thank you for the offer, but I just had a cup of milk tea.” In this elegant response, the speaker tactfully conveys both a rejection of the offer and their lack of willingness to partake in it.

Given that the speaker refrains from committing to future actions, the act of refusal falls under the commissive category (refer to 2.1.4). However, the idea is declined by Ellis. Ellis (2008) [11] states that “The speech act of refusals do not easily fit into Searle’s classification of speech acts. They occur in the form of responses to a variety of illocutionary acts such as invitations, offers, requests, and suggestions. It might be better to treat refusals as an interactional rather than a speech act”. This means the classification of speech acts proposed by Searle does not neatly accommodate the speech act of refusals. refusal is performed in order to respond to other speech acts such as offers, invitations, suggestions, or requests. Therefore, it might be more suitable to consider refusals as belonging to the realm of interactions instead of being classified solely as speech acts.

### **2.1.3 Politeness theory**

Politeness is a fundamental aspect of social behavior that plays a crucial role in shaping interactions between people. The quality of relationships between individuals is greatly influenced by the degree of politeness. As a cultural phenomenon, politeness encompasses unique features that vary across different communities. Each society and country complies with its own politeness principle. Therefore, there have been numerous studies about the

politeness theory in a variety of cultures for many years. Among those, the basic concept of the theory formulated by Brown and Levinson (1987) [12] has become very influential.

They assume that “all competent adult members of a society have ‘face’, the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself”. There are two types of face: Positive face and Negative face. In this context, a positive face refers to the self-image that is favored and approved by others, whereas a negative face is a need to feel independent and unburdened by others’ demands of constraints.

## **2.2. Theoretical review of offers and the concept of refusing an offer in business**

### **2.2.1. Offer and refusal of offer**

#### **2.2.1.1. Offer**

Hornby (2003) [13, p551-552] defines an offer as an expression of willingness to do something for or provide something to someone. According to the Vietnamese Dictionary edited by Hoang (2006) [14, p308], an offer is a request, often of a personal nature, that is intended to be accepted. Therefore, the primary objective of an offer is to indicate the speaker's intention for future action.

#### **2.2.1.2. Refusal of offer**

According to Hornby (2003) [15, p1052], “Refusing an offer means saying or showing that you do not want to do or accept the offer of someone”. This means that the refusal of an offer entails the act of expressing a lack of willingness or acceptance of someone’s proposal. This act is considered one of the face-threatening acts in daily communication. Refusing an offer poses challenges to both the speaker and the recipient in terms of face preservation.

### **2.2.2. Offer and refusal in business**

#### **2.2.2.1. Offer in business**

In the context of business, an offer refers to a formal proposal or expression of willingness made by one party (the offeror) to another party (the offeree) to enter into a legally binding agreement or contract. It involves specific terms and conditions that outline what the offering party is willing to provide or undertake in exchange for something of value from the other party. An offer in a business may cover aspects such as price, quantity, quality, delivery terms, payment terms, and any other relevant provisions that establish the proposed transaction or agreement.

#### **2.2.2. Refusal of an offer in business**

Refusing an offer in a business context refers to the act of declining or rejecting a proposal, deal, or opportunity presented by another party. It is a crucial aspect of business negotiations and decision-making processes. The refusal of an offer in business may include refusing to be involved in a negotiation meeting, refusing to sign a contract, refusing to buy a product, refusing cooperation, refusing a contract, etc. Below are some examples in English and Vietnamese:

*Example 1:* One of the most notorious Shark Tank refuses started as a video doorbell name Doorbot (Season 5 Episode 9 Shark Tank). After presenting their product – the world’s first Wi-Fi video doorbell and offer to receive \$700.000 with a 10% stake in the company, Jamie Siminoff got refused to invest by all of the Sharks.

The refusal made by Mark Cuban – the shark, was: “*No one’s arguing about the quality of the product, I like it. I think you’re gonna do great with it. But I’ve got to say*”

when I jump in, I've got to add enough value that this company still be worth 7 million and could be worth 80 90 million. I just don't see the progression and for that reason, I'm out".

*Example 2:* A negotiation between a departmental boss and his staff in the book of Susan Lowe, Louise Pile (DELTA Business Communication Skills - Negotiation, 2007) [16]. This refusal refers to refuse an offer to cooperate in business.

*Boss (B):* Morning John, Paul. How are you both?

*John (J):* Fine, thanks.

*Paul (P):* Fine.

*B:* Ok thanks everyone for sparing some time today for this meeting – I know you're all busy. I wanted to get you all together to discuss your workload. .... So, in the meantime. I'd like to propose that John moves from his current project and work with Thomas, Helga. I suggest that...

*J:* I'm afraid I have some reservations about moving from my project. I know it's nearly finished, but I propose that I see it through to the end. Could Thomas work on his own for a while instead?

*Example 3:* Still in the same book, another dialog refers to refuse an offer to invest:

*Karen (K):* Oh hi, is that Pierre? Hello. This is Karen from POR Consulting. I'm calling about the quote I sent you last week for running communications skills training.

*Pierre (P):* Oh yes, of course.

*K:* I just wondered if you'd made a decision about suppliers.

*P:* Yes, we have. I'm afraid you've been unsuccessful on this occasion.

*K:* Oh, I see. Can you give me a reason?

*P:* Well, your prices were at least double that of the other suppliers.

*Example 4:* Drew Houston – CEO of Dropbox, once made a refusal towards Steve Jobs. Steve Jobs offered to buy their company, however, Dropbox refused. The refusal was once shared by the CEO in the interview with 20VC with Harry Stebbings (2023) [17] that:

*"We really love Apple, we really admire everything you've done. But we're really enjoying building this company and we have a long way to go"*

*Example 5:* During the early days of Apple, when the company was operating out of a garage, Steve Jobs and Apple's board made the decision to deny stock options to certain early employees. Among them was Daniel Kottke, who held the position of Apple employee No. 12. At a later point, when another Apple executive raised the issue of Kottke not receiving stock options and offered to provide a matching grant, Jobs famously responded: "OK. I will give him zero."

*Example 6:* The client refuses to buy the company product by saying: "Chị sẽ suy nghĩ rồi báo lại cho em sau" – "I will think about it and get back to you later" (collected by Duy Nguyễn in his youtube video *TỔNG HỢP XỬ LÝ TỪ CHỐI TRONG BÁN HÀNG* on 2021) [18]

*Example 7:* In Episode 13 of Shark Tank Vietnam (2018), Mr. Vĩnh Bảo, Mr. Quốc Linh, and Mr. Xuân Huy from Vinagroup company are seeking investment for two projects - an e-commerce model proposing \$500,000 for a 5% stake in the company, and \$500,000 for a 10% stake in a Tek Nails project. Their offer was refused, and one of the 4 refusals made by sharks is:

Shark Phú: “Anh nghĩ là các em đang tham vọng, dấn thân vào phân phối rồi dấn thân sang sản xuất. Thật sự anh rất lo ngại. Và đó là lí do anh không đầu tư”

Mr Phú: “*I think you are being ambitious, venturing into distribution and then branching into production. I genuinely have concerns about that. And that is the reason why I won't invest*”

### **2.3. Strategies for refusing an offer in business**

The strategies for refusing an offer in business are based on the strategies organized by Beebe et al (1990) [19]. According to the taxonomy of refusal conducted by Beebe, the refusal strategies include two broad categories: direct and indirect strategies

#### **2.3.1. Direct refusal strategies**

A direct strategy can be classified as:

A. A performative refusal: This involves using explicit performative verbs or phrases to directly refuse an offer. For example, a person might say, "I refuse" or "I decline" as a direct and unambiguous rejection of the offer.

B. A non-performative statement: This includes two types of expression

*Expressing negative willingness or inability:* This refers to statements where the refusal is conveyed without explicitly using performative verbs or phrases. Instead, a person indicates their negative willingness or inability to accept the offer through other means. For example, phrases such as "I don't want to," "I'm not interested," or "I can't" fall under this category. These statements directly express a refusal without explicitly stating "I refuse" or using similar performative language.

*Using “No” directly:* This involves a direct expression of refusal using the word "No" or similar negative responses. For instance, responding with "No," "No, thank you," "No, I can't," or "No, I don't think so" are all examples of direct refusals using "No" to convey the refusal explicitly.

#### **2.3.2. Indirect refusal strategy**

This refusal strategy involves expressing the refusal less directly or explicitly, often using various linguistic formulas or techniques.

There are 11 types commonly used:

*Apology/regret:* This involves expressing remorse or sympathy while refusing. For example, using phrases like "I'm sorry, but..." or "I feel terrible, but..." to soften the impact of the refusal.

*Wish:* This strategy involves expressing a desire or wish for something that would make accepting the offer possible. For instance, saying "I wish I could go to your party" implies a refusal due to an inability to attend.

*Excuse/reason/explanation:* This involves providing a justification or explanation for not complying with the request. Examples include mentioning prior commitments, like "My children will be home that night," or citing personal circumstances such as having a headache.

*Statement of an alternative:* This strategy suggests an alternative action or solution instead of accepting the offer. It can be expressed through phrases like "I'd rather..." or "Why don't you do X instead of Y?".

*Setting conditions for future acceptance:* This is done by stating a condition that would need to be met for the acceptance of the invitation or offer. For example, saying "If I am not busy, I will..." or "If you had asked me earlier, I would have..." sets conditions for potential acceptance.

*Promise of future acceptance:* This involves expressing a commitment to accept a similar offer in the future, even though the current offer is refused. For instance, saying "I'll do it next time" indicates a willingness to engage in the future.

*Statement of principle:* This refers to stating a personal rule or principle that guides the refusal. For example, saying "I never do business with friends" indicates a refusal based on a guiding principle.

*Statement of philosophy:* This involves expressing a personal outlook or viewpoint that justifies the refusal. For instance, phrases like "One can't be too careful" or "Things break anyway" reflect a philosophical reasoning for refusal.

*Attempt to dissuade:* This strategy employs various tactics to discourage the requester, such as highlighting negative consequences, criticizing the request or requester, or appealing for empathy or assistance. These tactics aim to dissuade the requester from pursuing the request further.

*Acceptance that functions as a refusal:* Instead of refusing outright, interlocutors initially accept the invitation, offer, or suggestion but then introduce conditions or objections that effectively result in a refusal. For example, saying "Yes, but..." or "Okay, I will, but..." followed by conditions or objections.

*Avoidance:* This strategy involves avoiding a direct refusal through verbal acts. Verbal acts may include changing the subject, joking, hedging, or using silence or hesitation.

These semantic formulas represent various indirect strategies employed to soften the impact of refusal, maintain politeness, or mitigate potential conflicts in communication. Indirect strategies are often influenced by cultural norms, interpersonal factors, and the desire to preserve social harmony.

### 3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has made significant contributions to our understanding of refusal strategies in business contexts, particularly comparing English and Vietnamese speakers. By leveraging speech act theory, politeness theory, and concepts of offers and refusals, the research has shed light on both direct and indirect approaches to declining offers in professional settings. This investigation has not only provided valuable insights but also opened up new avenues for future research in the field of business communication. Potential directions for subsequent studies include: Examining refusal strategies in more specific business scenarios, such as negotiations, presentations, or industry-specific interactions; Exploring how individual factors like personality traits, professional experience, and social status influence the selection and execution of refusal strategies; Expanding the scope to include other languages and cultures, further enriching our understanding of cross-cultural business communication. The findings from this study serve as a foundation for developing a more nuanced comprehension of intercultural business interactions. By illuminating the similarities and differences in refusal strategies between English and Vietnamese speakers, this research contributes to the broader goal of improving cross-cultural communication in global business environments. Ultimately, the authors envision this work as a stepping stone toward fostering more effective and

culturally sensitive business practices in an increasingly interconnected world. As businesses continue to operate on a global scale, insights from studies like this will prove invaluable in navigating the complexities of intercultural professional communication.

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## HÀNH VI TỪ CHỐI LỜI ĐỀ NGHỊ TRONG KINH DOANH BỞI NGƯỜI ANH MỸ VÀ NGƯỜI VIỆT

**Tóm tắt:** Nghiên cứu này khám phá những phức tạp trong việc từ chối lời đề nghị trong môi trường kinh doanh, so sánh các chiến lược từ chối được người Anh Mỹ và người Việt ưa sử dụng. Dựa trên lý thuyết hành vi ngôn ngữ, lý thuyết lịch sự, và các khái niệm về đề nghị và từ chối, nghiên cứu xem xét cả phương pháp từ chối trực tiếp và gián tiếp, cung cấp một phân tích tập trung hơn so với các nghiên cứu trước đây về từ chối nói chung. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy một loạt các chiến lược từ chối được sử dụng ở cả hai ngôn ngữ. Cách tiếp cận trực tiếp bao gồm từ chối rõ ràng và các phát ngôn không mang tính thực hiện, trong khi phương pháp gián tiếp bao gồm lời xin lỗi, đưa lý do, đề xuất thay thế, và các phát biểu về điều kiện hoặc nguyên tắc cá nhân. Những chiến lược gián tiếp này thường được sử dụng để giảm thiểu tác động tiêu cực tiềm tàng của việc từ chối một đề nghị. Nghiên cứu đóng góp đáng kể vào lĩnh vực giao tiếp kinh doanh liên văn hóa bằng cách làm nổi bật các cách tiếp cận từ chối khác nhau trong các bối cảnh văn hóa khác nhau, nhấn mạnh sự cần thiết của việc nghiên cứu thêm để khám phá các yếu tố cụ thể ảnh hưởng đến lựa chọn chiến lược và xác định các biến thể văn hóa tiềm năng trong các cách tiếp cận này. Bài viết cung cấp cái nhìn sâu sắc về khía cạnh này với mong muốn nâng cao kỹ năng giao tiếp liên văn hóa trong môi trường kinh doanh.

**Từ khóa:** Kinh doanh, tiếng Anh, đề nghị, từ chối đề nghị, hành vi ngôn ngữ, tiếng Việt.