

## Semantic Analysis of Refusal Expressions in Daily English Conversations

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### Abstract

This study explores the semantic features of refusal expressions in English daily conversations, focusing on how meaning is constructed through direct and indirect strategies. Drawing on recent developments in speech act theory, politeness theory, and sociopragmatic research, this study analyzes a variety of refusal forms that reflect both linguistic choices and social considerations. The data, compiled through qualitative library research and drawn from authentic conversational contexts, reveal that refusals often include hedges, modal verbs, and mitigating elements such as apologies or compliments. These features help soften the illocutionary force of refusal and preserve the hearer's face. Semantic structures such as conditional clauses, discourse markers, and implicatures are commonly employed to encode indirectness, empathy, and politeness. The findings underscore how refusal expressions operate not merely as rejections but as context-sensitive speech acts shaped by cultural norms, social roles, and speaker intent.

**Keywords:** *Semantic, Refusal Expressions, Daily Conversations*

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi fitur semantik dari ungkapan penolakan dalam percakapan sehari-hari dalam bahasa Inggris, dengan fokus pada bagaimana makna dibangun melalui strategi langsung dan tidak langsung. Dengan mengacu pada perkembangan terbaru dalam teori tindak tutur, teori kesantunan, dan penelitian sosiopragmatik, penelitian ini menganalisis berbagai bentuk penolakan yang mencerminkan pilihan linguistik dan pertimbangan sosial. Data yang dikumpulkan melalui penelitian kepustakaan kualitatif dan diambil dari konteks percakapan otentik, mengungkapkan bahwa penolakan sering kali menyertakan lindung nilai, kata kerja modal, dan elemen-elemen yang meringankan seperti permintaan maaf atau pujian. Fitur-fitur ini membantu melunakkan kekuatan ilokusi penolakan dan menjaga wajah pendengar. Struktur semantik seperti klausa bersyarat, penanda wacana, dan implikatur biasanya digunakan untuk mengkodekan ketidaklangsungan, empati, dan kesopanan

**Kata Kunci:** *Semantik, Ekspresi Penolakan, Percakapan Sehari-hari*

## INTRODUCTION

Language serves not only as a tool for conveying information but also as a medium for negotiating social relationships and expressing interpersonal attitudes. One critical aspect of communication is the act of refusing, which, although necessary, can be socially delicate. Refusals are often categorized as face-threatening acts (FTAs) because they involve rejecting or declining requests, offers, invitations, or suggestions—acts that may threaten the interlocutor's positive or negative face. Recent studies in pragmatics, such as those by Culpeper and Haugh (2015), emphasize the role of politeness strategies in mitigating the potential social harm caused by FTAs and maintaining interpersonal harmony.

In semantic-pragmatic interfaces, understanding how meaning is constructed and conveyed in refusal expressions is essential. Refusals are not always delivered through direct or explicit negations; rather, speakers frequently use indirect strategies—such as excuses, justifications, or softened language to lessen the force of the refusal. As noted by Kádár and House (2020), these indirect strategies reveal how linguistic choices are shaped by both semantic functions and sociopragmatic expectations. Speech act theory has also evolved beyond its classical foundations to consider how utterances, such as refusals, perform social actions that are context-dependent (Taguchi, 2019). By examining the semantic features of refusal expressions, researchers can uncover how meaning is encoded in ways that reflect speaker intent and social context.

This study aims to analyze the semantic aspects of refusal expressions in English daily conversations, focusing on how different lexical and structural choices convey the act of refusal. It also seeks to explore how indirectness and politeness are semantically encoded to preserve social relationships. Data for this study were drawn from authentic English conversations across various social contexts and analyzed using qualitative methods. The findings are expected to provide a deeper understanding of how semantic analysis can illuminate the intricate relationship between language, meaning, and social behavior, particularly in the context of everyday refusals.

## METHOD

This study adopts a library research approach, which involves reviewing and analyzing previous scholarly works relevant to the topic of refusal expressions from both semantic and pragmatic perspectives. The primary data consist of journal articles, academic books, and conference proceedings that focus on the structure, meaning, and social implications of refusal strategies in English, particularly as they occur in everyday conversational contexts. The literature selected includes studies that explore

how language users express refusal, manage interpersonal relationships, and mitigate face-threatening acts in communication.

In addition to these empirical studies, the research also draws on theoretical sources that discuss speech act theory, politeness principles, and face theory particularly the frameworks proposed by scholars such as Austin, Searle, and Brown & Levinson, which provide a foundation for understanding the functions and implications of refusal as a communicative act. Data collection was conducted by systematically searching academic databases including Google Scholar, Scopus, and SINTA, focusing on peer-reviewed publications from the last five years. The search utilized relevant keywords such as “refusal expressions,” “speech act theory,” “semantic analysis,” “politeness strategies,” and “daily English conversation.”

The analysis is carried out using a qualitative descriptive method, in which selected texts are examined and categorized based on semantic features of refusal expressions, the types of strategies used (e.g., direct or indirect refusals), and the contextual variables that influence them (such as social roles, relational distance, and situational appropriateness). This approach allows for an in-depth interpretation of how refusal is semantically encoded and how it reflects broader patterns of social interaction and language use in everyday English communication.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Speech Act Theory**

Understanding refusal expressions in everyday conversation is closely tied to developments in speech act theory, which explains how language is used not just to communicate information but also to carry out actions. Although this theory was first introduced by Austin and later expanded by Searle, more recent scholars—such as Taguchi (2019) and Kecskes (2017)—have adapted it to better reflect the role of cultural context and intercultural communication in how speech acts are performed and interpreted.

Speech acts are generally divided into three components: the locutionary act (the literal meaning of the words), the illocutionary act (the speaker's intended function), and the perlocutionary act (the effect on the listener). In the case of refusal, the illocutionary function is especially important because it involves declining something while trying to maintain social balance. This makes refusal one of the more sensitive and complex types of speech acts.

Refusals are often seen as commissive acts, since the speaker commits to not carrying out an action that the listener hopes for. But in practice, refusals often include elements of expressive acts as well, especially when speakers try to show empathy, regret, or appreciation while turning something down. For example, saying “I’d love to help, but I’m already committed” allows the speaker to say no politely while still expressing

goodwill. Recent research (e.g., Ishihara & Cohen, 2020) also emphasizes the importance of indirect speech acts in expressing refusal. Rather than saying “no” directly, speakers often use softer or more ambiguous language such as “I wish I could join”—to imply refusal without openly rejecting the listener. This kind of indirectness is not accidental; it is often used deliberately as a politeness strategy, especially in situations where direct refusal might seem rude or overly blunt.

Because refusing something can threaten the listener’s face whether it’s their desire to be liked (*positive face*) or their desire not to be imposed on (*negative face*) many speakers adjust their language to reduce that threat. This may involve using hedges, giving reasons, offering alternatives, or showing sympathy, all of which help manage the social consequences of saying no. In short, refusals are not just about denying a request they involve a careful balance between expressing a decision and maintaining relationships. Looking at them from a semantic and pragmatic perspective reveals how language is used to convey meaning in subtle, socially aware ways. By analyzing refusal expressions, we can better understand how speakers choose their words based not only on meaning, but also on the social dynamics at play in everyday interactions.

### **Refusal Strategies and Semantic Formulas**

Contemporary studies continue to explore the structure and function of refusal expressions, particularly their semantic and pragmatic components. Refusal strategies can be classified into direct, indirect, and adjunctive components (Bella, 2014; Kurniawan & Marlina, 2022). Direct refusals use clear and unambiguous language, such as “No, I can’t,” but may be seen as blunt in some social contexts. Indirect strategies, which include excuses, hedges, or expressions of regret, are often preferred in cultures that value politeness and harmony. For example, “I’d love to, but I have another appointment” combines both expressive and commissive elements to deliver a socially appropriate refusal.

In addition, adjuncts such as compliments (“That’s a great idea”), apologies (“I’m sorry”), and gratitude (“Thank you for asking”) serve to cushion the refusal. These components are frequently combined into semantic formulas, which sequence various elements to reflect social distance, power dynamics, and cultural norms. For example, a typical refusal might follow this formula: *apology + excuse + refusal*, as in “I’m sorry, I’ve got a meeting, so I can’t join you.”

Cross-cultural studies, such as those by Morkus (2019) and Yuliana & Yanti (2019), demonstrate that learners from different linguistic backgrounds use a variety of indirect strategies and adjuncts depending on their cultural expectations and status relationships. These findings support

the importance of semantic analysis in identifying how refusal expressions function in real-world interactions.

### **Semantic Analysis of Refusals**

Semantic analysis provides a crucial lens through which refusal expressions in daily English conversations can be understood in terms of meaning, structure, and context. Refusals are inherently complex because they must communicate rejection while maintaining interpersonal harmony. As such, speakers often encode multiple layers of meaning through lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic strategies. In recent studies, researchers such as Terkourafi (2015), Haugh (2016), and Kecskes (2022) have emphasized the interplay between semantics and pragmatics in conveying politeness, indirectness, and speaker stance, especially in socially delicate acts like refusals.

Lexically, speakers utilize modals such as *might*, *could*, and *would* to signal tentativeness or indirectness, softening the impact of a refusal. Hedges like *maybe*, *kind of*, and *a bit* also function to reduce the force of rejection by introducing vagueness or uncertainty. Discourse markers such as *well*, *actually*, and *you know* serve both to delay the refusal and to provide interpersonal cushioning. These linguistic choices reflect not only semantic meaning but also pragmatic intent: to protect the hearer's face while asserting the speaker's stance.

Syntactically, refusal expressions frequently rely on conditional or subordinate clauses to frame the refusal as constrained rather than outright rejection—for example, *"If I weren't busy, I'd join you"*. This structure presents an imagined willingness and thus implies regret or empathy, a phenomenon supported by Kádár & Haugh's (2015) work on relational work and politeness. Such constructions reveal how speakers mitigate the illocutionary force of their refusal by embedding it within a socially acceptable rationale.

Pragmatically, refusal utterances often involve implicatures—that is, meaning derived not from what is said, but what is implied. Phrases like *"That sounds fun"* or *"I wish I could"* are frequently used as prefaces to refusals, hinting at a decline without direct negation. These implicatures signal politeness and allow for plausible deniability, making the refusal less confrontational. Moreover, many refusal expressions rely on presuppositions and entailments, which shape how the hearer interprets the message. For example, *"I'd love to, but I can't"* presupposes the speaker's willingness, thus aligning them emotionally with the offer even as they decline it. In conclusion, semantic analysis reveals that refusals are constructed not simply to convey a "no," but to achieve a complex social balancing act between honesty, empathy, and politeness. The data table provided below illustrates the diversity of refusal forms found in daily English conversation, categorized by their literal meanings, usage contexts, and pragmatic functions. These expressions range from direct refusals to indirect and heavily mitigated

forms, demonstrating how speakers navigate interpersonal dynamics through nuanced linguistic choices.

### Forms of Refusal Expressions in English

This section presents the different forms of refusal expressions identified in the data collected from daily English conversations. The analysis includes the literal meanings of these expressions, their usage context, and the speech act functions they perform. The table below summarizes the findings, illustrating how refusal expressions vary in formality, directness, and politeness strategies.

<b>Refusal Expression</b>	<b>Literal Meaning</b>	<b>Usage Context</b>	<b>Speech Act Function</b>
No, I can't.	I am not able to do it.	General, personal & formal settings	Direct refusal
I'd love to, but...	I would like to, but I can't.	Informal and formal settings	Indirect refusal with positive politeness
I wish I could help	I want to help but cannot.	Friendly or formal contexts	Indirect refusal; expressing empathy
I'm sorry, but I can't	Apology and refusal	Various settings	Indirect refusal with apology
I have another commitment	I have something else to do	Semi-formal to formal contexts	Indirect refusal; providing an excuse
Maybe another time	Suggesting postponement	Informal or polite refusal	Mitigating the refusal
That sounds great, but...	Positive evaluation before refusal	Social, casual conversations	Positive politeness, indirect refusal
I'd rather not	I prefer not to	Personal, informal	Direct but polite refusal
I'm afraid I can't make it	Expressing regret	Formal, polite contexts	Indirect refusal with apology
I'm sorry, I can't commit to that.	Apologizing for not being able to agree.	Formal or informal	Indirect refusal with apology
Unfortunately, I have to decline.	Expressing regret for refusing.	Formal	Negative politeness strategy

I can't help with that, I'm afraid.	Stating inability and regret.	Workplace or formal	Indirect refusal with apology
I'm not sure I can make it.	Expressing uncertainty about attending.	Informal and formal	Hedging, indirect refusal
That's kind of you, but I'll pass.	Acknowledging kindness before refusal.	Social settings	Positive politeness
I wish I could join you, but I can't.	Expressing regret and refusal.	Friendly and formal	Indirect refusal with empathy
I'd like to, but I already have plans.	Offering an explanation.	Informal and formal	Indirect refusal with explanation
I'm afraid that's not possible.	Expressing inability.	Formal, business contexts	Negative politeness
I'm sorry, but I'm unavailable.	Apologizing for being unavailable.	Formal or informal	Indirect refusal with apology
I'd love to, but my schedule won't allow it.	Explaining time constraints.	Formal or semi-formal	Indirect refusal with explanation
Maybe another time?	Suggesting alternative.	Informal	Indirect refusal; postponement
I'd rather not, thank you.	Polite way to decline.	Formal and informal	Direct but polite refusal
I can't promise that.	Declining commitment.	Business contexts	Direct refusal
That's a great offer, but I have to decline.	Complimenting offer, then declining.	Semi-formal to formal	Positive politeness, indirect refusal
I'm honored, but I must decline.	Showing respect while refusing.	Formal settings	Negative politeness
I'm sorry, but I'm committed elsewhere.	Explaining prior commitments.	Formal or informal	Indirect refusal with apology
I'd love to help, but I'm overbooked.	Apologizing for being busy.	Casual to formal	Indirect refusal
I can't accept that, sorry.	Declining politely.	Formal	Direct refusal with apology
I really appreciate the	Expressing appreciation before	Various settings	Positive politeness

offer, but I have to say no.	refusal.				
That's so kind of you, but I can't.	Appreciating refusal.	before	Social contexts	Indirect refusal	
I wish I could agree, but I can't.	Expressing regret.		Formal and informal	Indirect refusal with empathy	
I'm unable to accept, sorry.	Stating inability.		Formal	Direct refusal with apology	
That's not going to work for me.	Polite refusal.		Informal or workplace	Negative politeness	
I can't commit to that at the moment.	Declining politely.		Business and casual	Indirect refusal	
I'm not available, sorry.	Expressing unavailability.		Informal and formal	Indirect refusal	
I'll pass, but thanks for asking.	Polite refusal.		Casual settings	Positive politeness	
Unfortunately, I have other obligations.	Explaining commitments.	prior	Formal	Indirect refusal with explanation	
I'm not in a position to help, I'm afraid.	Expressing regret.		Formal	Negative politeness	
I'm sorry, I can't take that on.	Declining responsibility.		Workplace	Indirect refusal with apology	
I can't do that, sorry.	Direct refusal with apology.	with	Various settings	Direct refusal	
I'm grateful, but I must decline.	Showing appreciation.		Formal	Positive politeness	
I'm sorry, I'm booked that day.	Expressing unavailability.		Informal and formal	Indirect refusal with apology	
That sounds fun, but I can't.	Polite refusal.		Social contexts	Positive politeness	
I'd rather not, but thanks.	Declining politely.		Informal	Direct but polite refusal	
I can't at the moment, but maybe later.	Suggesting alternative.		Informal and formal	Indirect refusal	
I'm not sure that's a good idea.	Polite disagreement/refusal.		Formal	Indirect refusal	



That's very kind, but I can't commit.	Appreciating refusal.	before	Social formal	or	Positive politeness
Sorry, I don't think I can help with that.	Expressing regret.		Various settings		Indirect refusal
I wish I could, but I have other responsibilities.	Explaining unavailability.		Formal and informal		Indirect refusal
I can't promise that, sorry.	Declining politely.		Formal		Negative politeness
I really want to, but I can't.	Expressing desire but declining.	but	Informal and formal		Indirect refusal

### **Politeness Theory and Face Management**

The management of face-threatening acts (FTAs), especially in the context of refusal, plays a central role in politeness theory. Although Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework remains a cornerstone in this area, more recent scholarship—such as that by Haugh (2015) and Locher & Watts (2018)—has emphasized that politeness should be understood not as a fixed set of strategies, but as a dynamic, interactional, and context-sensitive process. In this view, politeness is co-constructed between speaker and listener, shaped by cultural norms, individual relationships, and the specific situational context. Refusal expressions are particularly sensitive speech acts because they involve rejecting an offer, invitation, or request, which may threaten the interlocutor's face—either their positive face (the desire to be liked and approved of) or negative face (the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition). To manage these threats, speakers often rely on a range of politeness strategies. Positive politeness seeks to affirm social bonds and show appreciation, as in “I really appreciate your offer, but...” This type of strategy is commonly used among friends or equals to maintain a sense of closeness. Negative politeness, on the other hand, demonstrates respect and acknowledges the imposition involved, as seen in expressions like “I'm afraid I can't join you.” This is often preferred in more formal or hierarchical relationships where deference is expected. Meanwhile, off-record strategies make use of vagueness or indirect hints—such as “Things have been hectic lately”—to avoid directly stating a refusal, leaving room for interpretation and minimizing the risk of offense. The speaker's choice among these strategies is typically influenced by various contextual factors, including social roles, familiarity, cultural background, and the perceived level of imposition. For instance, refusals directed at authority figures or unfamiliar individuals tend to be more indirect and formally polite, whereas refusals in

casual settings among peers may be more straightforward but still considerate.

### **Sociolinguistic Norms and Cultural Variation**

Sociolinguistic norms play a vital role in shaping how refusal expressions are constructed and perceived. Refusals are influenced by cultural expectations, social hierarchy, and situational context. In collectivist societies such as Indonesia or Japan, refusals are typically expressed with greater indirectness and politeness, using elaborate excuses and softening devices (Kurniasih, 2021). In contrast, individualistic cultures might tolerate more direct refusals, although still employing politeness markers.

Language proficiency and intercultural communicative competence also affect how speakers produce and interpret refusals. Learners who are unfamiliar with the cultural conventions of English-speaking contexts may produce refusals that sound abrupt or inappropriate, despite semantic accuracy. As Taguchi & Ishihara (2018) emphasize, teaching pragmatic competence is essential for effective communication in multilingual environments. By integrating updated insights from speech act theory, semantics, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics, this study offers a holistic framework for understanding how refusal expressions are semantically encoded, socially negotiated, and culturally interpreted in daily English conversations.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

This study has demonstrated that refusal expressions in daily English conversations are semantically rich and pragmatically nuanced. Through the lens of speech act theory and politeness theory, it is evident that refusals are not merely negative responses but complex communicative acts shaped by context, interpersonal dynamics, and cultural expectations. The semantic analysis reveals that speakers frequently employ indirectness, hedging, modal verbs, and mitigating language such as apologies, compliments, or explanations to maintain politeness and avoid threatening the hearer's face.

The data indicate that refusals vary in their formality, directness, and speech act functions depending on the social setting and the relationship between interlocutors. While some expressions are direct and unambiguous, others are deliberately softened to convey empathy, regret, or reluctance. These strategies reflect a deep awareness of social norms and an effort to balance sincerity with politeness. Moreover, semantic structures such as conditional and subordinate clauses enable speakers to frame refusals as situational rather than personal, thereby reducing potential offense. In conclusion, the semantic features of refusal expressions serve not only linguistic purposes but also essential social functions. Understanding these features is crucial for learners of English and for anyone engaged in cross-

cultural communication, as it promotes more effective and respectful interaction. Future research could expand on this work by examining refusals in different cultural or institutional settings, or by comparing spoken versus written refusals across genres.

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