

## A cross-cultural pragmatic analysis of refusal speech acts among Malay and German native speakers

Farhana Muslim Mohd Jalis

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Modern Languages & Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia*

### ABSTRACT

Successful communication requires not only mutual understanding between interlocutors but also a comprehensive understanding of how cultural rules are used in everyday language. The study aims to identify the refusal strategies employed by native Malay and German speakers when interacting with interlocutors of varying social status (lower, equal, and higher). A qualitative research design was used to analyse the refusal strategies, using a systematic coding scheme based on established refusal strategy taxonomies, followed by thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns across social status and cultural groups. The study included 30 participants, comprising 15 native Malay speakers and 15 native German speakers from various professional backgrounds residing in Selangor, Malaysia. Data were collected using a Discourse Completion Test (DCT), which obtained refusal behaviour across different social scenarios. The findings reveal that, although the refusal strategies used by Malay and German speakers are similar across social statuses, they differ in frequencies and pragmatic realisations. Malay speakers generally prefer more indirect and mitigated forms, while German speakers prefer more direct refusals, with age playing a greater role than social status. The study contributes to the fields of German and Malay foreign language teaching, as well as to intercultural pragmatic competence, by outlining the cultural dimensions of refusal behaviour and the cultural motivations underlying this speech act.

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural pragmatics; native speakers; refusals; social status; speech acts

**Received:**

14 March 2025

**Accepted:**

27 January 2026

**Revised:**

5 January 2026

**Published:**

30 January 2026

**How to cite (in APA style):**

Mohd Jalis, F. M. (2026). A cross-cultural pragmatic analysis of refusal speech acts among Malay and German native speakers. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 15(3), 498-509. <https://doi.org/10.17509/31exxs87>

### INTRODUCTION

Communication is any form of behaviour that is interpretable or understandable by humans. It is also a process through which the meaning or intention of information conveyed is interpreted. Communication includes both verbal messages, which are conveyed through spoken words, and non-verbal ones, such as facial expressions, contextual physical cues, and tonal variations (Djalolovna, 2025). In linguistics, pragmatics primarily examines the types of meaning that emerge in interpersonal communication, the inferences that are implied, and the influence of context and culture on meaning (Tanduk, 2023).

While it is difficult to define the basic focus of pragmatics, most progress and issues within this subject revolve around the same concern: the need to explain the rules that govern language use in a particular context (Levinson, 1989). The most crucial issue in the study of pragmatics concerns universality. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) suggested that the rules governing language use in specific contexts can vary significantly across cultures and languages. Therefore, an answer to this question can only come from the study of cross-cultural pragmatics.

Within the framework of cross-cultural pragmatics, particular attention has been given to

speech acts whose realisation is highly sensitive to cultural norms and social expectations. One such speech act is refusal. Refusals are face-threatening acts (FTA) and belong to the class of commissive, since the refuser commits himself never to carry out the act, which tends to threaten the interlocutor's positive or negative face (Searle, 1979; Brown & Levinson, 1987). Refusing can be treated as not doing what the speaker expects. To explain why refusals can be threatening, Brown & Levinson (1987) have classified face into two types: positive and negative face. Positive face is the need to be respected or appreciated by others.

On the other hand, negative face is the individual's need not to be imposed on or forced to do something by others. In this regard, when saying no, a speaker has to balance clarity and politeness to reduce the risk of embarrassment or offence. Individuals tend to involuntarily place themselves in a position where they do not wish to accept other people's offers or requests. Hence, they opt not to agree. Considering this, they may opt to refuse the offer or politely decline it. Refusal is a negative act that can be extremely frustrating or complex, as it involves the refuser's refusal to engage in an activity (Hashemian, 2021). Because of this complexity and its interpersonal consequences, refusal has become a principal area of investigation in numerous monocultural comparative studies and cross-cultural communication literature (Al-Issa, 2003; Beebe et al., 1990; Félix-Brasdefer, 2006). Building on this body of study, this present study contrasts and compares Malay and German refusal strategies, an area that has not been broadly addressed within cross-cultural pragmatics.

In the context of cross-cultural pragmatics and building on the discussion of refusals, cross-cultural variation with respect to norms, values, and observable behaviour is extensively documented (Elika & Chandra, 2024; McConachy & Spencer-Otey, 2021). These variations encompass nonverbal perception of self-construal and the use of language and speech acts in expressing social behaviour, thinking style, and intergroup bargaining. While cultural differences influence nonverbal cue detection and cross-cultural sensitivity, awareness is extremely vital in cross-cultural communication, where speech acts serve as a vehicle for conveying a nation's cultural sensitivities through linguistic utterances (Al-Ghamdi & Alrefaee, 2020; Shu & Bao, 2022). Such variations may stem from distinctive cultural practices and lead to misunderstandings of the intended meaning of the other's action, especially when a negative reaction is encountered. Additionally, culture is a system of concepts, norms, shared thoughts, and meanings that underlies and is symbolised by the way individuals live (Panesar et al., 2025).

In a multiethnic and multicultural society such as Malaysia, Saad et al. (2021) believed that a range

of refusal strategies is used when making refusals. These strategies are considered appropriate since refusal is variably defined and practised in each ethnic group. Alkhirbash (2024) maintained that politeness is among the most salient cultural values of Malay society conveyed through non-confrontational discourse and behaviour. Thus, the Malay culture has long been accused of being indirect and imprecise in its communication (Saimon, 2021). Germans, however, have traditionally been stereotyped as direct, analogical thinkers and are often described as having a comparatively serious cultural orientation (Nikitina et al., 2014). Germans prefer direct and explicit answers that provide much clarity and find these suitable for giving refusals. Hanna et al. (2022) note that the social conduct of Germans is marked by an (unnatural) avoidance of conflict. The contemporary German culture is a face-saving and conflict-avoiding culture. Hence, the application of directives is limited to the politeness strategies alone, where both avoiding conflict and saving face are equally valued.

Cultural values that shape the use of directives also influence how speakers manage interpersonal relations when responding to them. Refusal strategies are made based on a variety of social factors, including age, sex, level of education, social distance, and power. Moreover, their content and structure can vary depending on the kind of speech act that elicits them (Tak & Lyuh, 2024). Saad et al. (2021) note that refusing is generally hard to construct owing to certain considerations that the refuser must consider. The influence of power, familiarity, gender, age, and the social relationship between interlocutors is conventionally viewed as a variable affecting the refuser's behaviour in expressing refusal. Although refusals have been widely examined across various cultural contexts, relatively little attention has been paid to a systematic comparison of Malay and German refusal strategies, particularly regarding key social variables such as power distance, social distance, and age. In an era of increasing intercultural interaction, gaining insight into how these social factors shape pragmatic behaviour has become increasingly important. Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the role of power distance, social distance, and age in shaping refusal strategies among Malay and German speakers. By providing a comparative pragmatic analysis, this study seeks to enhance understanding of contemporary Malay and German cultural values and to offer empirically grounded explanations for variation in refusal behaviour. Ultimately, it is hoped that the findings will contribute to reducing stereotypical and groundless assumptions about communicative practices in both cultures. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the refusal strategies employed by native Malay and German speakers

when interacting with interlocutors of varying social status (lower, equal, and higher) by using the combined refusal taxonomy of Beebe et al. (1990) and Al-Issa (2003) by answering two research questions:

1. What refusal strategies are employed by native speakers of Malay and German when refusing to interlocutors of various social statuses (lower, equal, and higher)?
2. How do social variables, particularly power distance, social distance, and age, influence the selection and frequency of refusal strategies among Malay and German speakers?

### **Refusal Strategies in Malay and German Sociocultural Context**

Refusal is a universal speech act; however, its realisation varies considerably across sociocultural contexts in terms of frequency, situational appropriateness, and linguistic form. From a cross-cultural pragmatic perspective, refusals are widely recognised as face-threatening acts whose production is shaped by culturally embedded norms of politeness, power relations, and social distance (Beebe et al., 1990). As such, the strategies speakers employ when refusing are closely linked to broader sociocultural values and communicative expectations. In both Malay and German contexts, previous research has demonstrated that refusal behaviour reflects culturally specific preferences for indirectness, mitigation, or pragmatic clarity, making refusals a particularly revealing site for examining cross-cultural variation in communicative behaviour.

In the context of Malay refusal behaviour, Hieda et al. (2021) investigated the politeness effect and refusal strategies employed by Malay Japanese speakers and Japanese native speakers. Data for the study were gathered through SNS open role-play and post-task interviews. The study identified that the adherence of Malay speakers to target language norms caused positive/neutral politeness effects. In addition, through semantic expression minimisation and intentional upgrading of the use of [vague excuse] and [positive opinion] as responses to JNSs' refusal strategies, Malay speakers effectively adapted their approach to create negative politeness in multicultural environments. The findings of the study suggest that Malaysians are a representative population that is inclusive and distinguished by skilled intercultural communication skills. Building on these findings on indirectness and politeness, Saad et al. (2020) claimed that when using direct communication strategies, there is a tendency to opt for a lower degree of directness, described as negative willingness. This indicates that, as a tendency, Malaysians choose face-saving strategies to maintain the dignity of the interlocutor and avoid possible misunderstandings and miscommunications. Saad et al. (2021) further analysed the strategies and

the order of use of those strategies utilised by Malay English as a second language speakers (MSE) in refusing requests from interlocutors of higher or the same status. Extending the discussion to an intercultural digital context, Hieda (2022) concluded that there was no noteworthy difference between intercultural environments and native environments regarding the organisation of semantic formulas and the utilisation of emojis. In this study, none of the occurrences exhibited a negative politeness effect, but two were identified as pragmatic transfers. This research demonstrates that deviations from target language norms are not necessarily disruptive to appropriate communication in intercultural communication, but are acceptable if there is coordination between the recipient and the sender of the message.

Turning to gender and power relations within the Malay cultural context, Kamal and Ariffin (2023) conducted research into the refusal strategies adopted by Malaysian Malay female and male ESL undergraduates. The objective of this study was to determine the differences and similarities between the two genders, as well as to investigate the potential influence of relative power on the selection of refusal strategies employed. The study is of the opinion that Malay employed more indirect refusal strategies than direct refusal strategies, which can be linked to the cultural nature of the Malay society. Interestingly, when the two sexes are contrasted, it has been found that female students prefer using direct strategies over indirect strategies in communicating their refusals, contrary to the stereotypical view of men-women communication tendencies. The study interestingly discovered that the power relation between the participants and the addressees had a significant impact on the participants' choices of refusal strategies.

In contrast to findings from the Malay cultural context, refusals have also been investigated by Beckers (1999) in American and German English. The study employed a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) to collect data from 18 scenarios consisting of simulated offers, requests, invitations, and suggestions. Along with these, the participants were requested to provide refusals too. The study shows that Americans vary their refusals according to social status, while Germans vary their refusal strategies according to social distance. In addition, Beckers (1999) also discovered that Americans used the direct refusal "No" more frequently than Germans. Germans used avoidance strategies more often. It was also found that Germans were less direct and vaguer in apologies compared to Americans. Additionally, Germans used politeness and gratitude strategies more while denying. More recent studies on German pragmatics further support this observation, as Ackermann (2023), on the other hand, investigated politeness effects of different syntactic, morphosyntactic, and lexical mitigating

strategies in German speech acts. The study found that although the Germans used directive speech acts, in standard situations, those strategies are regarded as “political behaviour” which is seen as being extra polite. The Germans often use polite requests, such as *bitte* ‘please’, to mitigate a face-threatening situation. Mitigation is also achieved through particles that emphasise the optionality or casualness of the requested act. Siebold and Busch (2015) also clarified that the study on culturally distinctive ways of dealing with face-threatening situations shows that Spanish speakers tend to use indirect refusal strategies and provide ambiguous responses without a definite conclusion. On the other hand, German speakers tend to employ direct refusals and unambiguous responses, thus ensuring a high level of pragmatic clarity, particularly regarding the final outcome of the interaction.

A review across existing literature shows that studies concerning refusal strategies illustrate convergent as well as divergent tendencies across various cultural settings. On one hand, studies targeting speakers from a predominantly Malay culture portray a consistent preference for indirectness, face-saving maneuvers, and increased sensitivity toward power dynamics (Hieda et al., 2021; Kamal & Ariffin, 2023; Saad et al., 2020, 2021). On the other hand, studies targeting speakers from a predominantly German culture emphasise pragmatic lucidity, mitigation via lexical-syntactic techniques, and variation characterised more by social distance parameters rather than those concerning power dynamics and social status (Ackermann, 2023; Beckers, 1999; Siebold & Busch, 2015). Nevertheless, there appears to be a meagre overlap between the two traditions. More specifically, studies concerning refusal strategies among speakers from a predominantly Malay culture are typically performed either in monocultural settings focusing on English and/or Japanese culture counterparts, and vice versa, or compared with other European languages. In turn, comparative studies concerning refusal strategies among speakers from a predominantly German culture are often carried out. Notably, a comparative study focusing on refusal strategies for speakers from a predominantly Malay culture and those from a predominantly German culture across a range of cultural settings and incorporating parameters such as social distance and power dynamics has not yet been performed.

Overall, previous studies have consistently highlighted various factors, such as social status, gender, age, power and social distance, education level, cultural background, and language proficiency, that influence the selection of refusal strategies, as discussed in studies such as Beebe et al. (1990), Beckers (1999), and Saad et al. (2020, 2021). This study, therefore, attempts to bridge the gap within the discipline of cross-cultural

pragmatics by investigating the strategies the two cultures under investigation, namely, German and Malay, have utilised in their production of the speech act of refusal, with particular emphasis on power, social distance, and age.

## **METHOD**

The study adopted a qualitative comparative design and employed an oral Discourse Completion Test (DCT) as the primary data collection method. A total of 30 participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their linguistic background. The participants comprised 15 native Malay speakers (Malaysians) and 15 native German speakers (Germans), all of whom were working professionals residing in Selangor, Malaysia. The participants were aged 20-60 years and categorised into three age groups to reflect the working-age population in Malaysia, in accordance with the Malaysia Employment Act 1955. The refusal scenarios were presented orally and administered in person, allowing participants to respond in a manner that closely reflects authentic spoken interaction.

## **Research Participants**

The subjects of this research were divided into two quite distinct groups: Malay Native Speakers (MNS) and German Native Speakers (GNS). The participants of this research were 15 Malaysian respondents and 15 German respondents, all employed in various settings such as private and governmental organisations, higher educational institutions, local companies, and companies in different areas across Selangor, Malaysia. Purposive sampling was used in choosing participants in this study. This method has been frequently used in various speech act studies. The participants’ ages are between 20 and 60 years old, and they are divided into 3 age groups, namely: Group 1 (G1: 20 – 33), Group 2 (G2: 34 – 47), and Group 3 (G3: 48 – 60). This age division reflects commonly recognised stages of the working-age population in Malaysia, as outlined in the Malaysian Employment Act 1955, and allows for the examination of potential age-related differences in pragmatic behaviour across early-, mid-, and late-career stages (Jabatan Tenaga Kerja Semenanjung Malaysia, 2023). The primary requirement for this study is that the participants must be native speakers of Malay or German. This comparison is theoretically motivated, as Malay and German represent sociocultural contexts with contrasting communicative norms and pragmatic orientations. Malay communicative practices are often characterised by indirectness, face-saving strategies, and heightened sensitivity to hierarchy, age, and relational harmony, which are closely linked to collectivist values and relatively higher power distance. In contrast, German communicative norms tend to prioritise clarity,

explicitness, and pragmatic directness, reflecting more individualistic orientations and a comparatively lower tolerance for ambiguity in interaction. These culturally embedded linguistic traits are particularly salient in the performance of face-threatening acts such as refusals, making Malay and German speakers an appropriate and theoretically informative pairing for examining cross-cultural variation in refusal strategies within workplace contexts. In order to keep the participants anonymous and address the cross-cultural references, each participant was assigned a unique code depending on the native language they used; for instance, M1, M2, M3, etc. “M” in the participant's code signifies an individual who speaks Malay, whereas “G” indicates a German language speaker. With regards to the demographic profile of the respondents, it is a common understanding among Malaysians that employment would typically start at the age of 18 upon graduation from secondary school.

#### **Data Collection Procedure**

Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were provided with written information about the study and asked to sign a consent form indicating their voluntary participation. After consenting, participants completed a demographic information sheet, which collected basic details such as age, sex, occupation, languages known, and educational level.

In the present study, a tape-recorded face-to-face oral Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was administered, which is characterised by “scripted dialogues that portray socially distinct contexts, describe the setting, define the social distance between interlocutors and their hierarchical status in relation to one another, and conclude with an incomplete dialogue” (Blum-Kulka & House, 1989, pp. 12-14). Open role-play scenarios employed in this research were 12 experimental refusal situations. An open role-play is a role-play in which the roles of the actors are specified but not the direction and outcome of the discussion. The 12 scenarios were adapted from Beebe et al. (1990), involving four kinds of stimuli (suggestion, request, invitation, and offer). In each scenario, three social status relationships (higher, equal, and lower) were established for the refuser. The three power distances were utilised to illustrate the connection between speakers, as these elements could influence the selected speech act strategy.

Along with power distance as a determinative factor having an effect on refusal statements, age and social distance will be analysed as determinative factors in the event of refusals in this study. In fact, these two dimensions appear to be connected to the source of social power (Al-Shboul et al., 2022;

Eslami et al., 2023). According to the power distance theory propagated by Hofstede et al. (2010), high power distance societies recognise and expect an unequal distribution of power between less powerful members of institutions and organisations, such as the family. There is a dual attitude in such societies where “older people are both respected and feared.” In Malay culture, older people are given a place of high respect. Hence, this research considers it essential to establish the influence of the three variables on refusals and how they lead to a remarkable gap in the power distance index score, particularly where there is varied social power status, age, and social distance within the established social hierarchy.

#### **Data Analysis**

The data were organised and examined based on the frequency of refusal strategies occurring in their responses under three varying levels of power relationships in three situations for each type of stimulus to which the participants were requested to respond. The refusal data were coded manually using established semantic formula categories proposed by Beebe et al. (1990) and Al-Issa (2003). All responses were coded by the researcher, following the predefined coding framework. Any ambiguities in category assignment were resolved through careful review and comparison with the established taxonomies. Although no formal inter-rater reliability measure was applied, the use of well-established coding categories helped ensure systematic and consistent analysis of the data.

#### **Analytical Framework for Refusal Coding**

In order to ensure systematic and consistent analysis of refusal strategies, the present study employed a combined analytical framework adapted from established refusal taxonomies. Specifically, the refusal strategies were coded using an integrated taxonomy derived from Beebe et al. (1990) and Al-Issa (2003). In previous studies in cross-cultural pragmatics, the terms semantic formula and strategy have often been used interchangeably. Accordingly, semantic formulas and refusal adjuncts employed in this study represent functional components of refusal utterances.

The combined taxonomy allows for the identification of both direct and indirect refusal strategies, as well as adjuncts used to mitigate the face-threatening nature of refusals. This framework provides a unified analytical basis for comparing refusal behaviour across cultural groups and social contexts. As shown in Table 1, the refusal strategy terms (semantic formulas) used in this study were adapted from Raman (2016).

**Table 1**

*Terms of the Semantic Formulas used in the Combined Refusal Strategies*

<b>Beebe et al. (1990)</b>	<b>Al-Issa (2003)</b>	<b>Current Study</b>
Negative willingness/ability	Negative ability/ willingness	Negative willingness/ability
Statement of regret	Regret	Statement of regret
Excuse, reason, explanation	Explanation/Excuse	Excuse, reason, explanation
Statement of alternative: i. I can do X instead of Y ii. Why don't you do X instead of Y	Alternative	Statement of alternative: I can do X instead of Y ii. Why don't you do X instead of Y
Set a condition for future or past acceptance	i. Future or past acceptance ii. Conditional acceptance	i. Future or past acceptance ii. Conditional acceptance
Threat or statement of negative consequences to the requester	Negative consequences	Threat or statement of negative consequences to the requester
Criticise request/requester, etc. (statement of negative feeling or opinion); insult/attack	i. Criticise ii. Insult/Attack/Threat	Criticise request/requester, etc. (statement of negative feeling or opinion); insult/attack
Request for help, empathy, and assistance by dropping or holding the request	Request for understanding	Request for help, empathy, and assistance by dropping or holding the request
Adjuncts to Refusal: i. Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement ii. Gratitude/appreciation	i. Positive opinion/feeling/ agreement ii. Gratitude	Adjuncts to Refusal: i. Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement ii. Gratitude/appreciation

To illustrate the application of the combined refusal taxonomy presented in Table 1, in a case where a respondent declines an invitation from the head of the department to work late in a bid to complete some paperwork, the utterance “*Entschuldigen Sie, aber meine Frau erwartet mich zuhause. Ich werde den Bericht morgen fertig stellen*” was examined as comprising three distinct components, each conforming to a correct semantic pattern, as shown below:

1. *Entschuldigen Sie* [Excuse me]  
[Statement of regret]
2. *aber meine Frau erwartet mich zuhause* [but my wife is waiting for me at home]  
[Excuse/reason/explanation]
3. *Ich werde den Bericht morgen fertig stellen* [I will finish the report tomorrow]  
[Future/past acceptance]

This illustrative example demonstrates how the combined refusal taxonomy was systematically applied to identify and categorise the functional components of refusal utterances. By coding each response according to clearly defined semantic formulas, the framework ensures consistency in the analysis of refusal strategies across participants, social contexts, and cultural groups. This analytical procedure provides a reliable basis for investigating patterns of directness, indirectness, and mitigation in refusal behaviour, thereby enabling meaningful cross-cultural comparison in the subsequent analysis.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and discussion on the use of refusal strategies among Malay and German native speakers, with particular attention to the role of social factors in shaping communicative behaviour. It examines how refusal strategies vary according to the interlocutor’s social status and further investigates the influence of social variables, including power distance, social distance, and age, on the selection and frequency of refusal strategies across the two cultures.

### Refusal Strategies Employed when Refusing To Interlocutors of Various Social Statuses (Lower, Equal, and Higher)

The findings exhibited that both Malay and German speakers adjusted their refusal strategies according to the interlocutor’s social status. When refusing higher-status interlocutors, indirect strategies and mitigation devices were more frequently employed, whereas more direct strategies were observed in refusals directed at equal or lower-status interlocutors. This finding is consistent with previous studies on refusal behaviour (e.g., Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Beebe et al., 1990; Félix-Brasdefer, 2006), which demonstrated increased indirectness in refusals as a means of maintaining politeness and face. Similar tendencies were also observed among Malay speakers in previous studies (Saad et al., 2020; Hieda et al., 2021), suggesting that social distances play a crucial role in shaping refusal behaviour in both cultures. However, the current findings extend these studies by

demonstrating that German speakers, despite being associated with lower power distance, also exhibited increased mitigation when refusing higher-status interlocutors. This partially contrasts with Hofstede's (1994) cultural framework, which predicts greater directness in low power-distance societies. The discrepancy may be related to situational factors and the institutional context of the

interaction, indicating that power relations operate dynamically rather than uniformly across cultures.

Throughout this study, a similar pattern was observed for the semantic formulae used by both MNS and GNS in the three age groups, with the sole difference lying in their frequency of use. Table 2, summarises the frequency and percentage distribution of refusal strategies employed by MNS and GNS across three age groups (G1, G2, and G3).

**Table 2**  
*Refusal Strategies Used by MNS and GNS under the Influence of Age Distance*

Case	Refusal Strategy	G1		G2		G3	
		MNS	GNS	MNS	GNS	MNS	GNS
1-12	Direct	46	41	35	43	39	69
		3.54%	3.32%	2.69%	3.48%	2.99%	5.59%
	Indirect	306	233	223	240	259	237
		23.52%	18.87%	17.14%	19.43%	19.91%	19.19%
	Adjuncts	160	151	124	115	109	106
		12.30%	12.23%	9.53%	9.31%	8.38%	8.58%
	Total	<b>512</b>	<b>425</b>	<b>382</b>	<b>398</b>	<b>407</b>	<b>412</b>
		39.36%	34.42%	29.36%	32.22%	31.28%	33.36%

Overall, MNS G1 and GNS G1 showed the greatest use of semantic formulae. In particular, MNS G1 used the most semantic formulae (512), followed by MNS G3 (407) and MNS G2 (382). Similarly, GNS G1 used the most semantic formulas (425), followed by GNS G3 (412) and GNS G2 (398). Younger native speakers of the two languages thus used more refusal strategies than older speakers in refusing different interlocutors. Table 2 summarises MNSs' and GNSs' refusal strategies by age. The comparison revealed that the G1 MNSs employed fewer direct strategies (lower: 20, equal: 14, higher: 12) and indirect strategies (lower: 122, equal: 94, higher: 90 times) in refusals. The G3 MNSs employed more direct strategies (lower: 8, equal: 12, higher: 19) and made less use of indirect strategies (lower: 104 times, equal: 78 times, higher: 77). The pattern as seen is that age has a more decisive factor in the selection of refusal strategies among Malay speakers than social status. Within a culture that respects elders, younger Malays will tend to utilise less direct refusal modes for requests made by those higher in status and by older persons. Concerning Hofstede et al.'s (2010) large distance power theory, subordinates are supposed to be instructed in rules and obey them. There are some theories explained by Hofstede et al. (2010) that illustrate the same scenarios in Malay society, yet the findings of this research indicate that older Malays have greater power in workplaces because of their power derived from age. Thus, they may utilise more direct refusals and show their disagreement verbally, even in communication with young individuals who are of higher status.

In contrast to German native speakers, GNS G1 showed a decreasing use of direct refusal strategies across social status levels (lower: 20; equal: 11; higher: 10), accompanied by an overall

increase in indirect strategies (lower: 68; equal: 78; higher: 86) and frequent use of adjuncts. GNS G3, by comparison, showed a higher and increasing use of direct strategies (lower: 13; equal: 28; higher: 28), while their use of indirect strategies remained relatively stable with a slight upward trend (lower: 79; equal: 77; higher: 81). In the responses of the older German native speakers, the use of indirect strategies remained stable with a slight increase in their use across all social status levels (lower: 79; equal: 77; higher: 81). In comparing the refusal strategies of GNS G1 and GNS G3 with the refusal strategies of MNS G1 and MNS G3, the refusal strategies of GNS are closer to the refusal strategies of the other group, with the difference being in the degree of use, and the factor that influenced the refusal strategies more was the age factor rather than the social status factor. German native speakers, unlike Malay native speakers, used more direct refusal strategies, which indicates that Germans have a higher preference for the use of pragmatic directness. In the context of Hofstede et al.'s (2010) reduced power distance theory, the use of more direct refusal strategies by GNS indicates that Germans are more likely to maintain a culture that is oriented toward openness in communication, even in situations in which there are differences in social status. Table 3 shows the MNSs' most frequently used refusal strategies. In total, GNS employed direct strategies more than MNS. Specifically, GNS employed direct strategies 153 times, whereas MNS employed direct strategies 120 times in 12 cases.

As apparent in Table 3, MNS employed direct strategies more when refusing interlocutors of higher status on 42 occasions (9.68%). Conversely, GNS recorded the highest number of direct strategies when refusing interlocutors of lower status. As for indirect strategies, the present study

**Table 3**

*Refusal Strategies Used by MNS and GNS under the Influence of Power Distance*

Refusal Strategy	Lower Interlocutor		Equal Interlocutor		Higher Interlocutor	
	MNS	GNS	MNS	GNS	MNS	GNS
Direct	40 8.70%	55 12.79%	38 9.34%	47 12.11%	42 9.68%	51 12.23%
Indirect	303 65.87%	241 56.05%	244 59.95%	234 60.31%	241 55.53%	235 56.36%
Adjuncts	117 25.43%	134 31.16%	125 30.71%	107 27.58%	151 34.79%	131 31.41%
Total	<b>460</b> 100%	<b>430</b> 100%	<b>407</b> 100%	<b>388</b> 100%	<b>434</b> 100%	<b>417</b> 100%

revealed that MNSs and GNSs used the highest number of strategies (e.g., indirect methods and refusals' adjuncts) in refusing requests from lower-status interlocutors. MNSs utilised indirect strategies 420 times altogether, whereas GNSs employed such strategies 375 times altogether. This means that MNSs were more likely to employ direct strategies in refusing requests from interlocutors of higher status than those who were of equal or lower status. This is notable, given that Hofstede (1994) felt that MNSs live in a society with a vast power distance, yet the present study discovers intriguing data capable of altering current perceptions of Malay cultural dynamics. Besides, MNS favoured the use of indirect strategies in refusing requests from lower-status interlocutors. This indicates that MNS employed this refusal strategy as a means of saving face for both interlocutors. Germans, however, employed direct strategies in the majority of occurrences in refusing requests from lower-status interlocutors than those of equal or higher status. The GNS utilised not just the most direct strategies in communication with lower-status interlocutors, but also utilised the most indirect strategies. This result shows that although GNSs favoured direct strategies, they also used indirect strategies for face-saving for both parties. Analysis of the data reveals that older German speakers were more direct with a greater tendency compared to younger German speakers. Just like the Malays, the Germans also favoured direct strategies with fewer indirect strategies when communicating with close interlocutors. But the occurrence of these strategies varied among the Malays.

**The Influence of Age, Power and Relationship Distance in MNS and GNS Refusal Strategy Utterances towards Higher-Social-Status Interlocutors**

This section examines the extent to which social variables influence the preferences and frequencies of refusal strategies by both cultures. Specifically, it considers how power distance, social distance, and age shape speakers' pragmatic choices in refusal situations, with a comparative focus on Malay and German speakers. While Table 4 shows the four DCT scenarios testing the effects of age, power, and relationship distance on MNSs' and GNSs' refusal of lower status interlocutors, Table 5 shows the frequency and percentage distribution of refusal strategies used by GNS and MNS in addressing interlocutors of lower social status, i.e., cases 3, 6, 9, and 12. This finding supports Hofstede et al.'s (2010) theory of a large power distance society in which hierarchy reflects existential inequality between higher and lower status individuals. Young Malays prefer using direct refusals in turning down lower-status interlocutors, as the higher social status has intense power over them. This group, however, provided more indirect adjuncts to mitigate the direct strategies they used. Briefly, GNS G1 employed the direct strategy more, i.e., 20 occurrences (14.18%), while GNS G3 employed this strategy 13 times (5.52%). Conversely, GNS G1 employed fewer indirect strategies, which occurred 69 times (48.94%), while GNS G3 employed this strategy 79 times (61.72%).

**Table 4**

*Description of the DCT Stimulus for Refusal towards Lower Social Status Interlocutors*

Case	Stimulus type	Variable	Relationship with the Refuser	Situation
3	Suggestion	(- Power) (- Relation) (- / + Age)	Formal relationship Interlocutor Refuser Student Lecturer	Change a teaching method
6	Request	(- Power) (- Relation) (- / + Age)	Formal relationship Interlocutor Refuser Employee Café owner	Salary raises
9	Invitation	(- Power) (+ Relation) (- / + Age)	Formal relationship Interlocutor Refuser House maid House owner	Birthday celebration
12	Offer	(- Power) (+ Relation) (- / + Age)	Personal relationship Interlocutor Refuser Cousin Cousin	Try a new recipe

**Table 5**  
*Refusal Strategy Used by G1, G2 and G3 with Lower Social Status Interlocutors in Cases 3, 6, 9 & 12*

Case	Refusal Strategy	Lower-Status Interlocutor					
		G1		G2		G3	
		MNS	GNS	MNS	GNS	MNS	GNS
3, 6, 9, & 12	Direct	20	20	12	22	8	13
		10.99%	14.18%	9.02%	13.67%	5.52%	10.16%
	Indirect	122	69	77	93	104	79
		67.03%	48.94%	57.89%	57.76%	71.72%	61.72%
	Adjuncts	40	52	44	46	33	36
		21.98%	36.88%	33.08%	28.57%	22.76%	28.12%
	Total	<b>182</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>161</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>128</b>
		(100%)	(100%)	(100%)	(100%)	(100%)	(100%)

On the other hand, GNS G1 employed refusals' adjuncts with higher frequency, 52 times (36.88%), whereas GNS G3 employed this strategy 33 times (22.76%). In a low power distance society, GNS was characterised by "a hierarchy showing an equality of roles set up for convenience." In order to soften the tension inherent in refusals, GNSs used more adjuncts to refusals, which indicates that they tend to use supportive measures when providing indirect refusals. This finding also indicates that they exhibit some level of respect when interacting with interlocutors of lower status.

**The influence of Age, Power and Relationship Distance on the MNS and GNS Refusal Strategy Utterances towards Equal-Status Interlocutors**

Table 6 presents four DCT scenarios created to examine the effects of age, power, and relational distance on the ways in which MNSs and GNSs refuse interlocutors who are of equal social status. Table 7 presents the frequency and percentage distribution of the MNS and GNS strategies employed to refuse interlocutors of equal social status, i.e., in cases 2, 5, 8, and 11.

**Table 6**  
*Description of the DCT Stimulus for Refusal towards Equal Social Status Interlocutors*

Case	Stimulus type	Variable Distance	Relationship with the Refuser		Situation
2	Suggestion	(= Power) (+ Relation) (- / + Age)	Social relationship Interlocutor	Refuser Close friend	Buy a new laptop
5	Request	(= Power) (- Relation) (- / + Age)	Formal and Social relationship Interlocutor	Refuser Colleague	Borrow a car
8	Invitation	(= Power) (- Relation) (- / + Age)	Formal and Social relationship Interlocutor	Refuser Neighbour	Try a new recipe
11	Offer	(= Power) (+ Relation) (- / + Age)	Formal relationship Interlocutor	Refuser Cousin	Pay for the broken vase

**Table 7**  
*Refusal Strategy Used by G1, G2 and G3 with Equal Social Status Interlocutors in Cases 2, 5, 8 & 11*

Case	Refusal Strategy	G1		G2		G3	
		MNS	GNS	MNS	GNS	MNS	GNS
2, 5, 8, & 11	Direct	14	11	12	8	12	28
		8.64%	8.15%	10.08%	7.02%	9.52%	20.14%
	Indirect	94	78	72	79	78	77
		58.02%	57.78%	60.51%	69.30%	61.91%	55.40%
	Adjuncts	54	46	35	27	36	34
		33.34%	34.07%	29.41%	23.68%	28.57%	24.46%
	Total	<b>162</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>114</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>139</b>
		(100%)	(100%)	(100%)	(100%)	(100%)	(100%)

The German speakers also exhibited the same pattern as the MNSs. The G1 GNSs exhibited a declining pattern in utilising direct strategies, a total

of 11 occurrences (8.15%), while they utilised indirect strategies more frequently, with a total of 78 occurrences (61.91%) when reducing interactions

with low-status interlocutors. The G3 GNSs also showed an increasing pattern of direct strategies, 28 (20.14%), and used indirect strategies slightly less frequently. This pattern shows that Germans also favour a more direct approach in refusing equal status and younger interlocutors. The influence of power and social status in this hierarchical construct indicates that age exerts a more significant influence on the refusal strategy chosen by younger and older MNS and GNS.

**The influence of age, power and relationship distance in MNS and GNS refusal strategy utterances towards higher-social-status interlocutors**

Table 8 outlines four various DCT scenarios, which were emphasised during the examination of the influence of age, power, and relational proximity on higher-status interlocutor refusal, and Table 9 provides a breakdown of the frequency and percentage of MNS and GNS strategies employed in refusing higher social status interlocutors for cases 1, 4, 7, and 10.

**Table 8**

*Description of the DCT Stimulus for Refusal towards Higher Social Status Interlocutors*

Case	Stimulus type	Variable Distance	Relationship with the Refuser		Situation
1	Suggestion	(+ Power) (- Relation) (- / + Age)	Formal relationship Interlocutor Head of department	Refuser Staff	Participate in a seminar
4	Request	(+ Power) (+ Relation) (+ Age)	Personal relationship Interlocutor Grandmother	Refuser Grandchild	Visit to the hospital
7	Invitation	(+ Power) (- Relation) (- / + Age)	Formal relationship Interlocutor Boss	Refuser Staff	Farewell party invitation
10	Offer	(+ Power) (+ Relation) (+ Age)	Personal relationship Interlocutor Aunty	Refuser Nephew/Niece	Introducing a date

**Table 9**

*Refusal strategy used by G1, G2 and G3 with higher social status interlocutors in Cases 1, 4, 7 & 10*

Case	Refusal Strategy	Higher-Status Interlocutor					
		G1		G2		G3	
		MNS	GNS	MNS	GNS	MNS	GNS
1, 4, 7, & 10	Direct	12	10	11	13	19	28
		7.14%	6.71%	8.46%	10.57%	13.97%	19.31%
	Indirect	90	86	74	68	77	81
		53.57%	57.72%	56.92%	55.28%	56.62%	55.86%
	Adjuncts	66	53	45	42	40	36
39.29%		35.57%	34.62%	34.15%	29.41%	24.83%	
Total		<b>168</b> (100%)	<b>149</b> (100%)	<b>130</b> (100%)	<b>123</b> (100%)	<b>136</b> (100%)	<b>145</b> (100%)

Though both groups of speakers had identical refusal patterns, it was noted that GNSs used direct refusals more frequently than their Malay counterparts. The formal situations did influence the refusals issued by the two participants, but in Cases 4 and 10, the refusers stood in a lower relational position and power compared to the interlocutors. G1 MNS employed the least direct strategies in refusing higher status interlocutors, as shown in the data provided in Table 9, with a total of 12 occurrences (7.14%), compared to 90 occurrences (53.57%) in refusing lower or equal status interlocutors. On the other hand, G3 MNS showed an increasing pattern of direct strategy usage, 28 times (19.31%), and an increasing pattern of indirect strategy usage, 81 times. G1 showed the same decreasing pattern, and GNS G3 showed an increasing pattern. This table also indicates that

older Germans use more of a direct refusal strategy compared to younger Germans.

**CONCLUSION**

This study examined refusal strategies among Malay Native Speakers (MNSs) and German Native Speakers (GNSs) by considering the influence of social status, age, and relational distance. The findings indicate that speakers from both cultural groups predominantly employed indirect refusal strategies; however, notable differences emerged in terms of frequency, degree of directness, and use of mitigating adjuncts. While Malay speakers tended to favour longer and more indirect refusals, German speakers generally preferred shorter and more direct refusal forms, reflecting culturally embedded

preferences for face management and pragmatic clarity.

The analysis further demonstrated that social variables, particularly age and power relations, played a significant role in shaping refusal behaviour in both groups. Younger Malay speakers employed a wider range of refusal strategies, combining direct and indirect forms to maintain interpersonal harmony, whereas older German speakers showed a stronger tendency toward direct refusals. These findings contribute to cross-cultural pragmatics by providing empirical evidence of how cultural norms and social variables interact in the realisation of refusal speech acts within workplace contexts.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its relatively small sample size and reliance on Discourse Completion Test data. Future research could extend this work by incorporating larger and more diverse participant groups, employing naturally occurring interactional data, or examining additional sociolinguistic variables such as gender, professional hierarchy, or multilingual proficiency. Such studies would further enhance understanding of cross-cultural refusal behaviour and its implications for intercultural communication and language education.

## REFERENCES

- Ackermann, T. (2023). Mitigating strategies and politeness in German requests. *Journal of Politeness Research, 19*(2), 355-389. <https://doi.org/10.1515/pr-2021-0034>
- Al-Ghamdi, N., & Alrefaee, Y. (2020). The role of social status in the realisation of refusal speech act: A cross-cultural study. *The Asian ESP Journal, 16*, 207-221. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3570553>
- Alkhirbash, A. (2024). Incorporating Malay communicative and cultural values in discourse: An analysis of Mahathir Mohamed's orations. *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal, 11*(5), 59-72. <https://doi.org/10.14738/assrj.115.16930>
- Al-Issa, A. S. (2003). Sociocultural transfer in L2 speech behaviors: Evidence and motivating factors. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 27*, 581-601. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767\(03\)00055-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147-1767(03)00055-5)
- Al-Shboul, Y., Maros, M., & Yasin, M. S. M. (2012). An intercultural study of refusal strategies in English between Jordanian EFL and Malay ESL postgraduate students. *3L, Language, Linguistics, Literature, 18*(3). <http://ejournal.ukm.my/3l/article/download/1107/999>
- Beckers, A. M. (1999). *How to say "no" without saying "no": A study of the refusal strategies of Americans and Germans* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Mississippi].
- Beebe, L. M., Takahashi, T., & Uliss-Weltz, R. (1990). Pragmatic transfer in ESL refusals. In R. C. Scarcella & S. A. Elaine (Eds.), *Developing communicative competence in a second language*, 55-73.
- Blum-Kulka, S., & House, J. (1989). Cross-cultural and situational variation in requestive behavior in five languages. *Cross-cultural pragmatics: Requests and apologies*, 123-54. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Blum-Kulka, S. & Olshtain, E. (1984). Request and apologies: A cross-cultural study of speech act realisation patterns (CCSARP). *Applied linguistics, 5*(3), 196-213. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/5.3.196>
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage* (Vol. 4). Cambridge university press.
- Djalolovna, M. S. (2025). The Role of non-verbal communication in spoken language. *Web of Discoveries: Journal of Analysis and Inventions, 3*(1), 4-8.
- Elika, N., & Chandra, O. H. (2024). Speech act of refusal on vertical line levels in Japanese and Indian cultures. *Eduvest: Journal of Universal Studies, 4*(7), 60007-6024. <https://doi.org/10.59188/eduvest.v4i7.1433>
- Eslami, Z. R., Larina, T. V., & Pashmforoosh, R. (2023). Identity, politeness and discursive practices in a changing world. *Russian Journal of Linguistics, 27*(1), 7-38. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2687-0088-34051>
- Félix-Brasdefer, J. C. (2006). Linguistic politeness in Mexico: Refusal strategies among male speakers of Mexican Spanish. *Journal of Pragmatics, 38*(12), 2158-2187. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2006.05.004>
- Hanna, A., Diana, Y., Valeria, P., Oksana, Z., & Tetiana C. (2022). Functioning of directive speech acts in modern German linguistic culture. *World Journal of English Language, 12*(8), 212-219. <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v12n8p212>
- Hashemian, M. (2021). A cross-cultural study of refusal speech act by Persian L2 learners and American native speakers. *Journal of Research in Applied Linguistics, 12*(1), 81-98. <https://doi.org/10.22055/RALS.2021.16726>
- Hieda, N., Jalaluddin, N. H., & Jaafar, M. F. (2021). Penolakan Ajakan dalam Bahasa Jepun oleh Informan Melayu: Analisis Strategi dan Kesan Kesantunan. *GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies, 21*(1). <https://doi.org/10.17576/gema-2021-2101-09>
- Hieda, N., Jalaluddin, N. H., & Jaafar, M. F. (2022). Penolakan ajakan dalam rangkaian sosial dari perspektif sosiopragmatik. *KEMANUSIAAN:*

- The Asian Journal of Humanities* 29(1), 71–96.  
<https://doi.org/10.21315/kajh2022.29.1.4>
- Hofstede, G. (1994). The business of international business is culture. *International business review*, 3(1), 1-14.  
[https://doi.org/10.1016/0969-5931\(94\)90011-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/0969-5931(94)90011-6)
- Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J., & Minkov, M. (2010). *Cultures and organisations software of the mind: Intercultural cooperation and its importance for survival*. McGraw-Hill.
- Jabatan Tenaga Kerja Semenanjung Malaysia. (2023). *Akta Kerja 1955 (Akta 265)* [PDF]. Kementerian Sumber Manusia Malaysia.
- Kamal, N. A. M., & Ariffin, A. (2023). Gender and power relation in English refusal strategies of ESL undergraduates. *e-BANGI*, 20(3), 245-256.
- Levinson, S. C. (1989). A review of Relevance. *Journal of Linguistics*, 25(2), 455-472.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022226700014183>
- McConachy, T., & Spencer-Oatey, H. (2021). Cross-cultural and intercultural pragmatics. In M. Haugh, D. Z. Kádár, & M. Terkourafi (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Sociopragmatics* (pp. 733–757). Cambridge University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108954105.037>
- Nikitina, L., Don., Z. M. & Loh, S.C. (2014). Investigating stereotypes about the target language country: A case of German language learners. *RLA. Revista de Linguística Teórica y Aplicada*, 52(2), 113-131.  
<https://doi.org/10.4067/S0718-48832014000200006>
- Panesar, S., Rajabali, S., Kennedy, M., & Wagg, A. (2025). Understanding the role of culture in shaping attitudes and beliefs on urinary incontinence: A scoping review protocol. *BMJ Open*, 15(2), e091092.  
<https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2024-091092>
- Raman, J. (2016). *Refusal strategies in English by Malaysian Indian undergraduates*. [Unpublished Master Dissertation, Universiti Malaya].
- Saad, N., Bidin, S. J., & Shabdin, A. A. (2020). An intercultural study of refusal speech act of Malaysian university students. *Asian Journal of Arts, Culture and Tourism*, 1(2), 9-12.
- Saad, N., Bidin, S. J., & Shabdin, A. A. (2021). Realisation of the speech act of refusals among Malay ESL students. *Jurnal Pembangunan Sosial*, 24, 27–52.  
<https://doi.org/10.32890/jps2022.24.2>
- Saimon, A. (2021). Lakuan pertuturan dalam filem Nordin Ahmad (Speech acts in Nordin Ahmad's selected movies). *BITARA International Journal of Civilizational Studies and Human Sciences*, 4(1), 33-52.
- Searle, J. (1979). *Expression and meaning*. Cambridge University Press.
- Shu, Z., & Bao, Y. (2022). The cross-linguistic influences of third language acquisition in refusal speech act. In *2022 7th International Conference on Social Sciences and Economic Development (ICSSED 2022)*, 1231-1240. Atlantis Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.2991/aebmr.k.220405.204>
- Siebold, K. & Busch, H. (2015). (No) need for clarity: Facework in Spanish and German refusals. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 75, 53-68.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2014.10.006>
- Tak, J., & Lyuh, I. (2024). More than a language itself: The speech act of refusal in constructed languages. *Journal of Universal Language*, 25(2), 93–117.  
<https://doi.org/10.22425/jul.2024.25.2.93>
- Tanduk, R. (2023). Pragmatic aspects of speech acts: A cross-linguistic perspective. *English Review: Journal of English Education*, 11(3), 881-890.  
<https://doi.org/10.25134/erjee.v11i3.8762>