

Analysing Refusal Strategies in Kuwaiti Arabic and British English: Cross-Cultural Pragmatics

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Abstract

This study sought to investigate the similarities and differences between the refusal strategies employed by Kuwaiti speakers of Arabic and British speakers of English. A total of 420 refusals were analysed from 24 Kuwaiti and 18 British participants, with each response divided into a set of units. A spoken discourse completion test was employed to collect the data, consisting of 10 hypothetical situations eliciting refusals of three offers, three invitations, two suggestions, and two requests. The results revealed that both groups used indirect refusal strategies more frequently than direct strategies and, moreover, that they resembled each other in their use of indirect refusals. However, the Kuwaiti participants tended to employ more direct refusal strategies with people of high status, while the British group used more direct strategies with people of low status.

Keywords: discourse completion task, pragmatics, Kuwaiti dialect, refusal strategy, speech act

1. Introduction

People encounter scenarios on a daily basis in which they make refusal, give advice or express gratitude, and these elements of communication are known as speech acts, used to carry out communicative actions. The speech act of refusal has been defined as a negative reply produced in response to other speech acts, such as offers, invitations or suggestions (Gass & Houck, 1999). It occurs when a person responds with “no” to an initiating speech act, and because the answer does not match the listener’s expectations, refusal is a face-threatening act. Beebe et al. (1990) describe refusal as a complex speech act because pragmatic competence is required for employing it successfully. Making refusals sometimes comprises indirect strategies in order to avoid threatening the face of listeners.

In addition, this speech act can be affected by sociolinguistic variables such as the interlocutor’s status. For example, refusing an offer from a friend is very different to refusing one from a manager. Beebe et al. (1990, p. 68) argue that refusal reflects “fundamental cultural values” and includes “delicate interpersonal negotiation”, which prompt the interlocutor to “build rapport and help the listener to avoid embarrassment”.

1.1 Problem Statement

Cross-cultural interactions have become increasingly important due to globalisation, as a result of which people with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds need to communicate, and this affects language use (Boxer, 2002). A number of researchers have found that people speak and act differently in different societies and communities due to the influence of culture, religion and social norms (Tannen, 1981; Schiffrin, 1984). Relatedly, what is acceptable among people of a particular belief system or culture may be seen as impolite in another. Hence, learning the vocabulary and grammatical structures of a particular language does not ensure effective communication between people of different backgrounds because sociolinguistic and cultural principles and conventions also play a significant part in understanding in a particular context (Gumperz, 1966). The ability to successfully interact with someone of a different culture by using the correct language in the proper context is known as ‘pragmatic competence’, and this is fundamentally governed by an understanding of the appropriate cultural and linguistic background. Fraser (1983) argues that pragmatic competence is effectively achieved when the listener understands the illocutionary act, that is, the intended meaning of the speaker’s words.

An inability to understand the cultural rules and sociolinguistic principles of speakers from different backgrounds can cause cultural misunderstanding as a result of pragmatic failure. Thomas (1983) argues that pragmatic failure can occur when a speaker lacks the necessary linguistic ability, giving rise to a difficulty in

formulating clear sentences. However, pragmatic failure can also occur when speakers lack cultural and sociopragmatic knowledge with regard to what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour in the foreign or second language (Thomas, 1983). Speakers might consequently use strategies from their first language that are inappropriate in the other language setting because of the differences between the two cultures, and this is known as ‘pragmatic transfer’ (Nelson et al., 2002).

Thomas (1983) outlines the specific notion of cross-cultural pragmatic failure, which causes misunderstanding between the speaker and the listener when the listener does not comprehend the intended meaning. While linguistic failure is largely acceptable, Thomas argued, pragmatic failure can threaten the listener’s face and therefore cause offence. Learning the cultural principles governing language use is as important as its grammatical rules to be able to communicate effectively with someone from a different culture.

Speech act research, in which the sociopragmatic or cultural elements of languages are investigated, is a powerful arena for developing a clearer understanding of the cultural values and norms of a particular society (Nelson et al., 2002; Takahashi & Beebe, 1987; Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1991). Research on cross-cultural speech acts is considered significant for providing this kind of cultural clarity, but no study has yet investigated the use of refusal strategies employed by British native speakers of English and Kuwaiti native speakers of Arabic. A number of speech act studies have investigated the Kuwaiti dialect, examining the speech acts of, for example, complimenting (Alotaibi, 2016; Farghal & Haggan, 2006), asking a favour (Alrefai, 2012), requesting (Almujaibel & Gomaa, 2022) and suggesting (Alajmi, 2024). Refusals in Kuwaiti Arabic have not yet been investigated, so the present study aims to fill that gap in order to determine the similarities and differences between Kuwaiti speakers of Arabic and British speakers of English when making refusals. The research questions in the present study are as follows:

- (1) Do Kuwaiti Arabic speakers and British English speakers differ in their use of refusal strategies?
- (2) Do Kuwaiti Arabic speakers and British English speakers use different indirect strategies when refusing others?
- (3) Are speakers of either language affected by the status of the interlocutor when making refusals?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Politeness Theory

Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory is one of the most essential theories in pragmatics (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Eelen, 2014; Mao, 1994; Fukada & Asato, 2004). This theory revolves around the idea that speakers have a tendency to minimise the weight of imposition on listeners during interactional communication in order to show their politeness. Politeness theory is important for the current study, as it constitutes an integrated construct that can be used to analyse how a specific speech act is realised and the factors that can affect its use. Politeness theory is primarily based on Goffman’s earlier notion of ‘face’, defined as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (Goffman, 1967, p. 3). Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed that face has both positive and negative aspects, positive face being the desire to be liked and accepted by others and negative face the desire to be free from imposition.

The central argument of politeness theory is that speakers maintain listeners’ face by using appropriate language in a specific context, and so some speech acts can threaten face. These face-threatening acts can damage either positive or negative face; for example, when a suggestion is refused, the other person’s positive face is threatened, suggesting that the speaker does not care about their desires. Moreover, making requests can threaten negative face because the listener’s freedom is intruded upon.

Face-threatening acts can be performed according to three strategies: bald-on record; on record; and off record (Brown and Levinson, 1987). A bald-on strategy means the speech act directly threatens the listener’s face without mitigation or softening and is employed usually by speakers of higher status than their listeners. To go on record is the use of softening strategies, such as hedging, while going off record is when speakers try to protect the listener’s face and minimise the weight of imposition by using indirect hints, such as saying, “I must have forgotten my pen” instead of asking to borrow one.

2.1.2 Speech Act Theory

As previously explained, some speech acts can threaten the listener’s face and there are some strategies that can be used by the speakers in order to protect the listener’s face, meaning that speech acts and politeness theory are interrelated.

J.L. Austin first suggested the concept of speech acts in 1962, arguing that speakers use language not only to express their thoughts but also to carry out actions (Austin, 1962). For example, when the interlocutor says, “The coffee is cold”, the waiter takes the cup of coffee back to the kitchen and makes a new one. Instead of being mere phrases, words can cause acts. In this regard, Austin (1962) proposes that any speech can be divided into three levels, namely the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. The locutionary act refers to the direct and simple meaning of an utterance, while the illocutionary act is its intended meaning. The perlocutionary act represents the consequences of the illocution.

While Austin presented three speech act levels, John Searle later introduced a taxonomy focused on the illocutionary act (Searle, 1976). Searle’s (1976) classification is divided into five categories: representatives (e.g., claims and assertions); directives (e.g., suggestions and requests); expressives (e.g., gratitude and apologies); commissives (e.g., threats and promises); and declarations. Refusal, the speech act under consideration in this study, is a directive whereby the speaker causes the listener to do certain things or carry out specific actions.

2.2 Arabic Cross-cultural Refusal Studies

Many cross-cultural refusal studies have been conducted in the last three decades to identify the similarities and differences between speakers of English and Arabic. Al-Shalawi (1997), for example, examined the similarities and differences in the refusal strategies used by Saudi speakers of Arabic and American speakers of English and found that the American participants used more direct strategies than their Saudi counterparts. On the other hand, Nelson et al. (2002) found that both Egyptians and Americans tended to employ fewer direct than indirect refusals. This finding was in line with Morkus (2014), who found that their Egyptian and American participants used more indirect strategies when refusing requests and offers.

With regard to the effect of social status, Hussein (1995) observed that Arabic speakers utilized more indirect strategies with people of equal status, as well as with close friends of unequal status. The study was based on naturally occurring data gathered by observing university graduates and professionals, which was then compared to findings in the literature on American refusals. However, Nelson et al. (2002) found that Egyptians used more indirect strategies with people of lower status, whereas Americans performed more indirect strategies with people of higher status. However, both groups utilized more direct strategies with people of equal status, but Egyptians used less direct strategies with people of low status, whereas Americans used less direct strategies with people of high status. Morkus (2014) found that Egyptian speakers used indirect strategies when refusing people of higher status, but American participants were not affected by social status when making refusals. Although both Morkus (2014) and Nelson et al. (2002) examined the Egyptian dialect, their findings were not similar, and these differences may have been due to the use of different instruments, namely, an oral discourse-completion test (DCT) and role play.

Al-Shalawi (1997) observed that Saudi participants used more semantic formulas than the American group, although both groups employed a greater number of semantic formulas when refusing a person of high status. Another important finding regarding semantic formulas was that both groups preferred to employ regret, gratitude and explanation. In addition, Saudis were found to often use religious references and family excuses when giving reasons, such as “I have plans with my family”. Americans, on the other hand, used more personal excuses, such as “I have a meeting”. This finding was in line with Morkus (2014), in which the Egyptian participants tended to use family reasons and religious references, including “I swear to God” whereas the Americans tended to use personal excuses. Nelson et al. (2002) found that Egyptians and Americans employed similar semantic formulas when using refusal as a speech act, although their order differed in some situations. In addition, both groups used ‘reason’ as the most frequent strategy; however, Americans used ‘consideration of interlocutor’s feelings’ as the second most frequent strategy whereas the Egyptians used ‘suggestion of willingness’. Hussein (1995) also found that Arabic speakers and Americans utilized similar semantic formulas, such as the expression of positive opinion, regret and principle.

Several researchers have argued that research on Arabic speech acts should be conducted using spoken elicitations because Arabic dialects are mainly spoken (Nelson et al., 2002; Morkus, 2009, 2014), and the studies described in Nelson et al. (2002) and Morkus (2014) used the oral mode to elicit realistic interactions. Because the aim of research on cross-cultural speech acts is to identify the similarities and differences between two languages, it is important to examine how they are realised in real-world communication. In the case of Arabic, the spoken mode is the real use of the language. Although Hussein (1995) used naturally occurring data, no information is provided about how the data were collected or transcribed, and no systematic approach to analysis is mentioned.

According to the findings of previous studies, Arabic speakers exhibit many particular characteristics when making refusals, the most noticeable of which is a tendency to use indirect strategies when refusing someone of higher status. Conversely, they tend to employ more direct refusals in situations with people of equal status. Another noticeable feature is the use of religious references in terms of invoking God when making direct refusals. Arabic speakers use reasons as the most frequent semantic formula when making refusals. Finally, although Arabic speakers and English speakers use similar semantic formulas in their refusal strategies, they are employed in a different order.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

A total of 42 participants were involved in this study, specifically 24 Kuwaiti speakers of Arabic (male = 12; female = 12) and 18 British speakers of English (male = 9; female = 9). The Kuwaiti participants were aged between 20 and 39 years (average = 27.6 years), while the British participants were aged between 18 and 52 (average = 27 years).

The participants were selected through a convenience sampling method according to accessibility (Mackey & Gass, 2015). This was a non-random method by which participants were selected on the basis of being easily accessible and available.

3.2 Instrument

In most speech act research, a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) is used to collect data through the elicitation of a specific speech act (Blum-Kulka, 1982). A DCT, which can be spoken or written, presents several situations through which participants' responses can be analysed and evaluated. In a written DCT, participants are given time to read several situations and then asked to write down their responses. In a spoken DCT, the situations are read aloud by a researcher and each participant is required to reply orally. The DCT, regardless of whether it is written or spoken, is the most widely utilized instrument in speech act research (Nelson et al., 2002; Hinkel, 1997; Nureddeen, 2008; Kwon, 2004; Allami, & Naeimi, 2011).

Spoken elicitation is closer to real-life interactions, and it is particularly appropriate for Arabic speakers because Arabic is a diglossia language, in that what is spoken on a daily basis differs from the formal version. Therefore, in order to examine how speakers perform a specific speech act, it is realistic to examine the spoken language that is in daily use rather than the formal utterances that are not used in daily life interactions. In the present study, a modified version of the spoken DCT used by Beebe et al. (1990) was employed to collect the data. This DCT enables the control of different variables, such as social status, language, age and gender, and the comparison of strategies between two or more languages or cultures. In addition, it facilitates the collection of data from situations designed to elicit specific speech acts (Kasper, 1999).

Numerous researchers emphasised that instruments used for data collection need to be culturally appropriate to be considered valid (Turner, 2014; Hinkel, 1997; Nurani, 2009). Accordingly, the DCT was modified for this study as the aim was to design situations that were culturally appropriate in Kuwait and in the UK; it was translated into Arabic and the appropriateness of the content was reviewed. Two of the original situations were found to be culturally inappropriate in Kuwaiti culture, specifically attending a mixed-gender party and a man inviting his fiancée to dinner, both of which would rarely happen. Modifications of these two situations were made to achieve a better cultural fit.

The DCT consisted of 10 situations: three offers, three invitations, two suggestions and two requests (Table 1). These situations included refusing a person of higher, lower or equal status. In four situations, a person of equal status refused a request, a suggestion, an offer and an invitation. In four situations, a person of lower status refused an invitation, an offer, a suggestion, and a request. In two situations, a person of higher status refused an invitation and an offer. The modified DCT used in the present study can be found in two languages Arabic and English in Appendices A and B.

Table 1. Participant status by situation

Situation	Refusal in response to	Participant status
1	Request	Equal (=)
2	Invitation	High (+)
3	Invitation	Low (-)
4	Suggestion	Equal (=)
5	Suggestion	Low (-)
6	Offer	High (+)
7	Offer	Equal (=)
8	Invitation	Equal (=)
9	Offer	Low (-)
10	Request	Low (-)

3.3 Data Preparation

The 420 refusals were audio recorded, using an ICD-PX240 4GB voice recorder (Sony Corporation, Tokyo), and the oral data were transcribed for coding and analysis. According to Mackey and Gass (2015), “transcription conventions should match the object of inquiry of the study” (p. 223). The objective of this study was to examine not the intonations or the number of pauses and ellipses but the different ways in which refusals were realised by the Kuwaiti and British participants. Therefore, the data were transcribed using a verbatim method in which ellipses and pauses are excluded (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). The English data were transcribed into English and the Kuwaiti data were transcribed into Arabic before being coded. The Kuwaiti data were then translated into English to be used as examples in this study.

3.4 Data Coding

Transcriptions contain crucial data that should be coded in a systematic way to explore how refusals are performed by the groups involved (Mackey & Gass, 2015). In order to code speech act data, researchers rely on a taxonomy that includes various strategies. In this study, the researcher divided the responses into idea units when coding the oral data transcriptions; some responses contained only one or two idea units, whereas others contained five or six idea units (Chafe, 1980). Most of these idea units were independent clauses. As the data were nominal, each idea unit was coded separately because it could be a direct or an indirect strategy, a statement of regret, a reason and so forth. For example, the refusals elicited from the British speaker below were divided into four idea units.

- (i) Thank you for your suggestion
- (ii) but I have my own needs and methods
- (iii) and I know how to do it in my way
- (iv) so, thank you for that (BM51).

Each idea unit was then coded according to a specific strategy. The above example was coded as follows:

- (i) Thank you for your suggestion (consideration of interlocutor’s feelings)
- (ii) but I have my own needs and methods (reason)
- (iii) and I know how to do it in my way (reason)
- (iv) so, thank you for that (BM51; consideration of interlocutor’s feelings).

In the present study, Nelson et al.’s (2002) taxonomy which was a modified version of Beebe et al.’s (1990) taxonomy was used. Beebe et al.’s (1990) taxonomy is used widely when coding the speech act of refusal (VonCanon, 2006; Felix-Brasdefer, 2003; Nelson et al., 2002). Table 2 outlines Nelson et al.’s (2002) taxonomy, which was used in the present study. The strategies were categorised as direct or indirect strategies. Direct strategies refer to strategies that indicate unwillingness, such as “I refuse”, “I can’t”, and “No”. Indirect strategies include 10 categories, nine of which are listed below, in addition to “others”, which Nelson et al. (2002) used as the 10th indirect strategy. An example of ‘others’ is “Oh my goodness”. It is worth mentioning that responses such as “I will not,” “I don’t want to” and “it’s impossible to” were coded as direct strategies because these units were found to be used as direct strategies by both Nelson et al. (2002) and by Beebe et al. (1990).

Table 2. Refusal taxonomy, with corresponding examples, adapted from Nelson et al. (2002)

Directness	Strategy	Examples from the current study
Direct	Direct	“No”; “I can’t”; “I will not...”; “I refuse”
Indirect	A. Reason	“I have plans with my friends”
	B. Consideration of the interlocutor’s feelings	“Thank you for your suggestion”
	C. Suggestion of willingness	“Maybe we’ll organise another time”
	D. Let interlocutor off the hook	“Don’t worry”; “It’s all fine”
	E. Statement of Regret	“I’m sorry”
	F. Hedging	“I’m not sure”
	G. Statement of principle	“I don’t believe in diets”
	H. Criticising the request/requester	“You are careless”
	I. Repetition (of part) of the request	“On Sunday?”

3.5 Data Analysis

First, descriptive statistics were calculated to determine any differences between the two groups, including measures of central tendency and dispersion and particularly the means and standard deviations of all refusals made by the Kuwaiti and the British participants. Inferential statistics were then calculated to determine any statistically significant differences between the groups.

Descriptive statistics only were used to answer the second research question: “Do Kuwaiti Arabic speakers and British English speakers use different indirect strategies when refusing others?” The means and standard deviations of all 10 indirect strategies were calculated, and inferential statistics were not determined. The reason for this approach was the large number of variables (two groups, 10 indirect strategies and three types of status) in relation to a small number of participants. However, descriptive statistics enabled the observation of patterns in the data.

4. Results

4.1 Frequency of the Strategies Used

The first research question was ‘Do Kuwaiti speakers differ in the use of refusal strategies from British speakers?’ To answer this question, the means of total direct strategies and total indirect strategies were compared between the two groups. The British group used more refusal strategies (2.81 strategies per item) than the Kuwaiti group (2.27 strategies per item), and this difference was found to be statistically significant based on a T-test using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) ($t = 3.6$, $df = 32$, $p = .001$). Nevertheless, the participants within each of the two groups differed in terms of the number of refusal strategies, as shown in Table 3. The British group had an average of 2.81 strategies per refusal, whereas the Kuwaiti group had an average of 2.27 strategies per refusal.

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations of the Total Number of Direct and Indirect Refusal Strategies Used by the Kuwaiti and British Participants

Participants	Statistics	Total number of strategies	Strategies per item	per	Direct strategies	Indirect strategies
Full group (N=42)	Mean	25.04	2.50		6.16	18.88
	SD	5.29	0.52		2.99	4.86
British group (N=18)	Mean	28.11	2.81		6.33	21.66
	SD	5.17	0.51		3.85	4.77
Kuwaiti group (N=24)	Mean	22.75	2.27		6.04	16.70
	SD	4.16	0.41		2.23	3.86

Table 3 shows that both the Kuwaiti and British groups used more indirect refusal strategies than direct refusal strategies. Nevertheless, in comparing the two groups, the British group used slightly more indirect strategies

than the Kuwaiti group. On average, the British group used 3.4 times as many indirect refusal strategies (77.5 per cent of the total refusal strategies) as direct refusal strategies, whereas the Kuwaiti group used 2.7 times as many indirect refusal strategies (73.4 per cent of the total refusal strategies) on average.

A typical example of the refusal strategies used by the Kuwaiti participants, including both direct and indirect strategies, is demonstrated in example (3), in which the Kuwaiti participant invoked God's name when making a direct refusal in response to the boss's request to stay an extra two hours at work.

(3) Wallah ana ma agdar (direct refusal)

I swear to Allah I can't

Le anh lazam aadk eiali mn el madrasa (reason)

Because I have to pick up my children from school (KF1024)

Example (4) shows the typical use of refusal strategies, including both direct and indirect strategies, employed by a British participant in the same situation.

(4) I absolutely refuse to take any money from you (direct refusal)

This is a pure accident (reason)

And I accept your apology (let interlocutor off the hook) (BF616)

4.2 Types and Frequencies of Indirect Strategies

In addressing the second question, 'Do Kuwaiti and British speakers use different indirect strategies when refusing others?', the focus was solely on indirect strategies because there were 10 categories of indirect strategies and only one category of direct strategies in the taxonomy. Inferential statistics were not used for the reasons explained earlier. Therefore, only descriptive statistics were used. Figure 1 shows the indirect refusal strategies used by the two groups.

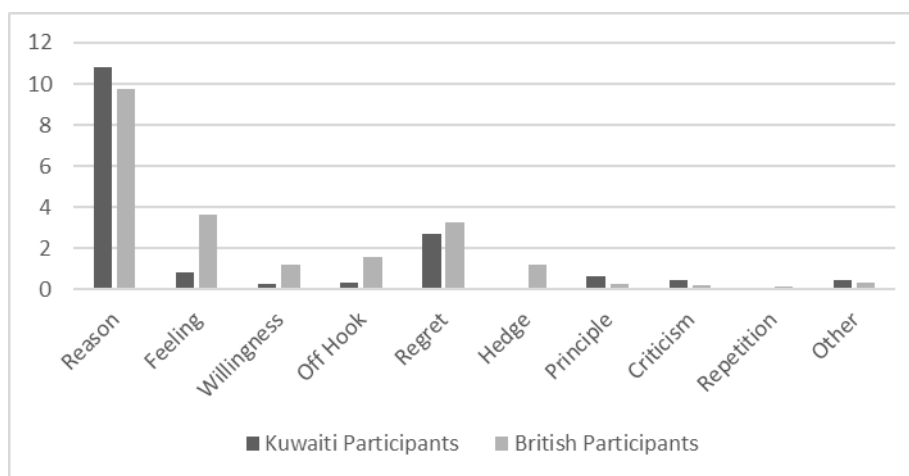


Figure 1. Indirect strategies used by the Kuwaiti and British participants

As shown in Figure 1, the most frequent indirect refusal strategy utilized by both the Kuwaiti and the British groups was reason; however, the Kuwaiti group used it more frequently ($M = 10.79$, $SD = 1.71$) than the British group ($M = 9.77$, $SD = 3.09$). An example of the Kuwaiti participants' use of reason when employing a refusal strategy is illustrated in Example (5), in which the respondent refused a friend's request to borrow notes.

(5) assif (statement of regret)

(Sorry)

Ma'agdar aateek almolahadat (direct strategy)

(I can't give you the notes)

Le ani mehtag la ha le derasa (reason)

(because I need them for studying) (KM14)

The British participants tended to respond to the same situation with various indirect strategies.

(6) I am sorry (statement of regret)

But I actually haven't got them right now (reason)

It would be quite difficult to get them to you (hedging)

So good luck (consideration of the interlocutor's feelings) (BM9)

The second most frequently used strategy by the British group was consideration of the interlocutor's feelings ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 2.35$). The Kuwaiti group also utilized this strategy, but as the third most frequent strategy ($M = 0.83$, $SD = 1.27$). However, there was a tremendous difference in the use of this strategy by the two groups, with the British group utilising it in almost all situations. In the following example, the British respondent refused the boss's offer of promotion via a direct refusal.

(7) Thanks (consideration of the interlocutor's feelings)

But due to a personal matter and family issues (reason)

I would not be able to take the position (direct refusal) (BF910)

In the same situation, a Kuwaiti participant refused the boss's offer by using an indirect strategy.

(8) shukran (consideration of the interlocutor's feelings)

(Thank you)

Agadr talabik (consideration of the interlocutor's feelings)

(I appreciate your offer)

Lakn hada el ard ma ynasibni (reason)

(But this offer does not suit me)

Tarif satin masafah kebera taather ala entagiati (reason)

(You know two hours are a long-distance driving that could affect my productivity) (KM92)

Regret was the third most frequently used strategy by the British participants ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.48$), while it was the second most frequent strategy ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.68$) used by the Kuwaitis. The British participants relied mainly on the formulaic phrase 'I am sorry' to express regret. In the following example, the British respondent used a statement of regret when refusing the salesman's invitation to dinner.

(9) I am really sorry (statement of regret)

I've got plans for tonight (reason) (BM24)

The Kuwaiti group used many different phrases to express regret. The use of the formulaic phrase 'esmahli' was particularly frequent, accounting for 22 of the 63 statements of regret used by the Kuwaitis. In the following example, the Kuwaiti respondent refused a friend's request to borrow notes.

(10) esmahli (statement of regret)

(I am sorry)

Daitem wa ana aadiek kl shi tatluba (criticise the request/ requester)

(I always give you what you request)

Lakin ha elmara ana mehtagha ashan adres (reason)

(but this time I need the notes for studying) (KM19)

4.3 The Effect of the Interlocutor's Status

To answer the third question, 'Are speakers of either language affected by the status of the interlocutor when making refusals?', descriptive statistics were first calculated for each type of refusal: refusal of a person of higher status, refusal of a person of equal status, and refusal of a person of lower status. The average number of strategies per item was used because the number of situations that represented each type of status was unequal. There were two situations in which refusal was utilized in response to a lower status person, four situations in which it was utilized in response to an equal status person, and four situations in which it was utilized in response to a higher status person. Table 4 shows that the means of each type within each group were similar with regard to direct and indirect strategies.

Although the differences in the use of refusal strategies among the three status types appeared to be minimal, a repeated measures analysis of variance was conducted to determine whether the average number of refusal

strategies per item was associated with any statistically significant differences among the three status types. The results revealed that no statistically significant effects among the three types ($F = 1.9, df = 2, p = 0.13$).

However, it is important to note that the results concerning the use of refusal strategies according to status type were relatively similar for the two groups. Both groups used fewer indirect strategies with a person of equal status than they did with people of lower or higher status (Kuwaiti group: $M = 1.60, SD = .65$; British group: $M = 2.06, SD = 0.82$). Moreover, both groups used more indirect refusal strategies with a person of higher status than they did with people of other status types. In the Kuwaiti group, this pattern concerning higher status was mirrored in the direct refusal strategies, whereas the British group employed more direct refusal strategies with people of lower and higher status.

Table 4. The average number of strategies per item used by the Kuwaiti and British participants in response to the three types of statuses

Participants	statistics	Indirect strategies			Direct strategies			All strategies		
		Lower status (2)	Equal status (4)	Higher status (4)	Lower status (2)	Equal status (4)	Higher status (4)	Lower Status (2)	Equal status (4)	Higher status (4)
Full group (N=42)	Mean	1.84	1.80	1.95	0.59	0.52	0.58	2.43	2.33	2.54
	SD	0.84	0.76	0.84	0.66	0.65	0.65	0.86	0.91	0.90
British group (N=18)	Mean	2.11	2.06	2.29	0.75	0.65	0.56	2.86	2.72	2.86
	SD	0.97	0.82	0.87	0.73	0.77	0.68	0.79	1.05	0.87
Kuwaiti group (N=24)	Mean	1.64	1.60	1.70	0.47	0.43	0.60	2.12	2.07	2.31
	SD	0.66	0.65	0.72	0.58	0.53	0.62	0.78	0.69	0.84

Based on a close analysis of the status types, it appeared that, as shown in Figure 2, reason was the most frequent indirect refusal strategy used in response to a person of lower status for the Kuwaiti participants, while the British participants employed the ‘letting the interlocutor off the hook’ strategy more often than the Kuwaiti participants. In the following example, a British respondent refused a cleaner’s offer to pay for a broken vase, using the ‘letting the interlocutor off the hook’ strategy twice.

(10) It is ok (let the interlocutor off the hook)

It’s just an accident (reason)

It’s not like a cool vase anyway (let the interlocutor off the hook) (BF612)

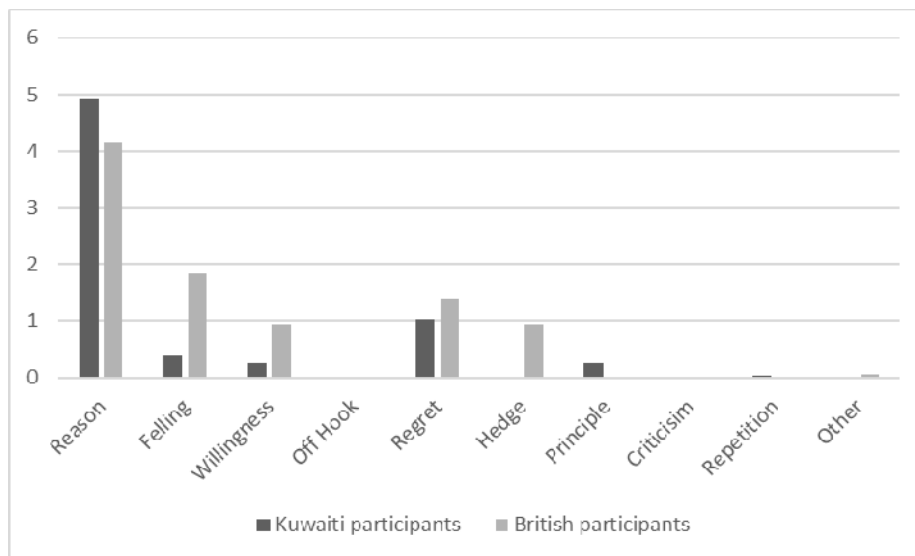


Figure 2. Indirect refusal strategies produced in response to people of lower status

With regard to refusing people of equal status, both groups employed reason as the most frequent strategy, followed by regret and consideration of the interlocutor's feelings (Figure 3). Example (11) reflects the excessive use of reason and regret strategies by a Kuwaiti respondent when refusing a friend's request for notes. These two strategies were used together frequently across all respondents.

(11) ana aasif (statement of regret)

(I am sorry)

Ana mihtaj el notat (reason)

(I need it for the exam) (KF113)

In the same situation, the British participants were more likely to use statements of regret than the Kuwaitis. Example (12) demonstrates the use of the regret strategy by a British respondent, a strategy the respondent used twice.

(12) I am really sorry (statement of regret)

But I need the notes for myself because the exam is tomorrow (reason)

And I would if could (statement of regret) (BF110)

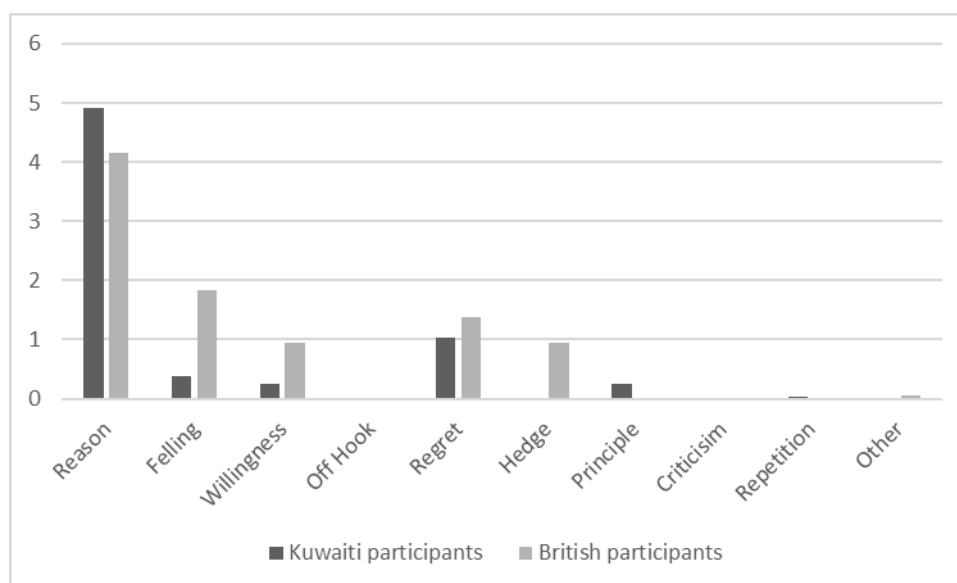


Figure 3. Indirect refusal strategy produced in response to people of equal status

When using indirect refusal strategies with a person of higher status, both the Kuwaiti and the British groups employed the reason strategy most frequently. However, as shown in Figure 4, the British group used the hedging strategy frequently when refusing a person of higher status, whereas no use of this strategy was observed in the Kuwaiti group. In Example (13), a British interlocutor refused the boss's offer of promotion by using hedging to avoid a direct refusal.

(13) Thanks for the offer (consideration of interlocutor's feelings)

I just think moving is not a right option (Hedging)

But thanks for considering me (consideration of interlocutor's feelings)

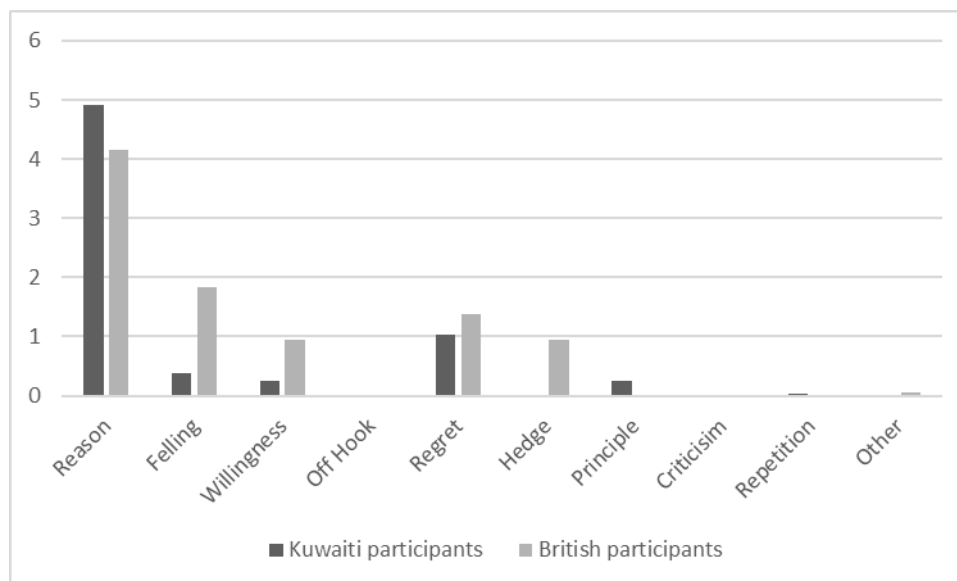


Figure 4. Indirect refusal strategies produced in response to people of higher status

5. Discussion

The findings related to the first research question revealed that the British group used more refusal strategies than the Kuwaiti group. This is consistent with the finding of Nelson et al. (2002), who reported that American speakers of English used more refusal strategies than Egyptian speakers of Arabic. Importantly, in certain situations, some Kuwaiti interlocutors utilized more refusal strategies than some British speakers. For example, one of the Kuwaiti respondents used 32 refusal strategies in 10 situations, whereas a British participant used only 18 refusal strategies in ten situations. Therefore, the difference in the total number of strategies used by the two groups could be attributed to individual differences.

Another finding was that the two groups used more indirect than direct refusal strategies. This aligns with the studies of Nelson et al. (2002) and Morkus (2014), which indicated that both Egyptians and Americans tended to use more indirect strategies. As refusal may be viewed as a face-threatening act, speakers often rely on indirect refusal strategies to avoid harming the hearer's face.

The findings related to the first research question also showed that there was a slight difference in the use of direct refusal strategies between the two groups, as the British participants used more direct refusal strategies ($M=6.33$) than the Kuwaiti participants ($M=6.04$). Again, it can be argued that this difference could be attributed to individual differences among the participants. For example, one of the Kuwaiti participants (KF21) utilized 11 direct refusal strategies in 10 situations, whereas a British participant (BF13) used only one direct refusal strategy in 10 situations. This difference between Arabic and English speakers in terms of the use of direct refusal strategies has been reported repeatedly in the literature (Al-Shalawi, 1997; Morkus, 2014; Nelson et al., 2002). Furthermore, when the Kuwaiti respondents utilized direct strategies, they used religious references like 'I swear to Allah I can't'. The use of such references by both males and females reflects the role of religion not only in Kuwaiti culture but also in greater Arabic culture. Such religious references were also reported by Al-Shalawi (1997) and Morkus (2014).

The results regarding the second research question indicated that there were more similarities than differences between the two groups with regard to the choice of refusal strategies, as both the Kuwaiti and British groups utilized reason as the most frequent indirect refusal strategy. This is in line with the results of most studies on refusal in the literature, which have also found that reason was the most frequent strategy used by Arabic and English speakers, despite employing different instruments for collecting data, such as the DCT and role-play (Al-Shalawi, 1997; Morkus, 2014; Nelson et al., 2002). Therefore, giving reasons when making refusals seems to be a characteristic of both Arabic and English speakers. After reason, both groups most commonly used consideration of the interlocutor's feelings and regret as refusal strategies.

As the two groups were similar in their choice of indirect strategies, with respect to pragmatic competence and pragmatic failure, pragmalinguistic failure would not be expected among Arabic and English learners when acquiring Arabic or English as a second or foreign language. The use of similar speech strategies by speakers of different languages often results in pragmatic competence (Kasper, 1997; Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993).

Therefore, British speakers of English and Kuwaiti speakers of Arabic could be able to successfully transfer different refusal strategies from their first language to the other language.

Another crucial finding regarding the use of indirect strategies, which provides insight into Kuwaiti culture, was that the Kuwaiti participants tended to use family excuses in an attempt to justify their refusals. The Kuwaiti participants used phrases like ‘my mother’, ‘my wife’ and ‘my children’ extensively in their attempts to explain or give reasons (e.g. ‘My mother is ill, and I have to be close to her’). Meanwhile, the British participants tended to use personal excuses, such as ‘I’ve already made plans for the weekend’. This finding is in line with those of Al-Shalawi (1997) and Morkus (2014). Al-Shalawi (1997) attributed these differences in the use of excuses to the differences between collectivist and individualistic cultures, with Western countries being individualistic and Eastern countries collectivist. In individualistic cultures, the person is separate from the group and is only responsible for his or her own goals. Conversely, in collectivist cultures, the person is part of the group, and his or her personal goals are subordinate to those of the group (Triandis et al., 1988).

Regarding the use of indirect strategies, it was clear that some strategies were common in one group but not in the other. For example, the Kuwaiti participants employed the hedging strategy twice, while the British participants utilized this strategy 17 times. According to Beebe et al. (1990), speakers use this strategy to avoid giving an immediate answer. This strategy was also used as a ‘softener’ to mitigate the threat to the hearer’s face. For example, one participant said, ‘I don’t think I am ready to be promoted’ rather than directly stating ‘I don’t want to be promoted’. Through the use of the hedging strategy, the participant sought to avoid threatening the hearer’s face.

The findings related to the third research question suggested that there were more similarities than differences between the Kuwaiti and the British participants when refusing people of different social statuses. The Kuwaiti group used more direct strategies with people of high status than with people of lower status types. In comparison to the studies of Morkus (2014) and Nelson et al. (2002), which also examined the refusal of people of different social statuses, it appears that Kuwaiti society is not as hierarchal as Egyptian society. Respondents refused a person of high status in situations 3, 4, 9 and 10, in which they were asked to refuse the boss’s invitation, suggestion, offer and request, respectively. A close analysis revealed that the Kuwaiti respondents utilized more direct strategies when the boss made a request than they did when the boss extended an invitation or made an offer or suggestion. This can be ascribed to the fact that the majority of Kuwaiti employees work in the governmental, or public, sector, in which the authority of supervisors is restricted. Therefore, the boss’s requests were unexpected, and it was expected that the respondents would use direct strategies in such situations.

However, the Kuwaitis also used more indirect strategies with people of high status. Thus, people of high status received more refusals than people of other status types. This may be a characteristic of a hierarchal society, in which people of high status receive greater attention than people of other status types. Indeed, more than 42 percent of the total refusal strategies were used in response to people of high status. For example, in situations that required refusing people of high status, some Kuwaiti participants used one direct strategy followed by many indirect strategies to minimise the threat to the hearer’s face. When refusing the boss’s request to remain after work for two hours, one of the Kuwaiti participants responded, ‘I stick to the official working hours. I am sorry, I can’t because I have many things to do, and another reason is that there is no bonus for that’. With regard to people of equal status (e.g. friends), the Kuwaiti participants employed fewer direct refusal strategies. This could reflect the importance of friendship and the strength of friendships bonds for Kuwaitis, which makes it more difficult to use direct refusal strategies with a friend.

Giving reasons was the most frequent refusal strategy used by the Kuwaiti participants when refusing people of all three status types, whereas the British group most frequently used this strategy with people of equal or high status. However, the content of these reasons differed dramatically between the two groups. The Kuwaiti group utilized white lies to save the hearer’s face (e.g. ‘My mother is ill’ and ‘My wife is ill’), while the British group rarely used these excuses. The use of white lies as a reason is common in collectivistic cultures. For example, Felix-Brasdefer (2003) observed that Mexican speakers relied on white lies when giving reasons for refusals. Although white lies are used to avoid threatening the hearer’s face, Felix-Brasdefer (2003) also noted that being straightforward is considered polite and respectful in individualistic cultures. Thus, the varying uses of reasons reflect the cultural differences between the two groups.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the similarities and differences between Kuwaiti and British participants when making refusals in terms of the realisation of refusal strategies, the effect of the interlocutor’s role and the use of indirect strategies. The results showed that there were more similarities than differences between the two groups.

The Kuwaiti and British groups were similar in their use of refusal strategies, as both groups preferred to employ indirect strategies rather than direct strategies. In addition, the Kuwaiti and British groups used similar indirect strategies, preferring the use of reason, regret and consideration of the interlocutors' feelings. Moreover, both the British and Kuwaiti participants used more indirect strategies with people of high status. However, the Kuwaiti group employed more direct strategies with people of high status, whereas the British group employed more direct strategies with people of lower status.

7. Recommendations for Further Research

The Kuwaiti variety of Arabic has received little attention in speech act studies. While this study attempted to fill this gap, further research is needed to better understand how Kuwaiti speakers of Arabic employ speech act strategies.

A non-random sampling method was used in this study. Future research on the use of refusal strategies by Kuwaiti participants could utilize random sampling methods to obtain more reliable data. As few studies have examined speech acts in Kuwaiti Arabic, future research could also use observational methods to collect naturally occurring data that are authentic, reliable and similar to real-life communications. In fact, many researchers have recommended the use of naturally occurring data to investigate how speakers perform a particular speech act rather than how they think it should be performed (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1993; Olshtain & Blum-Kulka, 1984; Wolfson, 1986). Studies on speech acts help people from different cultures understand the characteristics of other languages or cultures. Consequently, it is important to examine how people refuse strangers' requests and how refusals are produced by different genders in different cultural contexts. Finally, as suggested by Nelson et al. (2002), researchers should interview participants after the study to gain a deeper understanding of their motivation for choosing a particular refusal strategy over others. In the present study, this would mean asking the Kuwaiti participants about the reasons for their extensive use of reason-related strategies while ignoring other strategies like hedging.

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Appendix A

The Modified DCT Used in the Present Study for the British Participants

- (1) You are in your third year of university. You attend classes and take really good notes. Your classmate, who often misses classes, asks to borrow your lecture notes. On this occasion, your classmate says, 'Oh no! We have an exam tomorrow, and I don't have the notes from last week. I am sorry to ask you this, but could you please lend me your notes again?' (Request: Equal status)
- (2) You are the president of a printing company. A salesman from a paper supplier invites you to an expensive dinner. The salesman says, 'We have met several times before to discuss your purchase of my company's products. I was wondering if you would like to be my guest at the (name of expensive restaurant) in order to firm up a contract'. (Invitation: Person of higher status refuses the invitation)
- (3) You are a top executive at a large accounting firm. One day the boss calls you into his office. He says, 'Next Sunday I am having a little get-together at my place. I know it's a short notice but I am hoping all of my top executives will be there. What do you say?' (Invitation: Person of lower status refuses the invitation)
- (4) You're at a friend's house watching TV. Your friend offers you a snack. You turn it down, saying that you've gained some weight and having trouble fitting into your clothes. Your friend says, 'Hey, why don't you try this new diet I've been telling you about?' (Suggestion: Equal status)
- (5) You're at your desk trying to find a report that your boss just asked for. While you're searching through the mess on your desk, your boss walks over and says, 'you know, maybe you should try and organize yourself better. I always write myself little notes to help me keep track of things. Perhaps you should give it a try'. (Suggestion: Person of lower status refuses the suggestion)
- (6) You arrive home and notice that your cleaner is extremely upset. She comes rushing up to you and says, 'Oh God, I'm sorry! I had an awful accident. While I was cleaning, I bumped into the tables and your china vase fell off and broke. I feel just terrible about it. I insist on paying for it' (Offer: Person of higher status refuses the offer)

- (7) You are at a friend's house for lunch. Your friend says, 'How about another piece of cake?' (Offer: Equal status)
- (8) A friend invites you to dinner. You know your friend's brother/ sister will be there, and you really can't stand your friend's brother or sister. Your friend says, 'How about coming over for dinner on Sunday night? We are having a small dinner party'. (Invitation: Equal status)
- (9) You have been working in an advertising agency now for quite some time. The boss offers you a raise and a promotion, but it would involve relocating to another town. You don't want to go. Today, the boss calls you into his office. He says, 'I'd like to offer you an executive position at our new offices in (small town close to Bristol). It's a lovely town only two hours from here. The position also comes with a raise'. (Offer: Person of lower status refuses the offer)
- (10) You are at the office in a meeting with your boss. It is getting close to the end of the day, and you want to go home on time. But your boss says, 'If you don't mind, I'd like you to stay an extra hour or two tonight so that we can get this thing finished up.' (Request: Person of lower status refuses request)

Appendix B

The Modified DCT Used in the Present Study in Arabic Language for the Kuwaiti Participants

1. انت تكون طالب في كلية وتحضر المحاضرات بانتظام وتدوّن ملاحظات في كل محاضرة، زميلك بالدراسة ما يحضر كل المحاضرات وعادة ما يسألك إنك تعطيه ملاحظتك (نوتاتك)، زميلك يقول: اوف عندنا اختبار بكرنا ولكن انا ما دونت الملاحظات لمحاضرة الأسبوع اللي طاف، أدري أني ثقلت عليك بس ممكن تعطيني النوات اللي كتبتها لمحاضرة الأسبوع اللي طاف؟ (طلب: مناصب متساوية)
2. انت تكون رئيس شركة طباعة، جاك مندوب مبيعات من شركة تصنيع ورق وعزمك على مطعم غالي، مندوب المبيعات يقول: تناقشنا أكثر من مرة بخصوص مشنرياتك من شركتنا، هذه المرة ودي ان تقبل دعوتي بمطعم (اسم المطعم) عشان نناقش مسألة العقود بين الشركتين. (دعوة: شخص من منصب عالي يرفض الدعوة)
3. انت تكون مسؤول كبير في شركة محاسبة مرموقة، يوم من الأيام اتصل عليك مديرك وطلب منك الحضور لمكتبة. المدير يقول: يوم الأحد الجاي عندي عزيمة والعموم بيحضر وأتمنى إنك تحضر، شنو ترد عليه؟ (شخص من منصب متدني يرفض الدعوة)
4. انت في بيت صديقك وتشوف معاه التلفزيون، وبنص السوالف معاه قدم لك وجبة خفيفة (سناك). انت رفضت تأخذها وقلت له ان وزنك زايد هالأيام حتى ملابسك ضاقت. صديقك يقول: ليش ماتجرب نظام الدايت الجديد اللي قلت لك عنه قبل فترة؟ (اقتراح: مكانة متساوية)
5. المدير طلب منك ملف معين، وانت قاعد بمكتبك وسط فوضة الملفات، في هالثناء مر المدير وقالك: لازم تنظم شغلك عدل، انا دايم اكتب لنفسني نوات صغيرة عشان تذكركني بمكان كل ملف، ليش ما تجرب تسوي هالشغله؟ (اقتراح: منصب متدني يرفض الاقتراح)
6. اول ما وصلت البيت لاحظت ان الخادمة معصيه. جات عندك الخادمة وقالت: أنا أسفه، اليوم وانا كنت أنظف البيت، ضربت الفازة بالغلط وطاحت وانكسرت، أدري اني غلطانة، بس راح أصلح غلطتي وادفع حسابها. (عرض: شخص من منصب عالي يرفض العرض)
7. أنت ضيف في بيت صديقك. صديقك قال لك: تفضل هذي الكيكة. (عرض: مكانة متساوية)
8. صديقك عزمك للعشاء، ولكن انت ما تحب تشوف واحد/واحدة من إخوانه /خواتمه، صديقك يقول: شرايك اتعشى عندي يوم الاحد في بيتنا؟
9. تخيل إنك تشتغل في وكالة إعلانات، المدير عطاك عرض مغري، ولكن هذا العرض يتطلب منك إنك تنتقل من مكان عملك إلى مكان آخر وانت ماتبي تنتقل، المدير اتصل عليك قالك ممكن تجي لمكتبي؟
- المدير: ودي أقدم لك وظيفة جديدة في مكتبنا الجديد، مكتبنا الجديد على بعد ساعتين من هنا، وراح تكون فيه زيادة بالراتب لك مع المنصب الجديد. (عرض: منصب متدني يرفض العرض)
10. مديرك مجتمع معاك في مكتبة، والدوام قرب يخلص. المدير قالك: إذا ما عندك مانع، ابيك تقعد بالدوام ساعة او ساعتين زيادة بعد انتهاء الدوام الرسمي عشان تخلص باقي الشغل. (طلب: شخص من منصب متدني يرفض الطلب)

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