REFUSAL STRATEGIES: A PROPOSAL FROM A SOCIOPRAGMATIC APPROACH[1]

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Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es presentar una taxonomía abierta de estrategias de rechazo, la cual puede ser usada para el análisis de la producción de negativas desde una perspectiva discursiva. En primer lugar revisaremos los primeros estudios llevados a cabo sobre las negativas para clasificar la producción de este acto de habla por hablantes no nativos. En segundo lugar describiremos la taxonomía que proponemos de una forma sistematizada teniendo en cuenta tanto el enfoque sociopragmático como el del análisis conversacional. Para finalizar, sugerimos que diversas variables sociales tales como poder, distancia social o grado de imposición juegan un papel fundamental en la producción de este acto de habla.
Palabras clave: *Negativas, actos de habla, pragmática del interlenguaje*

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present an open typology of refusal strategies which may be employed in the analysis of refusal performance from a discourse approach. We will first review previous research carried out on refusals in order to classify non-native speakers' production of this speech act. Secondly, we will describe the suggested taxonomy in a systematised way from a sociopragmatic perspective and within a conversational analysis framework. Finally, we conclude that social variables such as power, social distance and ranking of imposition play an important role in the production of this face-threatening speech act of refusing.
Keywords: *Refusals, speech acts, interlanguage pragmatics*

1. Introduction

The present paper focuses on a speech act that has received little attention in interlanguage pragmatics research, namely that of refusing. It is our purpose to present an open typology of refusal routines that may be used in the analysis of refusal behaviour from a discourse perspective. Existing studies on refusals include cross-cultural descriptions of pragmatic production (Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz 1990; Félix-Brasdefer, 2003). Nevertheless, pragmatic competence will only be fostered if a developmental perspective (Kasper, 2001) is adopted, and a focus is placed on those individual and contextual factors influencing language use and acquisition.

Research into Interlanguage Pragmatics has often focused on speech act production (Takahashi and Beebe, 1987; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Omar, 1991; Svanes, 1992; Trosborg, 1995; Cenoz and Valencia, 1996; Takahashi, 1996; Hassall, 1997; Hill, 1997; Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei, 1998; Matsumura, 2001). Requests, apologies and complaints have received a great deal of attention over the years, where a special focus has been placed on ESL settings and to a lesser extent on EFL settings. In most cases, the use of speech acts has been analysed from a semantic and cognitive viewpoint by describing the routines employed in realising particular speech acts. In those cases, the analysis is placed on one (or two at best) single conversational turns isolated from their context; thus, providing a partial account of what actually takes place in communication. On that account, there is a need to deal with pragmatic acquisition from a discourse perspective, thereby taking into account the main tenets in

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Conversation Analysis (henceforth CA) as a theoretical framework for empirical analysis. Such a framework will affect notions related to pragmatic production and acquisition, namely those of politeness and speech acts.

According to Kasper (2006), politeness as a form of linguistic behaviour is conceptualized as a dependent variable determined by the values of the context. Focusing on the work by Brown and Levinson (1987), social acts may be categorised as face threatening or face supportive. However, such distinction presents a static and deterministic relationship of context and linguistic resources, and has been widely criticised for its ethnocentric bias. On the one hand, Kasper (2006) advocates for a dynamic view emerging from the interplay of social context, action and resources, as offered by Cook (1996) or Okamoto (1999). On the other hand, Locher (2004) states that we should not misinterpret Brown and Levinson's (1987) ranking of strategies with levels of politeness. Although politeness is norm-dependent, in practice, what is considered polite or impolite will be determined by the participants in the interaction. The suggestion lies in the idea that researchers should point to relational work that may be interpreted as polite. Hence, they would discover the norm of appropriateness for a given context, which may vary across cultures and speech communities.

Despite the above criticisms and alternative suggestions to the study of politeness, Locher (2004) claims that Brown and Levinson's (1987) description of politeness is one of the most valuable tools in which CA builds their studies of linguistic action. Yet, it underlies the distinction between directness and mitigation, so often employed in conversational-analytic studies. Therefore, we should consider both CA and Brown and Levinson's (1987) view when identifying those routines that realise refusal work.

Moreover, refusals may also be understood as dispreferred messages. From a contextual approach (Bilmes, 1988), the notion of preference is conceived of as institutionally ranked conventional action where available choices are non-equivalent. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), preference choices are in many cases motivated and determined by face considerations. Thus, messages such as rejection constitute dispreferred messages whenever preservation of face is an important consideration. Following Hayashi (1996), we understand refusals as dispreferred seconds, and may be placed under the category of Searle's (1977) directives, that is, acts intended to get the hearer to do something, or under Bach and Harnish's (1979) category of constatives. These acts imply expression of a belief or intention, which is subdivided into assertives, retractives or dissentives. Refusals would be included in the latter subcategories.

Refusing is a complex issue, as the speaker directly or indirectly says *no* to his/her interlocutor's request, invitation or suggestion. This speech act has attracted researchers' attention due to the face-threatening nature it entails. Refusals threaten the addressee's negative face, that is, the desire that his/her future choice of actions or words be uninhibited. According to Chen (1996), refusals are often realised through indirect strategies, which require a high level of pragmatic competence. If refusals are challenging for native speakers (NSs) as they may involve lengthy negotiation moves, the situation becomes even more complex in interactions between NSs and non-native speakers (NNSs) or between NNSs-NNSs. In fact, refusing is a complex task for NNSs since it may be conducive to communication failure. Pragmatic inappropriateness may arise as a consequence of limited linguistic proficiency in the L2 or a lack of L2 sociocultural knowledge. In the EFL context, this sociocultural gap makes awareness and instruction of adequate refusals a necessity.

In line with Safont's (2005) claim, there is a need for providing systematised pragmatic patterns in identifying and using specific speech acts. According to this author, patterns provided in teaching pragmatics should be based on research into interlanguage pragmatics and

foreign language acquisition. Moreover, according to Coulmas (1981), routine formulae constitute a substantial part of adult NS pragmatic competence, and learners need to acquire a sizeable repertoire of routines in order to cope efficiently with recurrent and expanding social situations and discourse requirements. On that account, there is a need to identify the repertoire of strategies that may realise refusals in natural conversations within the EFL context. In so doing, a taxonomy of refusals is needed as a starting point.

Bearing this purpose in mind, we first describe previous attempts to categorise refusal routines in the analysis of NNSs' pragmatic production in English. Secondly, a proposal for describing refusal behaviour in a systematised way from a discourse perspective is provided. Finally, some conclusions deriving from our suggested taxonomy are presented.

2.   Describing NNSs' refusal behaviour

In an early attempt to classify the realization of refusals, Ueda (1972) listed 16 ways to avoid saying *no* in Japanese (Vague *no*, silence, delaying answers, among others). Some years later, Rubin (1983) claimed that there were the following 9 ways of refusing across a number of cultures:

1. Be silent, hesitate, show a lack of enthusiasm
2. Offer an alternative
3. Postponement
4. Put the blame on a third party or something over which you have no control
5. Avoidance
6. General acceptance of an offer but giving no details
7. Divert and distract the addressee
8. General acceptance with excuses
9. Say what is offered is inappropriate

These early classification systems paved the way for, probably, the most influential and best-known study on refusals, namely Beebe, Takahashi and Uliss-Weltz's (1990) taxonomy. The authors examined how Japanese learners of English refused requests, invitations, offers and suggestions by means of a Discourse Completion Test (DCT). Their classification is divided into semantic formulas, i.e., those expressions used to perform a refusal, and adjuncts, that is, expressions which accompany a refusal but which cannot by themselves be used to perform a refusal. Both components -semantic formulas and adjuncts- are illustrated as follows:

Semantic formulas
    Direct
        1. Performative
        2. Nonperformative statement
    Indirect
        3. Statement of regret
        4. Wish
        5. Excuse, reason, explanation
        6. Statement of alternative
        7. Set condition for future or past acceptance
        8. Promise of future acceptance

    9. Statement of principle
   10. Statement of philosophy
   11. Attempt to dissuade interlocutor
   12. Acceptance that functions as a refusal
   13. Avoidance

Adjuncts
1. Statement of positive opinion/feeling of agreement
2. Statement of empathy
3. Pause fillers
4. Gratitude/appreciation

In the above taxonomy, semantic formulas are first divided into direct and indirect realisations of refusals. Direct categories include performative statements such as "I refuse" and non-performative statements like "No" or "I can't". By means of indirect realisations, the refuser mitigates the face-threatening act in order to soften negative effects. This is accomplished through the use of excuses, explanations, alternatives, and so on.

As mentioned earlier, adjuncts cannot by themselves be used to perform a refusal. Yet, they may appear just before the semantic formula (*prerefusals*) or after it (*postrefusals*), in Félix-Brasdefer's (2004) terms. Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz's (1990) taxonomy has been adopted to analyse refusals in a great number of studies over the last 20 years. In the early 90s, Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1991) examined rejections used by 7 NSs and 39 proficient NNSs of English in 39 audio-taped academic advising sessions. Explanation was the most common semantic formula for both groups. Giving alternatives was the second most common strategy for NSs, and, among NNSs, it was avoidance. Differences in rejecting advisors' advice were not only quantitative, but from a qualitative perspective, the content of NNSs' reasons was more often unacceptable.

Turnbull and Saxton (1997) examined the use of modality (e.g., *can, may, would, perhaps*) in 70 refusals to comply with a request. Data collection consisted of telephone conversations with previously contacted university students who had agreed to take part in a psychological study. As it involved reactions to electric shock, the authors expected participants' refusals to such a demanding request.

Analysis of the data revealed that modal expressions occurred frequently in the five categories Turnbull and Saxton (1997) proposed, which are as follows:
- Negate requests (9%): "No"; "I don't think so"
- Performative refusal (7%):"I pass"; "I better say no"
- Indicate unwillingness (7%): "I don't think I want to do that kind of thing"
- Negated ability (44%): "I can't"; "I won't be able to do it"
- Identify impeding statement (33%): "I have to work"; "I'm busy"

The use of modality refers to speakers' attempts to do facework, by means of a tentative refusal ("I don't know") which implies that the speaker is reluctant to refuse. A different possibility is negating the speaker's ability to grant the request (e.g. "I can't"). Moreover, a widely used strategy is presenting reasons for not complying with the request ("I have to work on Saturday").

In this same paper, Turnbull and Saxton (1997) present a second study in which they use the same taxonomy to analyse a different set of data. With minor changes, refusals were elicited in the same way as in Study 1. For this second study, the authors found that modals occurred in all refusals to comply with a request, except in the category *Identify impeding event/state*. Overall, Turnbull and Saxton (1997) point out that modals are chosen to help repair the damage to face that results from refusing.

Following the work of Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990), Gass and Houck (1999) investigated refusals to suggestions, offers, invitations and requests. By means of open role plays, it was found that nonperformative refusal, statement of regret, excuse/reason and alternative accounted for almost two-thirds of responses. As for adjuncts, the authors found a preference for empathy, pause fillers and expressions of gratitude.

Sadler and Eröz (2002) examined English refusals produced by 30 subjects from three different L1 backgrounds: American, Lao and Turkish. The authors used both the questionnaire and the taxonomy developed by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990) to elicit and analyse data. The most common strategies of refusals by American NSs of English included first, excuses/reasons, and second, statements of regret. In contrast, American subjects did not favour direct responses like *no*. The same patterns of refusals was found in the analysis of data by Lao subjects, that is, the most commonly used category was excuses/reasons and then statements of regret, followed by negative ability and gratitude or appreciation. The refusal categories most frequently used by Turkish subjects were again excuses/reasons followed by statements of regret. These similarities, according to Sadler and Eröz, may be explained in terms of the high level of English proficiency the participants in the study had acquired.

A further contribution to analysis of cross-cultural refusals was carried out by Kwon (2004). It was hypothesised that there would be differences in the content of semantic formulas used in refusals by Korean speakers of Korean and American English speakers. In terms of direct formulas, American speakers sounded more direct in their tone of refusals than Korean speakers. Moreover, Koreans used more mitigation devices to soften the refusals, providing more diverse and longer reasons than the American English speakers. Mitigation was also present when Koreans dealt with a higher status person, showing therefore sensitivity to type of status (higher, equal or lower).

Félix-Brasdefer (2003) used three groups of subjects (Americans speaking English, advanced American learners of Spanish and Latin Americans) to investigate what politeness strategies were used when declining an invitation. Refusals were elicited by means of open-role plays with interlocutors of different status. These role plays were tape-recorded and played back to carry out retrospective verbal reports (Ericsson and Simon, 1993). Although no major differences were found among the three groups with respect to the level of directness, they did display different degrees of preference: Americans speaking English were more direct when refusing; the advanced learners were in intermediate position and Latin Americans showed a lesser degree of directness. These findings were further explained with the analysis of the verbal reports, in which the Latin Americans observed that they were not able to provide a direct *no* to the person who made the invitation. Therefore, an indirect refusal was preferred as it contributed to save face. This study corroborates previous claims (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei, 1998) on the fact that advanced proficiency in a language does not equate with the same level of sociocultural knowledge and values.

Félix-Brasdefer (2006) investigated refusal interactions with Mexican monolingual speakers of Spanish in formal and informal situations. As in his 2003 study, role-plays and retrospective interviews were used to collect the production data. In both formal and informal contexts, participants showed a preference for indirectness over directness. The most frequent strategies included reasons or explanations and indefinite replies, which were used to soften the refusals. To this end, the subjects also employed conditionals or diminutives. The retrospective verbal reports were used as complementary data and showed why most subjects felt compelled to provide justifications to soothe the negative effects of the refusal.

As in the case of those studies reported above, research on IL and cross-cultural pragmatics dealing with refusals has applied or adapted Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz's

(1990) taxonomy thereby focusing on semantic formulas especially when dealing with EFL/ESL learners or when contrasting NS and NNS use (see King and Silver, 1993; Kondo, 2001, 2008; Al-Issa, 2003; Félix-Brasdefer, 2003, 2006; Kwon, 2004; Al-Kahtani, 2005; Keshawarz, Eslami, and Ghahraman, 2006; Al-Eryani, 2007; and Geyang, 2007; among others). In some studies Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz's (1990) taxonomy has been adopted without modifications; yet in order to accomplish the objectives of some other studies, this well-known classification has been adapted with some changes. Gass and Houck (1999) complemented that classification with three responses (confirmation, request for clarification and agreement). Further, full application of Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz's classification system was not possible in this study since the authors videotaped nonverbal behaviour as a complement to linguistic realizations. For this reason, Gass and Houck (1999) provide extensive discussion on the importance of nonverbal signs when refusing.

Félix-Brasdefer (2003) added the category Solidarity Politeness Strategies to Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz's (1990) classification of refusals. Within this category, this author includes three substrategies which, explicitly or via mitigation, turn the refusal into acceptance. Kwon's (2004) study reviewed earlier also elicited other semantic formulas (e.g., statement of relinquishment "I can't do anything about it" or asking a question "Is it really effective?") not present in Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz's (1990) study.

Most studies on refusal behaviour adopt a cross-cultural or pseudo cross-cultural perspective, or analyse the semantic formulas produced by EFL learners and compare them with those used by NNSs. We find an exception in Salazar and Subero's study (in press) which dealt with EFL learners' use of refusal strategies. Participants were university students with a level of proficiency in English ranging from Beginner to Advanced. Refusals were elicited by means of the DCT developed by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990). A total of 828 refusal strategies were collected and analysed. To a great extent, results showed instances of direct strategies, namely blunt *no* (26.4%), and some indirect strategies in the form of reason/explanation (11.8%) and regret/apology (34%). Other indirect strategies and adjuncts were hardly employed. According to Salazar and Subero (in press), this finding could be explained by the limited proficiency of the subjects in their sample, or by the nature of the data collection instrument.

As has been previously mentioned, research on IL refusals presents either a sociopragmatic description of ESL learners' production or a pragmalinguistic account of EFL refusal behaviour. Yet, a need for both a pragmalinguistic and a sociopragmatic account of refusal work within a conversational framework is needed. On that account, we present the following typology of refusals which should be regarded as a starting point in describing IL pragmatic behaviour.

3. A proposed taxonomy for analysing the speech act of refusing

In this paper, we aim at presenting a taxonomy on refusals (Figure 1) which is partially based on the research described above. It relies heavily on Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz's (1990) taxonomy. However, following the work of Kasper (2006) on interlanguage pragmatics, the taxonomy we proposed has been modified to account for a discourse perspective in the study of refusal behaviour.

We distinguish two major categories: Refusals and Adjuncts to Refusals. We concur with most classifications in categorising Refusals as Direct or Indirect and distinguishing them from Adjuncts. Whereas with Refusals (direct and indirect) a semantic expression indicating the

refusing nature of the speech act tends to accompany the refusal, with Adjuncts, the expression that accompanies the refusal cannot by itself perform the intended function of refusing.

REFUSALS	
Direct Strategies	
1. Bluntness	*No./ I refuse.*
2. Negation of proposition	*I can't, I don't think so.*
Indirect Strategies	
1. Plain indirect	*It looks like I won't be able to go.*
2. Reason/Explanation	*I can't. I have a doctor's appointment.*
3. Regret/Apology	*I'm so sorry! I can't.*
4. Alternative: • Change option • Change time (Postponement)	*I would join you if you choose another restaurant.* *I can't go right now, but I could next week*
5. Disagreement/Dissuasion/Criticism	*Under the current economic circumstances, you should not be asking for a rise right now!*
6. Statement of principle/philosophy	*I can't. It goes against my beliefs!*

7.   Avoidance
• Non-verbal: Ignoring (Silence, etc.)
• Verbal:
  o   Hedging
  o   Change topic
  o   Joking
  o   Sarcasm
	Well, I'll see if I can.

ADJUNCTS TO REFUSALS	
1. Positive opinion	*This is a great idea, but....*
2. Willingness	*I'd love to go, but....*
3. Gratitude	*Thanks so much, but…*
4. Agreement	*Fine!, but....*
5. Solidarity/Empathy	*I'm sure you'll understand, but…*

Figure 1: Taxonomy on the speech act of refusing

Direct Strategies include instances of both a Direct *no* that is, the refuser bluntly turns down the request, invitation, etc., and Negation of proposition, with expressions like ("I can't", "I don't think so"). However, in order to attenuate the negative effects of a direct refusal and mitigate the highly face-threatening nature of refusals, Indirect Strategies are often used.

Within Indirect Strategies, most taxonomies include Mitigated refusal for expressions such as "It seems I can't", "I don't think I can". However, we propose the term Plain refusal to avoid the term "mitigation" since we consider all Indirect Strategies instances of mitigated attempts to avoid using a Direct refusal. The refuser may resort to the strategy Reason or Explanation to show that the request, invitation, etc. cannot be accomplished, as the person turning down the petition, invitation, etc. provides a motive for doing so ("I have plans", "My father is ill"). In Regret/Apology ("Sorry", "I'm so sorry, I can't", "I apologize, I can't") the refuser expresses her/his regret for turning down the request. A further strategy is Alternative, which subsumes Change of option, in which the speaker suggests another option ("I will join you if you choose another restaurant") and Postponement, in which a deferral of the request ("I could go out for dinner next week") is offered. Unlike previous taxonomies, which considered Postponement as a sub-type of Indirect Strategy, we recognize it as a category within Alternative (an option regarding time), and, therefore, we suggest to subsume Postponement under the Alternative strategy type.

We propose Disagreement as an indirect strategy to point out the negative effect the act of requesting exerts on the addressee. In this case the refuser turns down the request by stating her/his disagreement about the requester's action of asking, the refuser's intention to dissuade

the requester from asking (Dissuasion) or even criticising her/him for doing it. ("Under the current economic environment, you shouldn't be asking for a rise right now!"). In Statement of principle/philosophy, the refuser resorts to moral convictions or beliefs so as not to comply with the petition ("I can't. It goes against my convictions", "I never do business with friends/relatives"). The last Indirect Strategy is Avoidance, which has been traditionally divided into non-verbal, that is, when the addressee merely ignores the request by means of silence, ignoring the request or even walking away, and verbal avoidance, in which the refusal is accomplished via hedging ("Well, I'm not sure"), changing topic, joking or expressing sarcasm, just to name a few strategies.

As far as Adjuncts are concerned, they are part of the act of refusing but do not constitute a refusal by themselves. Thus, in Positive opinion the speaker believes the invitation, offer, etc. to be a good one but cannot comply with it ("That's a good idea, but…"). Something similar happens with Willingness, as the refuser turns down the request by means of expressions such as "I'd love to go, but…". In the strategy Gratitude, in order to soften the refusal, the speaker thanks his/her interlocutor for the invitation, offer, etc. ("Thank you for the invitation, but…"). The strategy of Agreement expresses consent on the part of the speaker before uttering the refusal ("Yes, but…", "OK, but…"). Finally, the refuser demands solidarity of the requester by soliciting his/her sympathy in the strategy of Solidarity ("I'm sure you'll understand, but…").

It should be pointed out that there are no clear-cut boundaries between strategies and that in some cases contextual variables will determine whether a given refusal strategy exemplifies a specific subtype. To illustrate this, let's consider the situation in which the refuser may offer a postponement as a way of avoiding the request/invitation (Gass and Houck, 1999) rather than offering a true time alternative; in this case postponement would not be considered alternative but an avoidance strategy. Hence, the importance of taking into account the context in which the speech act occurs. Following Kasper (2006), we believe that contextual variables will determine linguistic behaviour, and thus, they should be considered in interpreting refusal behaviour. The context will provide us with information on social distance, power and degree of imposition. The interplay between (i) these contextual variables, (ii) the refusal routine employed and (iii) the conversational turns needed for refusing is the basis of our proposal for analysing EFL learners' refusal behaviour. In so doing, we should analyse pragmatic production of language learners from a conversational perspective. Moreover, pedagogical implications deriving from our proposal will also account for a conversational framework in pragmatics instruction. Hence, we might fill a gap in research on the acquisition of pragmatic competence in FL learning settings by adopting a conversational perspective.

In line with Alcón (2008a, 2008b), discourse perspectives in tackling interlanguage pragmatics should account for both: (a) ways of strengthening or weakening a given utterance, that is, pragmalinguistic knowledge and (b) ways of interpreting and acknowledging situational variables, that is, sociopragmatic knowledge.

3.   Conclusion

In this paper we have aimed at describing a comprehensive taxonomy of refusals. This taxonomy has been proposed from a sociopragmatic approach and within a CA framework, where issues such as degree of formality, politeness and social variables are at stake. Indeed, the three sociopragmatic variables proposed in Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory (power, social distance and ranking of imposition) are relevant in the analysis of refusals due to their face-threatening nature. The taxonomy we have suggested is heavily rooted in the well-

known classification system developed by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990). However, as we have already pointed out, data collection procedures may provide other types of refusals not considered in the present paper. For example, it is likely that in face-to-face conversation the refuser ends up accepting after the initial refusal if the petitioner is persistent. Therefore, as Félix-Brasdefer (2004) rightly points out, oral interaction may allow for lengthy negotiations which, in the end, turn a refusal into an acceptance. Clearly, this strategy is less likely to appear if data are elicited with a DCT.

In addition to the instrument employed in collecting data, a further issue for future research refers to the level of pragmatic knowledge on the part of the students, that is, whether they know how to refuse in an appropriate way in the foreign language.

Our taxonomy may be employed not only to examine data on refusals, but it can also be useful for teaching refusals in EFL contexts. Indeed, in foreign language situations where exposure to the target language is only found in the classroom, it is highly advisable to present students with materials about how appropriate refusals should be performed. Tanck (2004) argues that even "fluent" speakers, that is, those with a good command of grammar and vocabulary, may still lack the pragmatic elements that allow face-threatening acts to be well received by the interlocutor.

Foreign language learners should be aware of the fact that social variables play a role when refusing, and that their inappropriate refusals may make them sound rude, vague or abrupt. As a corollary, achieving effective communicative competence in a foreign language is a difficult task and, in Cohen's (1996: 383) words "a continual concern for language learners" because it implies knowledge of the social values of the target language culture and the ability to produce adequate speech act strategies in a specific situation.

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