
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Pragmatic Analysis of Refusal Strategies in Management Communication

Mouad Mohammed Al-Natour¹, Shireen Ibraheem Al-Qawasmeh², Areej Mohammad Mahmoud Al-Hawamdeh³, Salaam M. Alhawamdeh⁴ and Haitham M.K AlYousef⁵

^{1,3,4,5}*Department of English Language and Literature, Jerash University, Jordan*

²*Palestine Polytechnic University, Palestine*

Corresponding Author: Mouad Mohammed Al-Natour, **E-mail:** msgmouad@gmail.com

| ABSTRACT

This study examines the refusal strategies employed in superior-subordinate communication during departmental meetings. It aims to reveal these strategies' function, specifically exploring why individuals use particular refusal techniques in their interactions. Data is collected through observation of participants' turn-taking patterns in departmental meetings. The findings indicate that both heads of departments and department members utilized direct and indirect refusal strategies. Participants employed two direct refusal strategies, as defined in the Beebe et al. (1990, pp. 55-73) framework, and five indirect refusal strategies: explanation, statement of alternatives, attempts to dissuade, acceptance functioning as a refusal, and silence. The most frequently used direct strategy is the non-performative statement, while the most common indirect strategies are explanation and statements of alternatives. Social power dynamics are evident in the heads of departments' speech, as they seek to control dissenting opinions. Department members, however, exercise social power by forming coalitions to support specific viewpoints discussed in the meetings. Future research could investigate the politeness strategies used by superiors and subordinates in these meetings and their impact on influencing heads of departments.

| KEYWORDS

Management, Refusal Strategies, Superior-Subordinate Communication, Academic Setting.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 19 February 2025

PUBLISHED: 22 March 2025

DOI: 10.32996/jgcs.2025.5.1.5

1. Introduction

Choosing an appropriate refusal strategy requires careful consideration, as refusals are inherently face-threatening acts that can potentially damage the relationship between interlocutors. To define and maintain relationships, individuals subtly use language to signal the nature of the speech event they are participating in. Speakers and hearers employ specific utterances, terms, and phrases that are contextually relevant and sensitive to their relationship. Given the variability of refusal speech acts and strategies across cultures, investigating refusal speech acts is crucial for maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships and minimizing potential face threats. The specific characteristics of their refusal strategies can be identified by analyzing the speech, utterances, and phrases used by superiors and subordinates in departmental meetings, shedding light on power dynamics and communication norms within this context.

Human speech acts are manifested through utterances; words carry the potential to initiate actions, both by the speaker and by others. Pragmatics focuses explicitly on the role of speech acts, recognizing that interactants imbue words with implicit semantic meaning that is comprehensively understood within their shared context. Therefore, utterances can carry both explicit and implicit meanings, which are interpreted based on culture, traditions, and the specific context of the interaction. Discrepancies between speakers and listeners are common, and listeners may refuse a speaker's opinion if they cannot comply or if the opinion conflicts

with their intentions. Context, therefore, plays a critical role in determining the precise meaning intended by interactants, extending beyond the literal language used.

Refusal is a frequent occurrence in daily communication. Refusal strategies, which can be employed directly or indirectly, convey rejection of another's opinion or request. In Jordanian culture, for example, the choice between direct and indirect refusal often depends on the relationship between the individuals involved.

Understanding a speech act of refusal requires considering the context of the situation in addition to semantics. As Taguchi and Liu [no id provided] argue, "Pragmatic knowledge entails the ability to assess contextual information and to choose appropriate linguistic means to perform functions according to the context." In other words, inadequate assessment of context can lead to unsuccessful communication, as contextual cues are essential for pragmatic understanding. Comprehending language requires knowledge beyond the meaning of words and grammatical relations; it necessitates understanding the relationship between language and its context of use. Furthermore, pragmatic choices in conversation simultaneously encode interpersonal and cultural information such as power, gender, status, and age. This study aims to describe the forms of refusal speech acts found in superior/subordinate communication within departmental meetings, ultimately to understand the factors that influence the selection of particular refusal strategies.

2. Literature Review

A. Analytical Framework

Beebe et al. (1990:55-73) classified Refusals into two categories, which are direct refusal strategies and indirect refusal strategies. Abed, A. (2011) explains the refusal strategies of Beebe et al. (1990:55-73) in detail in his study. This research adopted his description of the refusal strategies and reformatted them in a table to clearly show their differences. Table 2.1 explains these strategies with examples to express them distinctly.

No	Direct Refusal Strategies	No	Indirect Refusal Strategies
1	Using performative verbs (I refuse)	1	Statement of regret (I'm sorry.../I feel terrible...)
2	Non performative statement o "No" o Negative willingness/ability (I can't./I won't./I don't think so)	2	Wish (I wish I could help you...)
		3	Excuse, reason, explanation (My children will be home that night./I have a headache)
		4	Statement of alternative: o I can do X instead of Y (I'd rather.../I'd prefer...) o Why don't you do X instead of Y (Why don't you ask someone else?)
		5	Set condition for future or past acceptance (If you had asked me earlier, I would have...)
		6	Promise of future acceptance (I'll do it next time./I promise I'll.../Next time I'll...)

7	Statement of principle (I never do business with friends.)
8	Statement of philosophy (One can't be too careful.)
9	<p>Attempt to dissuade interlocutor:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Threat or statement of negative consequences to the requester (I won't be any fun tonight to refuse an invitation) o Guilt trip (waitress to customers who want to sit a while: I can't make a living off people who just order coffee.) o Criticize the request/requester (statement of negative feeling or opinion; insult/attack (Who do you think you are?/That's a terrible idea!)) <p>Request for help, empathy, and assistance by dropping or holding the request</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Let interlocutor off the hook (Don't worry about it./That's okay./You don't have to.) o Self-defense (I'm trying my best./I'm doing all I can do.)
10	<p>Acceptance that functions as a refusal:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Unspecific or indefinite reply o Lack of enthusiasm
11	<p>Avoidance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Nonverbal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •• Silence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •• Hesitation •• Doing nothing •• Physical departure o Verbal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •• Topic switch •• Joke •• Repetition of part of request (Monday?) •• Postponement (I'll think about it.) •• Hedge (Gee, I don't know./I'm not sure

Beebe et al. (1990:55-73) also added that these refusals may be preceded by adjuncts like:

1. Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement (That's a good idea.../I'd love to...)
2. Statement of empathy (I realize you are in a difficult situation.)
3. Pause fillers (uhh/ well/oh/ uhm)
4. Gratitude/appreciation

Refusals can be seen as a series of the following sequences:

1. Pre-refusal strategies: these strategies prepare the addressee for an upcoming refusal .
2. Main refusal (Head Act): this strategy expresses the main refusal.
3. Post-refusal strategies: these strategies follow the head act and tend to emphasize, justify, mitigate, or conclude the refusal response.

The data analysis is classified based on the types of refusal strategies mentioned in Beebe et al. (1990:55-73) to make the analysis more consistent with the data collected in this research.

B. Past Studies

Researchers have shown increasing interest in integrated studies in recent decades, driven by the complexity of emerging phenomena that necessitate interdisciplinary approaches. One such integration involves the fields of management and linguistics. Given the potential for these fields to inform each other, this research aims to identify the refusal strategies employed in superior-subordinate communication. This section synthesizes relevant studies on refusals and integrated research combining refusals with other disciplines to provide context for this investigation.

Oommen's (2025) study found that concerning management versus non-management status, women employees were more likely to express upward dissent and utilize dissent strategies that indicated both influence and a lack thereof within organizations. However, race-based differences were observed when expressing certain forms of dissent. Shifting the focus to gender and language more broadly, Saito (2011), confirming findings in Western research on language and gender, suggests numerous contextual parameters significantly influence a speaker's language choices. Gender is only one factor determining linguistic practices, and language use does not always conform to gender stereotypes.

Paramasivam & Subramaniam (2018) found that superiors tended to be authoritative when facing threat and imposition were low, and egalitarian when these factors were high. Basis (2024) explored linguistic features in request letters, revealing that those addressed to the Dean of Student Affairs Office employed diverse politeness strategies. These studies highlight the importance of contextual factors and politeness in communication. Further elaborating on the nuances of communication strategies, Saira Batool et al. (2024) observed that the American president used more politeness strategies than the Chinese president. Nicola Brocca & Elena Nuzzo (2024) investigated request strategies in Austrian-Italian learners, finding minimal differences between L1 speakers of Italian and Austrian-German in structuring requests, but some minor differences in the use of modifiers.

Bisel et al. (2012) examined supervisor-subordinate communication, focusing on the "hierarchical mum effect" and organizational learning. Félix-Brasdefer (2004) found that learners with more time in the target community showed more negotiation attempts and greater use of mitigation, approximating native Spanish speaker norms with a preference for solidarity and indirectness. These findings emphasize the role of experience and cultural context in shaping communication patterns, leading to the consideration of apology strategies. Alaoui & Benabderrazik (2024) characterized their study as pioneering in its societal context, supporting the universality of apology strategies while highlighting culture-specific aspects in the illocutionary forces and identifying new strategies.

Recent studies have illuminated various facets of interpersonal communication and behavior within diverse contexts. Yang et al. (2025) demonstrated that workplace anxiety and work overload contribute to interpersonal deviant behavior, with narcissistic admiration weakening the mediating role of work overload but not workplace anxiety. Addressing intercultural communication, Al-Natour and Bakkar (2024) noted that misunderstandings among students at northern universities in Jordan hinder the development of strong relationships, impeding effective communication.

In the realm of pragmatic strategies, Renkwitz and Katrin (2024) affirmed the significance of pragmatic and prosodic dimensions in conveying the sincerity of apologies, suggesting that these features can be adjusted based on the severity of the offense and situational appropriateness. Examining impoliteness, Simanjuntak et al. (2024) identified bald-on-record impoliteness as the most frequently employed strategy, with candidates using impoliteness to express emotions and influence audience perception.

Further insights into leadership styles were provided by Ge et al. (2025), who revealed benevolent leadership's dual functions, demonstrating its unique effects on ostracism and follower performance through its emphasis on care, even when controlling for LMX and authentic leadership. Al-Natour et al. (2024) also found that invitees preferred indirect strategies to be more polite with inviters, employing religious terms, justified reasons, prayers, promises, and requests for forgiveness. Li and Wongwaropakorn (2024) highlighted the use of indirect and culturally nuanced refusal strategies in Chinese television dramas. Yuniasih (2024) found that witnesses in court employ various forms of speech to convey information, beliefs, instructions, commitments, and feelings, reflecting social norms, ethics, and their social role.

These findings align with existing research emphasizing the role of sociopragmatic variables, such as social distance, relative power, and imposition, in shaping politeness strategies (Tree & Manusawai, 2021; Al-Ali & Shatat, 2022). As Marco and Arguedas (2021) note, speakers strategically choose their words to maintain face, a concept defined by Goffman (1955) and further elaborated by Borg and Alshumaimeri (2019) and Kersten and Lotze (2020), as the public self-image individuals create based on qualities such as competence, moral integrity, autonomy, and trustworthiness. The strategic manipulation of language to achieve desired social outcomes highlights the inherently interdisciplinary nature of communication research. Understanding these nuanced interactions requires insights from various fields, including linguistics, sociology, and psychology.

Previous studies indicate that researchers increasingly seek to integrate multiple disciplines to generate novel contributions that address complex problems across various fields. Examples include the integration of linguistics with management studies and political science. This interdisciplinary approach offers readers enriched knowledge spanning diverse areas within a single study. Stakeholders increasingly favor integrated research within their fields of investigation, as it provides a broader range of potential solutions to challenges encountered in business, work, and communication.

3. Methodology

This section details the research methodology, encompassing three key areas: data collection, the study sample, and the instruments used for data acquisition.

A. Data Collection

The data for this study are collected from professors in the Arabic and English departments during departmental meetings with their respective heads of departments in the Faculty of Arts at Jerash University. Following the acquisition of permission from the heads of the department, the researcher observed the refusal strategies employed by the professors during negotiations, as reflected in the meeting minutes. These observations are gathered directly from the professors' interactions during the meetings.

B- Sample of The Study

The participants in this study comprise the heads of the English and Arabic departments and their department members, totaling 38 individuals. As Sekaran (2003, p. 295) advises, a minimum sample size of 30 is generally acceptable for data analysis. The sample includes both male and female professors to account for potential variations in the refusal strategies used during communication and in response to differing opinions. Two examples are clearly presented in the analyses section. The researcher used specific codes for the participants to identify the examples that related to them. HE1 is related to the English head of the department, while HA1 is for the Arabic head of the department. PA is related to Arabic professors, and PE is related to English professors.

C- Research Instrument

This research employs a qualitative approach to analyze data systematically, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of the refusal strategies utilized by the participants. Creswell (2014) describes qualitative data as information from purposefully selected informants. Data collection through observation occurred during the first semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. Following Musante and DeWalt's (2010) recommendations, the researcher aimed to study the phenomena and their underlying causes,

differentiate between regular and irregular activities, seek diverse perspectives to view events comprehensively, identify negative cases or exceptions, and systematically observe events and behaviors that exemplify the theoretical purposes of observation.

Observations were collected until data saturation was achieved, indicating that repeated data collection yielded no new information (Imran, M., & Almusharraf, N., 2023). Consequently, data collection ceased once saturation was reached. Before data collection, the researcher obtained permission from the heads of the English and Arabic departments, assuring them that the data would be used solely for this study.

4. Analysis and Findings

This section includes two subsections categorized based on the analytical framework adopted in this research. The first one is the direct refusal strategies. The second one is the indirect refusal strategies. As the analysis shows, the participant used both types of strategies with little differences in the range used. These differences are related to the social power of the head of departments, the context of the speech and the kind of the minutes that are discussed. All of these variables are analyzed precisely to shed light on the interlocutors' reasons for using the refusal strategies.

4.1 Direct Refusla Strategies

As observed in the speeches of the heads of departments and the professors, the two direct refusal strategies are implemented in their speeches. They predominately utilized them once the opinions proposed by participants contradicted the university policies and instructions. The following examples indicate using these direct strategies to elaborate the exact meaning and reasons for using them in their speeches.

HE1: I do not think so. The university policy allows students to get permission to be absent for 20% of the total hours of the semester.

HA1: No, the professors have to upload at least two assignments by semester in the university platform for their students for each course.

HE2: I refuse that because the professor who uploads their midterm exams in the platform will be requested to justify the reason for doing that, although the university president informed us, based on the university policies, to have a paper midterm exam on the campus.

PE4: I do not think we can complete documentation for all courses of the MA plan within three months. We need more time.

PA7: Uploading the attendance for the blending course is not easy. I do not think the professors can do that manually. The platform has to collect the attendance automatically based on the students' names and numbers.

The above examples indicated that the research participants utilized the direct refusal strategies in their interaction in their departmental meetings. Both the heads of departments and the department members used them based on the minutes discussed in their meetings. HE1 employed the Negative willingness/ability refusal strategy by telling the attendees that the university instructions and policies prevent them from accepting students' reason for absence once they exceed the limited percentage of permissions that the universality permitted. He said: *'I do not think so. The university policy allow for the students to get permission to be absent for 20% of the total hours in the semester.'* Saying 'I don not think so' indicated the direct refusal to accept the students' justification for more absences in their lectures.

For example, in HA1, the head of the department directly rejects the opinion of one of the department members to upload just one assignment within the semester for the students in his course. He insisted that he and the other professors upload minimally two assignments for each course. His refusal strategy was clearly direct because he wanted to prevent all the department members from interrogation. He said that *'No, the professors have to upload at least two assignments by semester in the university platform for their students for each course.'* He used the word 'no' which obviously indicated his absolute refusal. The refusal strategy in this example was used because the interlocutors discussed a central issue in their academic work: the absence of students in their lectures. Therefore, the head of the department wanted to implement the university rules and regulations to protect the professor from any interrogation in the future.

Following the rules and regulations of the department members is the responsibility of the head of departments. So, They continually remind the department members to avoid breaking them in their work. An example of that was in the speech of HE2 to the professors in his meeting once he said that *'I refuse that because the professor who upload their midterm exams in the platform will be requested to justify the reason for doing that although the president of the university informed us based on the*

university polices to have a paper midterm exams in the campus.' The university policies emphasize that the midterm exams must be on campus. They do not have to be online. So, the professors must prepare hard copy sheets for their exams. He reminded them of the professors' insistence that the university president do that. Because of that, he refused directly the members' opinion to make online midterm exams for their students.

The professors in the departmental meeting also utilized direct refusal strategies while negotiating the meeting minutes. One of them said, 'I do not think that we can complete documentation for all course of the MA plan within three months. We need more time.' He used the same strategy that his head of department used, which is *negative willingness/ability*. In this case, the professor wants to convince the head of department directly that the documentation of all files for the MA programs is impressive. His refusal was performed because the time to complete this task was very limited. Thus, using this direct refusal strategy indicated the unwillingness to do the job as the head of the department requested it.

PA7 used a similar refusal strategy once she ensured that uploading the students' attendance was not an easy task once it had to be taken manually. She insisted the head of the department request from the university to systematize it automatically. This refusal is due to the huge number of students in the online courses. Moreover, the limited time for the lectures can not help the professor manually complete the attendance for all students. She said that '*Uploading the attendance for the blending course is not easy. I do not think that the professors can do that manually, the platform has to collect the attendance automatically based on the students names and numbers.*'. This means that the professor refused to collect the attendance in the online lectures for a limited time. She had to do that.

The analysis showed that using the direct refusal strategies by the HODs and the professors in their department was precisely related to two reasons. The first reason is related to avoiding breaking the rules and regulations of the university for the medium of learning in the on-campus and online lectures. This reason was the main one used mostly by the HODs in their interactions with the opinions of the professors in their meetings. The second reason was related to the professors' inability to complete the required jobs, such as collecting the students' attendance manually and conducting online exams for the online course. This reason motivated the professors and the HODs to refuse the task directly because they either can not change the rules or the impossibility to complete the jobs appointed to them by the heads of their departments.

4.2. Indirect Refusal Strategies

Under this type, there are eleven strategies. The interlocutors of this study employed five of them in their interactions: *explanation, Statement of alternative, Attempt to dissuade interlocutor, Acceptance that functions as a refusal, Silence*. The following examples explain the interlocutors' forms and exhibit the reasons for using them in their interactions.

HA1: I can not postpone submitting forms 2 and 4 until next week because the department has to submit all the documents to the quality supervisor on Sunday. (*explanation*)

HE1: Let us get our lunch in one of the Jerash restaurants instead of in Amman. (*Statement of alternative*)

HA1: It is a good suggestion but let us listen to the others opinions. (*Acceptance that functions as a refusal*)

PE1: I am doing my best to complete the requested forms. It is a hard job to finish preparing them within three months. (*Attempt to dissuade interlocutor*).

HE1: can you help the department members to prepare the required documents Doctor? PE24: Silent (he did not reply) (*Silence*)

PA31: Let the secretaries print the forms instead of us. (*Statement of alternative*)

PE35: I think we should meet on Tuesday, not Saturday. (*Acceptance that functions as a refusal*)

The indirect strategies used by the HODs and the professors in their department indicated that they were polite while they proposed their opinions. They wanted the other parties to consider their reasons for refusing the proposed opinions and to consider that they had other interests in the issues discussed in the meeting. HA1 used an indirect explanation strategy once he said, '*I can not postpone the submission of the form 2 and 4 to the next week because the department has to submit all the documents to the quality supervisor on Sunday.*' He explained to the department members that he can not postpone the submission of the forms because he had a specific date for submission. So, indirectly, he refused their opinion to postpone the submission by explaining why. The HOD used this strategy to convince the professors that he did not have the right to give them permission to submit the document on another date rather than the one that the quality assurance supervisor appointed to him.

The second strategy that the participants used was *statement of alternation*. In this strategy, the speaker seeks to refuse the proposed opinion indirectly by giving other choices to indicate that the proposed one by the speaker is not the primary or preferred one for him. It is another polite reaction by the receiver of the opinion. HE1 employed an example for this strategy who said that, 'Let us get our lunch in one of the Jerash restaurants instead of getting it in Amman.' He did not refuse his partner's opinion directly rather, he indicated his refusal indirectly by requesting the other members' opinions to decide if they should have their lunch in Jerash City or Amman City. It is an intelligent way of being kind to others by showing that the hearer does not make the decision rather, the group members do it. Although the head of the department had the power to refuse the opinion directly, he preferred to refuse it indirectly as a kind of respecting the professors' opinions. PA31 used the same strategy once he said 'Let the secretaries print the forms instead of us.' she gave another alternative solution for printing the forms to avoid wasting the professors' time. She indirectly redirected the task to another faculty employee by recommending that the department head complete the task with the help of the secretaries. Her reason for using this strategy is to show that the professors had another complex task they had to complete instead of doing a simple task that the administrative employees could complete.

The third strategy that the interlocutors utilized was *Acceptance that functions as a refusal*. In this strategy, the speaker wants to disagree with the other party indirectly by giving other choices to get the decision on the proposed issues. HA1 utilized this strategy by saying 'It is a good suggestion but let us listen to the others opinions.'. He did not make his last decision by requesting the professor listen to other members' opinions. He used a smooth strategy to show his interest in the professor's opinion but intelligently directed the speech to the other members in the meeting. The strategy used in this example indicated the highly skillful playing with words and sentences by the head of the department to manage the meeting by evading making solo decisions by himself. He showed that he believed in the group agreement by requesting the other members to tell him their opinions and suggestions for the minutes discussed in the meeting.

Attempt to dissuade interlocutor strategy was used by PE1. She showed that she refused to complete the form on the date that the HOD requested because doing that needed more time than the limited one proposed in the meeting. She said, ' I am doing my best to complete the requested forms. It is hard to finish preparing them within three months.'. She refused the limited time for achieving the job indirectly by telling the HOD and the department members for the difficulty of doing that in three months. Using this indirect strategy helped the professor convince the HOD to rethink his decision and give him more time to complete the task.

The next strategy that was used by the professors to indirectly refuse the HOD opinion was silence, which PE24 implemented once the HE1 requested him to help other partners in the department complete the preparation of the required documents. Their turn-taking role of interactions occurred as the following

'HE1:can you help the department members prepare the required documents, Doctor?

PE24: Silent (he did not reply)'

This example elaborated the role of non-verbal communication among the interlocutors. It showed the implicit intended meanings by the interactants, which they inevitably understood within interactions. HE1 understood that PE24 refused his request once he did not reply on his request by being silent. The HOD comprehensively understood the refusal because the requestee did not want to waste more time helping his partners than completing his job of submitting his documents. This type of indirect refusal can be clearly comprehended by the other parties based on the context of the interaction and the relationship between the members of the department, The specific responsibility helped the requestee to reject the request because they were responsible for doing what was appointed to them by themselves. Helping other members is not an obligatory task in this case because the other members ensured that they had a limited time and requested to extend the documents' submission date.

The last indirect refusal strategy was *Acceptance, which functions as a refusal*. PE35 used it once he said, ' I think we should have a meeting on Tuesday, not Saturday.'. He refused the day the HOD was appointed by telling him about another date suitable for him and other members. In this strategy, the professor did not accept the proposed date, which the HOD said and refused indirectly by proposing another day which meant that he refused the HOD's date. It is a polite strategy to show respect for the HOD and tell him implicitly that the chosen date was not indirectly suitable. This reaction motivated the HOD to rethink changing the date of the next meeting.

All in all, the HODs and the professors in their department showed much respect for each other by using indirect refusal strategies in their interactions. They preferred to use them although both had the power to reject part of the minutes' opinions directly. The HODs had the power to say 'no' for some of the opinions of the professors. Still, they liked to be indirect in listening to the other members' opinions or giving other choices that indirectly represented their refusal.

5. Conclusion

Refusal is a speech act employed in varied ways depending on the interactional context. Both explicit and implicit meanings are discerned through the interlocutors and the strategies they employ within a specific setting. This research examined the refusal strategies utilized in superior/subordinate interactions during departmental meetings at the Faculty of Arts, Jerash University. Data is collected through observation to capture natural turn-taking speech patterns. The study adopted Beebe et al.'s (1990, pp.55-73) analytical framework for data analysis. The findings revealed that participants employed two direct and five indirect strategies in their negotiations regarding meeting minutes. The most frequently used direct strategy was the *Non-performative statement*, while the *Statement of alternative* and *Explanation* strategies were the most preferred indirect strategies among both heads of department and department members. A notable contribution of this study lies in the diverse forms interlocutors use for the same strategies in their interactions. Participants skillfully switched between forms to effectively convey their opinions and persuade others. Future research could investigate the politeness devices used by the same sample to further understand their speech styles. This would help elucidate how professors politely convince HODs of their opinions by employing suitable politeness strategies.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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