
RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Pragmatics of Refusing Food Invitations by Jordanians

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to find politeness strategies in refusing food invitations among Jordanians. Brown and Levenson's politeness theory (1987) is adopted to analyze the Jordanian refusals. The data was collected from English language students at Jerash University. Interviews were prepared to find out the different strategies for refusing invitations. This study revealed that the invitees used indirect strategies to be more polite with the inviters. The most preferred strategies were rejecting by employing religious terms, justified reasons, prayers, promising, ask for forgiveness. This study helps researchers to know the politest strategies used by Jordanians once they refuse invitations. Moreover, it assists them in making comparative research on refusal between Jordanian society and other societies to cover the cultural differences between them clearly.

KEYWORDS

Refuse, pragmatics, invitation, Jordanian

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1. Introduction

Invitation is one of the speech acts that people perform daily. So, investigating this speech is vital to understand people's mentality and practices. The understanding of this speech can help people belonging to the same culture to understand themselves adequately and help people from other cultures evade misunderstanding once they get an invitation from Jordanians. The response to the invitation can be performed in different ways. Therefore, covering the invitation strategies increases the successful communication among the communicators with Jordanians.

Making the inviters satisfied once accepting or rejecting the invitation by the invitees politely supports the inviter to accept their responses. Even avoiding giving a final response to the invitation makes the responses more acceptable sometimes Natour, M (2015). Rejecting the invitation is disapproved by the inviter when it is performed baldly. Therefore, the invitees use various strategies to decrease the impact of their rejection on the inviters' invitations. This study sought to find these strategies once the invitees refuse the invitation to soften their refusals and make them acceptable.

Much research has been conducted on politeness, either for invitations or other aspects such as disagreements, request, apology, and others. This study concentrated on the refusal strategies that performed by the Jordanians to make their refuses acceptable. On the other hand, this study looked for a way of refusing the invitations to get an in-depth understanding of the performance of this strategy while the two parties were communicating with each other.

2. Analytical Framework and Past Studies

2.1 Analytical Framework

Many studies have been conducted on politeness in the previous decades. Part of that research investigated agreement, disagreements, request, apology, refusal, complements, complaint and so on. They analyzed their data based on different theories

that examined politeness, such as Grice (1975), Lakoff (1973), Leech (1983), and Brown and Levinson (1987). Brown and Levinson (1987) are the most used theories in recent centuries to analyze politeness because the scholars of this theory stated that their theory is universal. This means that their theory can analyze politeness in every culture because people share the same face wants.

The strategies are universally used by speakers according to Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory. The strategies that could be used based on their theoretical framework are four. First, *positive politeness* which involves addressing the positive face of the listener. Second, *negative politeness* which involves addressing the negative face of the listener. Third, *bald-one record* is used to express a message directly to the listener. The fourth one is *off-record*, which allows speakers to execute a *face-threatening act* (FTA) indirectly where their utterances can consist of several ways of interpreting the utterances. The following diagram explains the circumstances determining the choice of politeness strategies that are proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 60):

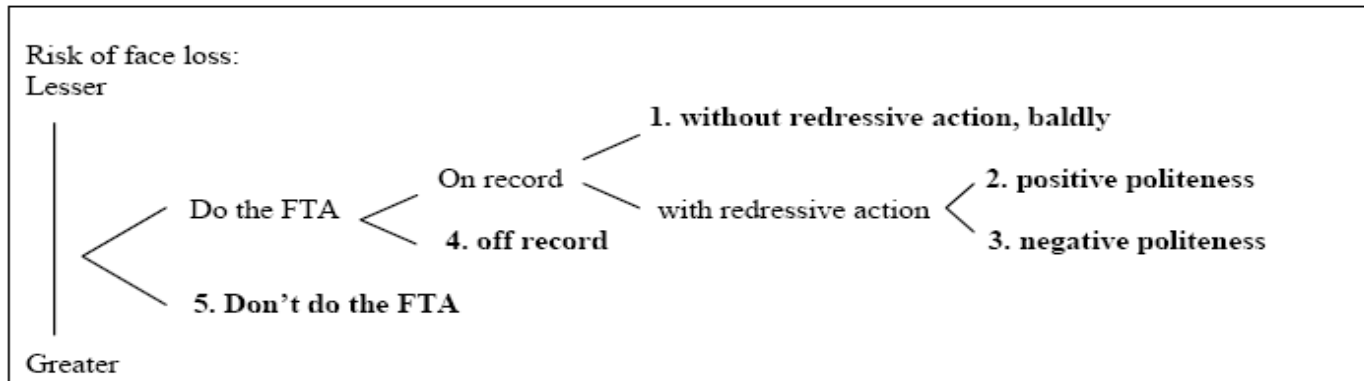


Figure 1 Circumstances Determining Choice of Strategy (from Brown and Levinson, 1987, p.60)

To determine the refusal strategies utilized by the students, this study analyzed the data based on the above framework. It is noteworthy to mention here that this framework has been used in several studies that aim to find out the occurrence of politeness utterances through using the above framework (1987:60).

This study concentrated on the utterances that are produced by the students of English with each other at Jerash University. It was a qualitative one that was retrieved to find fruitful results that find a vital contribution to future studies. The data was recorded to facilitate the researcher's analysis. Each participant was coded in order to maintain the privacy of their responses. Examples of these codes were ES-1, ES-2, ES-3, and so on.

Each interview lasted about 10- 20 minutes. Observations and memos were used while reviewing the recorded data to identify the refusal strategies that were performed by the students. The politeness strategies were listed while listening to the interviews. Finally, they were classified and then analyzed based on Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theoretical framework.

2.2 Past Studies

Aljhem Basis (2024) conducted a study to discover the linguistic features in the opening strategy, closing strategy, and directness of the head-acts in the request letters. The research revealed that request letters sent to the Dean of Student Affairs Office at the institution employ a diverse range of politeness strategies. Saira Batool et al. (2024) stated that the American president used more politeness strategies than the Chinese president. Nicola Brocca & Elena Nuzzo (2024) looked to explore request strategies in Austrian-Italian learners. The analysis revealed minimal differences between L1 speakers of Italian and Austrian-German in perceiving the most appropriate way to structure the request in terms of directness level and use of face-saving strategies. As for the use of modifiers, small differences were found in the total number as well as in the preference for some types over others.

Alaoui & Benabderrazik (2024) stated that their study was a pioneering study in its societal context, and its main results support earlier findings suggesting the universality of apology strategies; however, the illocutionary forces assigned to these strategies and the identification of new apology strategies reinforce the culture-specific aspect of apologies. The misunderstanding among the students at the northern universities of Jordan restricts building strong relationships among the students, which could expand the problem of making successful communication among them Al-Natour, M., & Bakkar, A. B. (2024). Renkwitz & Katrin (2024) confirmed that pragmatic and prosodic dimensions serve important functions in indicating the underlying sincerity of apologies and suggest the possibility of strengthening or weakening its features in accordance with the severity of the offense and general situational appropriateness. Simanjuntak et al. (2024) found the presence of four types of impoliteness strategies: bald-on-record, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, and sarcasm. Notably, bald-on-record impoliteness emerged as the most frequently

used strategy, while no instances of withholding politeness were observed. The effective function was found to be the most prevalent, suggesting that candidates often employ impoliteness to express emotions and influence audience perceptions.

Ying Li & Wari Wongwaropakorn (2024) examined rejection dialogues (refusals) in three popular Chinese TV dramas. They revealed that Chinese television dramas articulate refusals in an indirect and cultural manner through these strategies. Yuniasih (2024) found that witnesses use various forms of speech such as representative, assertive, directive, commissive, and expressive to convey their information, beliefs, instructions, commitments, and feelings, which reflect their social norms and ethics as well as their social role in the courtroom. Compliance with these norms is important to maintain integrity, fairness, and professionalism in the judicial process.

Numerous research has shown how social distance, relative power, and imposition—three important sociopragmatic variables—strongly limit the language encoding of politeness during the generation of requests based on cultural norms (Tree & Manusawai, 2021; Al-Ali & Shatat, 2022). During social interactions, speakers strategically choose their words to preserve their own and other people's faces (Marco and Arguedas, 2021). This is known as politeness (Mansoor, 2018). Face is a public self-image that people create for themselves in each socio-cultural setting based on qualities they believe to be true about themselves, such as competence, moral integrity, autonomy, and trustworthiness (Goffman, 1955; Lim & Bowers, 1991; Borg and Alshumaimeri, 2019; Kersten and Lotze, 2020).

3. Methodology

In this section, three points will be explained. Firstly, data collection, the study sample, and the instrument used to collect the data are discussed.

3.1 Data Collection

The data for this study were collected from students in the English department at Jerash University. After getting the permission from the head of department to collect the data, the students were invited for interviews. The interviews were held individually in one of the suitable places at the Art faculty. The former prepares the schedule for each interview with the students to manage the time and avoid being busy with their lectures. The students got five open questions to reveal the results. Each student signed on a consent form before making the interview. All data were saved and used to propose the study and its objectives.

3.2 Sample of The Study

The respondents are students in the English department. The total number of students is 30. Sekaran (2003: 295) advised that, as a rule of thumb, a minimal sample size of 30 is acceptable for the analysis. The sample includes male and female students in order to know the varieties of politeness strategies used while they communicate with each other once they refuse invitations. All students are undergraduates because the number of postgraduate students is limited.

3.3 Research Instrument

The researcher used semi-structured interview with the participants to collect the data. Leech (2002) stated that the suitability of using this instrument is designed for qualitative research. He explained how participants engaged through genuine interest, poignant open-ended questions, and prompts. It helps the researcher to collect the data that represent the participants internal intention based on their understanding and culture. Creswell's (2014) description of qualitative data as that was obtained through information provided by purposefully selected informants. This instrument helped the researcher to add questions other than the five main questions that had been prepared previously. This kind of interview helps the researcher to get an in-depth understanding of the exact meaning of the refusal strategies they used once they wanted to reject it. The questions were prepared by the research team and then reviewed by experts to amend them if there is any need for them.

4. Analysis and Findings

This study investigated refusal strategies among Jordanians. It dealt with the students' politeness meanings with their colleague students at Jerash university that reflect the Jordanians' social conditions in language use. The power of the sociopragmatic factors was essential. As Brown and Levinson (1987) explained, they included social variables: social distance, social power, and rank of imposition. The following table represents the frequent refusal strategies by the students:

Table 1. The Students' Refusal Strategies

Refusal Strategies		
No.	Strategy	Frequency
1	Rejecting with religious terms	11
2	Justified reasons	8
3	Promising	7
4	Ask for forgiveness	4

As detected in the analysis, the students preferred to use more than one refusal strategy. Table 1 explains the refusal strategy that was used by the students, such as: rejecting with religious terms, justified reasons, promising, ask for forgiveness. Each one of these strategies was clearly explained with examples in the analysis. The most preferred refusal strategy out of the four was *rejecting with religious terms*. The students employed it 11 times. This strategy saved the inviters' faces and represented respect for them because the students wanted them to feel that they wished to attend their invitations, but they had a convincing reason that prevented them from attending their invitations.

The second highest strategy used was *Justified reasons*, which appeared 8 times. The third one was *promising*, which was uttered by the students 7 times. *Ask for forgiveness* was used 4 times. All of these refusal strategies were considered very polite based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory because the invitees were prudent to save the invitees faces. To get a more in-depth understanding of the reasons behind using them and why they occurred in the students' utterances, the researcher analyzed each one of them in detail. Additionally, a variety of examples were mentioned to demonstrate their use precisely. The following subsections represent a detailed analysis of the use of these strategies. Figure 1 describes the frequencies of using each strategy by the Jordanian Students:

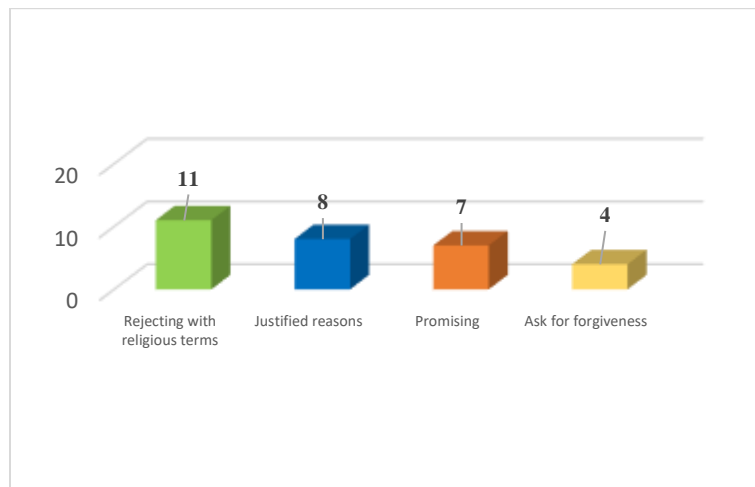


Figure 1. Frequencies of the Refusal Strategy Used by Jordanian Students

Invitation is one of the common speeches that is performed sequentially among people. Therefore, accepting and refusing the invitation are the main two choices for the invitees. In the present study, the researcher analyzed the data of this study based on the responses of the interviewees based on the utterances they chose in their responses. The data showed that the participants used four main refusal strategies that were performed in different ways. The refusal strategies were analyzed based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. The following sections explain each strategy in detail with examples that represent their preference for these strategies to respond to the invitations.

4.1 Rejecting with Religious Terms

Using religious terms in the Muslim culture is common because they deem it more polite. Using religious utterance is a way of convincing others to accept their rejection, as the analysis represented. In order to explain that, the following examples indicated the usage of this strategy by the students:

ES-20: Jazak Allah Khair (May Allah reward with good) but I have another invitation in the same time.

ES-6: Wallahi (By Allah) I do not know what should I say, I have an exam in that day.

ES-10: Subhan Allah (Glory be to God), I would love to be with you but I am going to the library with my friend.

ES-28: Wallahi (By Allah) I do not know what should I say. I cannot come because I have a meeting with my professor.

ES-9: Subhan Allah (Glory be to God), Yesterday I was going to invite you. Unfortunately, today I cannot because I have an office lecture.

ES-16: Ma sha Allah (Oh my God), I will not accept (Oh my God)t your invitation before I invite you. You have invited me many times.

ES-3: I would like to accept but Uqsem Billah (I swear to God) I have to go back to home early.

ES-29: Wallahi (By Allah)! Thanks, I cannot accept male invitations.

ES-19: Billah Aleek (By Allah), you invite me. Even I cannot walk with you, so how can I accept your invitation!

ES-8: Wallahi (By Allah) I will pay if I want to accept your invitation or I will not accept it.

As the examples represented, Jordanian students used many religious expressions in their refusals. They used the words which are related to God '*Allah*'. This word meant swearing before refusing the invitation to represent that they were honest in their rejections. This word indicated that they wanted to show that they wanted to accept the invitation, but some reasons prevented them from doing so. Part of these words meant that they were surprised by the invitation once ES-16 said '*Ma sha Allah*', which means that they are surprised. The expression '*Jazak Allah Khair*' means a kind of religious appreciation religiously. This expression is one of the best appreciations as mentioned by Muslim's Prophet. Mohammad, peace be upon him. So, they preferred to use this expression in their responses to the invitations.

Other students used the word '*Wallahi!*' as a kind of indicating their admiration. An invitation is a speech of respect to others who were close to the inviter. So, once the inviters invited the invitees, they showed great respect for them, which made the invitees wonder about this kind of generous offer. Thus, the invitees strived to be polite in their refusals. ES-9 is another student who explained his previous intention to invite the inviter by saying, '*Subhan Allah*, yesterday I was going to invite you. Unfortunately, today I cannot accept it because I have an office lecture.' He used the expression '*Subhan Allah*' to express his intention to invite the inviter in order to show his closeness and having the same intention to invite him. This expression convinced the inviter of the closeness of his relationship with the invitee and gave the invitee a space to refuse the invitation politely.

As the analysis indicated, using religious expressions led to knowing that the impact of religion on the Jordanian students' invitations was vital. The occurrence of them in the interlocutors' speeches meant that they considered them suitable to refuse the invitations politely because they avoided damaging the inviters' faces. As Brown and Levenson's (1987) stated in their theory, once a person seeks to be polite to others, they are taking care to be polite with the other party in their communication. So, the invitees, as the examples indicated, were polite because they strived to save the inviters' faces. The frequent usage of these expressions manifested their perseverance in being polite in their responses.

4.2 Justified Reasons

Saving the face of the inviters was required by the invitees. Because of that, they tried to justify their reason once they wanted to refuse the invitations. The respondents of this study used this strategy to refuse the invitation politely. They did not refuse the invitation directly by giving some reasons that helped them to refuse it respectively. The reasons that they used were performed in different ways. They sometimes used reasons which could not be avoided by the inviter to accept them. Some of them gave reasons that were not convincing, but they used them to show that they just did not want to attend the invitations. The following examples represented these reasons in their utterances once they got the invitations from the inviters.

ES13: I would like to come but I have another invitation with my family members to my uncle home.

ES30: Thanks a lot. My son is not feeling well, so I would apologize.

ES7: Unfortunately, my brother invited me to his daughter engagement in the same day. Next time I will make it.

ES2: It is my pleasure to accept but I have an urgent work that I have to finish in that day.

As the examples indicated, the respondents refused the invitation indirectly by giving various reasons for being polite to the inviters. They mentioned the reasons in order to convince the inviters of their inability to attend the invitations. ES13 used a negative politeness strategy by using a modal verb to be indirect. He used 'I would like ...'; this strategy softened the refusal reasons that he mentioned to the inviter to be accepted by him. ES30 preferred to use a positive politeness strategy to indicate that he appreciated the inviter's invitation once he said 'thank you' to save the inviter's face. Then, he gave reasons that could be understood by the inviter to forgive him for his refusal. ES7 refused the inviter's invitation by rejecting it directly, but in the end, he used a negative politeness strategy to soften his refusal after mentioning the reasons. ES2. The student used a positive politeness strategy by showing his respect for the inviter's invitation. He used 'it is my pleasure, ...' in order to represent his regret to the inviter's invitation, and then he mentioned the reasons for his refusal.

As the examples indicated, the refusal strategy that was frequently used was performed politely once they used the most politeness strategy that was mentioned in Brown and Levinsons politeness theory (1987). Utilizing this strategy elucidated the invitees' interests to save the inviters' faces. They did not want to refuse the invitation directly to demonstrate their respect to the inviters for their invitations. Positive and negative politeness strategies were mostly preferred universally, as stated by Brown and Levinsons politeness theory (1987) to perform politeness, which meant that they sight to save the inviter's faces. All in all, the usage of these

strategies guided me to know that the Jordanians were polite in their responses to the inviters, even if they wanted to refuse the invitations.

4.3 Promising

In this strategy, Jordanians wanted to express their happiness with the invitations by promising the invitees they would attend their invitation in the future. They used a promising utterance to prove that. This kind of refusal was used frequently by many Jordanians because they did not want to damage the inviters' faces. Sometimes, they integrated this strategy with the first strategy by using some religious utterances to convey their wishes to attend the invitations. The following examples represent their usage for this refusal strategy.

ES4: Thank you, thank you, Inshallah I will be with you in the next invitation because I am very busy in that time.

ES18: I like to come but my wife is still in the hospital. I promise you to come next invitation.

ES5: Thank you so much, I am going to travel tomorrow. Once I come back, I will visit you without inviting me.

ES23: I will come if you promise me that you will come to my home to have lunch with each other's.

ES25: May you postpone your invitation because I am going to the dead sea with my friends. Once you invite me next time, I will come even if I will be busy.

All the above examples showed that the invitees wanted to promise the invitees that they would accept their invitations because they could not accept their current invitations. This kind of refusal was polite as the Jordanians did not reject the inviters' invitations totally. Moreover, they demonstrated their internal intentions for their wishes to attend their invitations in general. They wanted to send a message to the inviters for their refusal; at the same time, they wanted to show their respect that they would accept future invitations before they got them in the time of the current invitations. This refusal strategy was considered polite as they requested to forgive them for their current refusal.

ES4, the student used two strategies in his response to the invitation, which were using religious terms and promising. This kind of integration made the inviters feel positive because they felt happy about the promises. Using religious terms supported the honesty of the invitee to join them in future invitations. ES23, the student used a rare form to refuse the invitation once he wanted to request the inviter to accept his invitation in the future before accepting his current invitation. This kind of response to the invitation showed the generous personality of the Jordanians. ES25, he requested the inviter to postpone the time of the invitation, which indicated indirectly that he accepted the invitation but at another time because he was not available for the current time of the invitation. Literally, he wanted to show that he did not refuse the invitation, but he did that based on his request. This kind of refusal is considered polite because the invitees kept going to save the invitees' faces. They used two politeness strategies, which were positive or negative, to save the inviters' faces.

4.4 Ask for Forgiveness

This kind of refusal softened the refusal of the invitations. The invitees used this refusal strategy as a kind of apology for their inability to attend the invitation. Asking for forgiveness indicated that the invitee cared about the reaction of the inviters. So, they preferred to use these strategies to save the inviters' faces. Many examples represent this refusal strategy. The following part of these examples clarified the utterances used by the invitees.

ES21: Forgive me please, I could not come because I have a commitment in the invitation day.

ES11: I do not know what to say, accept my apology to join you in this invitation because I have my personal reasons to be there.

ES12: Many thanks for inviting me. It is a great opportunity for me to be with you but I would like if you may forgive me because I have another appointment with my colleague.

ES15: If you forgive me, I would be happy because I invited my friends to my house.

ES 17: I ask you to forgive me. I cannot come because my father wants to meet me.

All the refusal utterances, as indicated in the above example, are followed with reasons because they were stative verbs, which inevitably need a compliment that explains the reasons for the forgiveness. Therefore, this refusal strategy was another integrated strategy with another one which was justified reasons strategy. The difference between the forgiveness strategy and justified reasons was that the level of refusal of an invitation was higher than that of the justified reasons strategy. This kind of difference is guided by the fact that the interlocutors implicitly understand the meaning of refusing the invitation. As the interviewees explained, using this strategy gave indirect, clear rejection of the invitation because the reasons that adopted this kind of refusal

ensured the rejection. Contrastively, the justified reason strategy could be a pre-acceptance of the invitation. Jordanians, in general, as they said, refuse any invitation at the beginning to be sure that the inviter is serious. So, the forgiveness refusal strategy gave a clear impression that the invitees could not accept the invitation.

In example ES 21, the invitee asked for forgiveness directly, and then he mentioned the reasons for his inability to attend it. The flow of the refusal sentence was understood pragmatically by the inviter that he mostly could not attend the invitation. In ES11 example, his answer was understood by the inviters that he had internal intentional refusal for the invitation, which prevented the inviters from insisting on him to accept the invitations. 'I do not know what to say, if you forgive me to join you in this invitation because I have my personal reasons to be there.' ES12, he used a grounding before he asked for forgiveness. He preferred to be more indirect to show his caring about the invitee's face. Then, he used a negative politeness strategy by using the modal verb 'I would request ...', which represents his interest to be polite. Then he mentioned the reason for that, which was an appointment with his colleague. Syntactically, in ES15, the student used a conditional sentence in order to leave a strong understanding that he mostly couldn't attend the invitation. Similarly, he used a reason to justify that. The reason was 'because I invite my friends to my house.' For ES17, the student's refusal showed his appreciation by using a negative politeness strategy to save the inviter face clearly. After that, he mentioned a reason for his refusal, which was 'because my father wants to meet me.' The analysis demonstrated that this strategy was preferred once the invitees wanted to let the inviters know that they mostly did not want to attend the invitation to prevent him from insisting on them accepting it.

5. Discussion

Refusal is a face threatening act that is used continually by the speakers of different languages generally and by Jordanians particularly. As the analysis indicated, the Jordanians preferred to use polite strategies to soften their responses to the inviter's invitations. They used negative politeness strategies and positive politeness strategies. These two strategies match Brown and Levinsons (1987) politeness strategies, which were suggested in their model. This result revealed that Jordanians are polite in their refusals, whether they want to accept it after the refusal or refuse it without acceptance after the refusal. The pragmatic performance of refusal manifested by Jordanians led to knowing that they were indirect in their rejections. They want to save the inviters' faces by using four politeness strategies which were namely, rejecting with religious terms, justified reasons, prayers, promising, and asking for forgiveness.

The analysis also indicated that Islamic influence appears in their interactions. They considered using the religious terms as a kind of respect and showing harmony with the inviters. Using these terms softened the refusals and raised the level of responses' honesty. This result could help the non-Jordanians understand the reaction of the Jordanians to their invitation to minimize the misunderstanding between them. The Jordanian culture is not like the other cultures, especially the non-Arab cultures. So, revealing this result assists in understanding the diversity among communities' speeches and cultures.

Another result that was found after analyzing the data of this study was the structure of the refusals. The Jordanians refused the invitations by using religious terms, reasons, promises, or asking for forgiveness. They do not respond to the invitations without explanations. They felt that they need to explain the refusals indirectly by using the four strategies of refusal in this study. This result provokes the idea that they did not like to attack the inviters' faces, which meant that they were careful about saving it. They comprehended this implicit meaning within the interaction to avoid breaking the cultural conventions that are followed in Jordanian society. Jordanian culture is a collective and tribal culture that obligates the members of the community to take care of their image in front of others. This result ensure that they had wished to be polite with each other's. In other words, they had to respond politely even if they did not like to accept it. An example of that is refusing the invitation politely even if they do not like to be invited by some people.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the pragmatics of politeness in refusing food invitations by Jordanians. It is qualitative research that utilized qualitative instruments, which were semi-structured interviews, memos and note-taking. Brown and Levenson's (1987) politeness theory was followed to analyze the data. The study found that Jordanians used four politeness strategies in their refusals for the food invitation which were rejecting with religious terms, justified reasons, promising, ask for forgiveness. Their preferred strategy was rejecting with religious terms. This study recommends that future researchers conduct research on other aspects of speeches, such as refusals among employees at universities, based on the level of authority and responsibilities. To conclude, communities' cultures and traditions affect their refusal performance. In Jordanian culture, for instance, it is preferred to refuse the invitation at the beginning to be sure about the seriousness of the inviter Al-Natour, M (2015). So, there are implicit and explicit meanings that are comprehended by the interlocutors of the same culture, which were not performed in the words that they used. These meanings could not be deduced by people from other cultures, which sometimes leads to misunderstanding among them.

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