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Original Research

How Do Speech Acts Change with Regard to Gender of the Interlocutors?

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ABSTRACT

Gender differences in refusal strategies have long been investigated with regard to gender of the speakers, however, adopted strategies may change with regard to gender of the listener as well. Bearing this in mind, this qualitative study aimed to investigate gender differences in refusal strategies focusing both on the gender of the speaker and the listener. It further investigated how the strategies differed when responding to interlocutors of different power statuses. The participants of the study consisted of 13 female and 10 male students studying at the faculty of education at a foundation university in Turkey. The data was collected through a discourse completion test that included situations that were likely to be refused and were close to natural contexts. The discourse completion test was in Turkish, the data was collected in Turkish and analysed by the taxonomy developed by Beebe et al. (1990). The findings revealed that both female and male participants mainly used indirect strategies in their refusals, however, regardless of gender of the interlocutors, female participants used direct strategies less than male participants. In addition, regardless of the gender, female participants were more direct to equal-status interlocutors. Male participants, on the other hand, aligned their strategies with the gender of the listener; they were more direct to male interlocutors. Their directness of male participants was not affected by the higher status of the listener.

Keywords: Speech acts, refusal strategies, gender differences.

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1. INTRODUCTION

To achieve communication what the speaker says should be correctly interpreted by the listener and culture is an indispensable part of this interpretation. Speech acts, which are the “functional unit[s] in communication” (Cohen, 1996, p.384), are also shaped by culture.

Austin (1975) investigates speech acts under three categories: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. Locutionary acts are the sentences themselves, and they indicate references or senses. Illocutionary acts are the acts that indicate stating or asserting, and they force the listener to do something. Perlocutionary acts are the acts that have an effect on the listener. An example from Hochstetler (2011) may help to understand these terms clearly:

John: "Darling, do you want to go out to the show tonight?"

Laura: "I'm feeling ill."

John: "That's ok. You stay there and I'll make soup."

In Laura's response, locutionary act is the mere utterance “I'm feeling ill”. Instead of saying “no” she says “I'm feeling ill” -this sentence serves as a refusal, and it is an illocutionary act. Finally, the condition or the consequence that Laura got John to make her a soup is the perlocutionary act.

Searle (2003) makes another categorisation of speech acts by investigating them as direct and indirect speech acts. He defines the former as the acts by which the speaker utters exactly what they mean and the latter as the acts which carry more meaning than the uttered speech. In relation to the given example, Laura's speech is indirect because her utterance has more than its locutionary act.

One of the reasons for use of indirect responses is politeness (Searle, 1975). To avoid the negative effects of face-threatening acts, a speaker may try to be polite by using indirect speech acts. Nevertheless, understanding of politeness is not universal; politeness strategies are culture-specific (Brown & Levinson, 1987), and they may vary from one culture to another (Goffman, 1967).

Refusal is a face-threatening act and indirect strategies can be used to minimize the negative effects of these acts. As the perception of politeness differs across cultures, refusal strategies may also differ across cultures (Felix-Brasdefer, 2004).

Hofstede (1984) investigates cultures in four dimensions: power distance, individualism, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance. According to him members of individualist cultures initially focus on the interest of their own and their immediate family. On the other hand, members of collectivist cultures are mainly concerned with the interest of the group they belong to. Related to this, refusal strategies in individualist cultures are likely to be different from the ones in collectivist cultures (Liao and Bresnahan, 1996).

Scollon and Scollon (2001, p.146,147) conceptualized and compared Chinese and Western perceptions of personality, and they found that Chinese culture, which is a collectivist culture, considered intimate society and culture as inseparable aspects of their selves, whereas Western culture, which is individualistic, did not consider intimate society and culture very important; they placed intimate society and culture in the outer circle (see Figure 1).

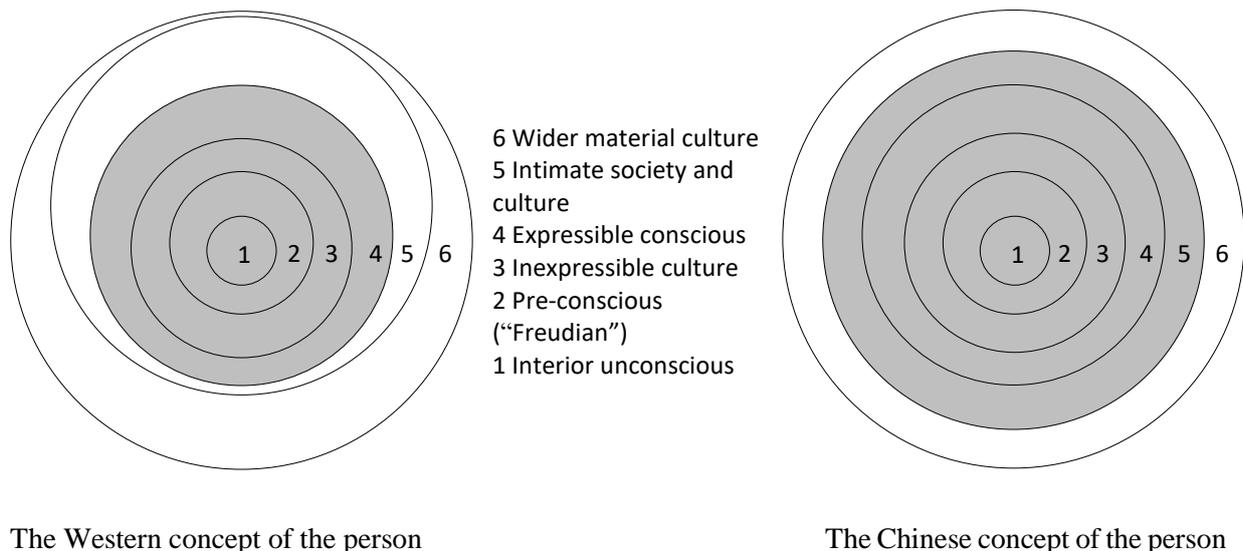


Figure 1. Western and Chinese concepts of the person (Scollon & Scollon, 2001, p.145-146).

When the suggestion that indirect speech acts are more polite than direct ones is considered together with Ting-Toomey and Kurogi's (1998) suggestion that individualist cultures have "I-identity" whereas collectivist cultures have "we-identity", it is likely that members of collectivist cultures use indirect strategies more than members of individualistic cultures.

Related to this, Takahashi and Beebe (1987) compared refusals of Japanese learners of English and Native Americans to investigate developmental pragmatic competence, and they found that Americans (individualist culture) used direct strategies almost twice as Japanese (a collectivist culture). Felix-Brasdefer (2006) investigated refusal strategies among males in Mexican Spanish culture (a collectivist culture) and concluded that "negotiation of face is mainly achieved indirectly". Chang (2009) examined cross-cultural differences in refusal strategies among native speakers of Mandarin, and they showed that the Chinese mainly used indirect refusal strategies whereas Americans conveyed their messages more directly. Sadler and Eroz (2001) made a study on refusal strategies of native speakers of English, Lao, and Turkish, and they found that all three groups avoided direct strategies. Sahin's (2011, p.140) cross-cultural study on American English (AE), Turkish (TUR), and interlanguage pragmatics also revealed that "both AE and TUR are very often indirect when refusing their lovers, close friends, classmates and

acquaintances and they always combined direct refusal strategies with at least one indirect semantic formula or adjunct to refusal.”

On the other hand, a more current view states that collectivism and individualism are more likely to be group- or even individual-specific rather than being country-specific (Boynuegri, 2018; Kağıtçıbaşı, 1997; 2017). There are several factors that affect collectivism and individualism; these factors include relatedness, connectedness (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2017), self-serving bias, pride, self-esteem and anger (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1997). Also, as an indicator of politeness, directness may change due to interlocutor-related factors, namely power and distance (Wolfson, 1989).

In addition to these factors, gender is also likely to affect refusal strategies. Many studies investigated gender differences in refusal strategies by comparing directness and indirectness in refusals performed by females and males, nevertheless, they did not take into account the gender of the listener. Bearing this in mind, the current study mainly tried to explore whether speech acts of refusals differed with regard to the gender of the listener. It also investigated refusals with regard to power status.

2. METHOD

2.1 Participants

The study was conducted at the faculty of education at a foundation university in Ankara. The participants of the study were 13 female and 10 male students aged between 20 and 22. The participants voluntarily participated in the study.

2.2 Instruments

Data was collected through a discourse completion test (DCT) written in Turkish. To construct the DCT, firstly pre-existing DCTs in the literature were reviewed and 13 items were created. The items on the DCT were created in such a way that they reflected situations that were likely to occur and be refused in Turkish culture.

The first draft of the DCT was analysed by three field experts and piloted on a sample of five participants. The final version of the DCT (see Appendix A) was designed after necessary corrections. The final DCT included eight situations, three of which addressed interlocutors of higher-status and five of which addressed interlocutors of equal status. In the study, the participants were asked to refuse a female and a male interlocutor (genders emphasised) under the same circumstances. For example:

A. Your female friend asks you to take care of her cat while she is away on holiday for two weeks. However, the last time you looked after a friend’s dog, it ran away and was never found. You don't want to have this responsibility again; you have to refuse her.

B. Your male friend asks you to take care of his cat while he is away on holiday for two weeks. However, the last time you looked after a friend's dog, it ran away and was never found. You don't want to have this responsibility again; you have to refuse him.

2.3 Data Collection

Data was collected through the DCT in written form. After making necessary arrangements, the researcher collected data from the volunteers during a class at the university. Thus, she was able to clearly explain the process and answer the questions of the participants.

2.4 Analysis

The results were analysed by "Classification of Refusals" developed by Beebe et al. (1990) (see Appendix B). To ensure validity, the whole set of data was analysed by two field experts. Each expert divided the data into meaningful chunks and coded them accordingly. For the items that were coded differently by the two experts, a third field expert's opinion was asked. Thus, it was ensured that no unresolved strings were left. After the coding, responses for each category on the taxonomy were counted to present the findings.

3. RESULTS

The analysis showed that both female and male participants mainly used indirect refusal strategies in their responses. On the other hand, when using direct strategies, both female and male participants combined them with indirect strategies by never using direct strategies alone.

All direct refusals were performed by a *non-performative statement*, *non-performative statements* always included *negative willingness/ability* (e.g. "I can't" "I won't" "I don't think so"), and sometimes a flat "no" accompanied *negative willingness*. None of the participants used a *performative statement* (e.g. "I refuse") in their refusals.

Male participants used direct strategies more than females, however, they were more direct to male interlocutors regardless of the power status. On the other hand, female participants did not change their strategies with regard to the gender of the listener.

Both female and male participants used the *excuse/reason/explanation* strategy extensively in their refusals.

On item basis, detailed results giving the exact number of direct and indirect strategies used by female and male participants with regard to gender and power status of the interlocutors can be seen in the Appendix C.

3.1 Refusal Strategies towards Higher-Status Interlocutors

In this study, some of the items included a professor, an uncle/aunt-in-law and an elderly neighbour as interlocutors. Although in some cultures older age does not add a higher status, it is particularly an indicator of higher status in Turkish culture. However, level of closeness and formality with a professor is different than with an uncle/aunt-in-law and an elderly neighbour. Thus, items included professor and elderlyies analysed separately.

3.1.1 Female participants

All of the female participants responded using only indirect strategies when refusing interlocutors of higher status. None of the female participants used direct strategies when they were refusing higher-status interlocutors, either female or male.

For the item in which the interlocutor was a lecturer, most of the female participants used *excuse/reason/explanation* combined with *regret* or *wish*. Examples are presented below:

Excerpt 1 (refusing female lecturer in item 1): “I wish I could come to *Hocam*, but my friends and I made a plan a long time ago.” (translation from Turkish)

Excerpt 2 (refusing male lecturer in item 1): “I’m sorry *Hocam*, I’m not going to be here at the weekend.” (translation from Turkish)

In the other two situations, the interlocutors were an aunt/uncle-in-law and an elderly neighbour. In these items, most of the female participants used *excuse/reason/explanation* combined with *statement of alternative* or *promise*. They did not adapt their responses based on the gender of the listener. Examples from a particular female participant are presented below:

Excerpt 3 (refusing uncle-in-law in item 5): “I have three midterm exams which are really important. But I’ll help you tomorrow.” (translation from Turkish)

Excerpt 4 (refusing female elderly neighbour in item 7): “I gave it to my literature teacher to get her feedback, and she has not returned it yet. I’ll give it to you when she returns it.” (translation from Turkish)

3.1.2 Male participants

Male participants mainly used indirect refusals when they were responding to a higher-status interlocutor. Only once they used a direct refusal when they were responding to a female higher-status listener. They used indirect strategies more when refusing a higher-status male interlocutor.

When refusing a male professor, some of the male participants used direct strategies, whereas none of them used direct strategies when refusing a female professor. Examples from a particular male participant are presented below:

Excerpt 5 (refusing female lecturer in item 1): I'm sorry *Hocam*, I have another plan for the weekend." (translation from Turkish)

Excerpt 6 (refusing male lecturer in item 1): "*Hocam*, unfortunately, I can't do that because I have other plans. (translation from Turkish)

When refusing elderlies, male participants mainly used indirect strategies. Only once they used a direct refusal when they were responding to a female elderly interlocutor, which was an elderly neighbour. At times, they were also playful to female interlocutors by using *joke* strategy. Examples from a particular male participant are presented below:

Excerpt 7 (refusing aunt-in-law in item 5) "Oh Auntie, just wait. Let me take my midterm exams first. Then I will even teach you the history of iPad. I promise." (translation from Turkish)

Excerpt 8 (refusing male elderly neighbour item 7) "I just can't. I have already handed it to my teacher to be evaluated." (translation from Turkish)

3.2 Refusal Strategies towards Equal-Status Interlocutors

3.2.1 Female participants

When refusing equal-status interlocutors, female participants mainly used indirect strategies. When they used direct strategies, they combined them with indirect ones. Except one situation, their strategies did not change with regard to the gender of the listener.

Female participants also tended to add some friendly expressions such as "honey" and "sweetheart" when their interlocutors were equal-status females.

Examples from a particular female participant are presented below:

Excerpt 9 (refusing a female friend in item 2): "I'm so sorry sweetie. I have a terrible experience in a similar situation. So, I don't want to take responsibility again. (translation from Turkish)

Excerpt 10 (refusing a male cousin in item 4): "I don't want to support. Maybe I can help you in another issue." (translation from Turkish)

3.2.2 Male Participants

Male participants mainly used indirect refusal strategies when they were refusing interlocutors in equal status. They sometimes combined indirect strategies with direct ones when responding both to females and males, however, they used direct strategies more when they were responding to males. At times, they made the point clearer for the male interlocutors. Examples from a particular male participant are presented below:

Excerpt 11 (refusing male second cousin in item 8): “Sorry man, you cannot. And let me tell you she has a boyfriend.” (translation from Turkish)

Excerpt 12 (refusing female second cousin in item 8): “Ah I am sorry. We have booked for six people and it is fixed.” (translation from Turkish)

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study investigated the refusal strategies of Turkish university students when they were responding to female and male interlocutors of higher and equal status. It was found that both male and female participants mainly used indirect strategies in their refusals and in most of the responses they did not use direct strategies. This finding supports the related literature that suggests members of collectivist cultures are likely to avoid direct refusals (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2010, 2011; Forbes, Zhang, Doroszewicz, & Haas, 2009; Hofstede, 2007; Merkin, 2015; Ting-Toomey, 1985, 1998; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998; Triandis, 1995).

The findings also showed that female participants tended to use direct strategies less when compared to male participants, regardless of the gender of the listener. This finding can be explained by the status of women in interdependent cultures. Kağıtçıbaşı (2013) suggests that traditional interdependent cultures place women in a lower status when compared to men. As higher-status interlocutors are likely to be responded by indirect strategies (Fe'lix-Brasdefer, 2006), very limited use of direct strategies by female participants can be a result of being a woman in a traditional interdependent and collectivist culture.

Female participants never used direct strategies towards higher-status interlocutors. In this study interlocutors representing higher status were a lecturer, an uncle/aunt-in-law, and an elderly neighbour. The social status of elderly people in different cultures is questionable; however, elderly people have a higher status in the social hierarchy in Turkish culture. Kowner and Wiseman (2003) state that the perceived lower status of the speaker leads to “subordinate, timid, considerate, and respectful behaviour”. Combined with Kağıtçıbaşı’s (2013) suggestion mentioned above, multiple lower status of female participants in related items on the DCT may have led to a massive avoidance from direct refusal strategies.

Male participants mainly avoided direct strategies when they were refusing a female interlocutor, however they were more direct to male interlocutors. They were also more playful or less explicit in their responses to female interlocutors. This can be the most significant finding of the study as it suggests that gender studies in speech acts should include the gender of the listener as a dynamic as well. In a situation that does not give a clue about the gender of the interlocutor, the research may lack accurate interpretation because it is not possible to know the perception of the participant of the gender of the listener.

5. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this study, data was collected with a written DCT. Regarding the oral nature of the speech acts, an oral DCT better fits research in speech acts. Another limitation of the study was the small sample size. Repeating the study with a larger sample size would provide more reliable conclusions.

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Appendix A

Translation of the items on the discourse completion test

1. A. Your **female** professor asks you to join a weekend activity at the university; however, you and your friends are going away for a city break that weekend. Therefore, you can't join the activity at the university, you have to refuse **her**.
 B. Your **male** professor asks you to join a weekend activity at the university; however, you and your friends are going away for a city break that weekend. Therefore, you can't join the activity at the university, you have to refuse **him**.
2. A. Your **female** friend asks you to take care of her cat while she is away on holiday for two weeks. However, the last time you looked after a friend's dog, it ran away and was never found. You don't want to have this responsibility again; you have to refuse **her**.
 B. Your **male** friend asks you to take care of his cat while he is away on holiday for two weeks. However, the last time you looked after a friend's dog, it ran away and was never found. You don't want to have this responsibility again; you have to refuse **him**.
3. A. You and some friends have been invited to a dinner party at a mutual friends' new house. You spent the whole day looking for a gift and finally found the perfect one. On the way a **female** friend asks to put her name on the gift as well. Since you have spent a lot of time and effort on that, you are going to refuse **her**.
 B. You and some friends have been invited to a dinner party at a mutual friends' new house. You spent the whole day looking for a gift and finally found the perfect one. On the way a **male** friend asks to put his name on the gift as well. Since you have spent a lot of time and effort on that, you are going to refuse **him**.
4. A. Your **female** cousin is a nature lover and is keen on protecting the environment. She donates a set amount to an environmental charity each month. During a conversation she asks you to donate as well. However, it is not one of your preferred charities; you are going to refuse **her**.
 B. Your **male** cousin is a nature lover and is keen on protecting the environment. He donates a set amount to an environmental charity each month. During a conversation he asks you to donate as well. However, it is not one of your preferred charities; you are going to refuse **him**.
5. A. Your **aunt-in-law** has just bought a new tablet PC and is having problems using it. As you are very familiar with this kind of technology, she asks you to stop by in the evening and give her some tips. However, you have a midterm exam the next day, you have to refuse **her**.
 B. Your **uncle-in-law** has just bought a new tablet PC and is having problems using it. As you are very familiar with this kind of technology, he asks you to stop by in the evening and give him some tips. However, you have a midterm exam the next day, you have to refuse **him**.

6. A. The brother of a close **female** friend of yours has a math exam the next day. She asks you to help her brother with some extra tuition in the evening. But that night you are throwing a birthday party for the person you are dating and have no time to help your friend's brother. You are going to refuse **her**.

B. The brother of a close **male** friend of yours has a math exam the next day. He asks you to help his brother with some extra tuition in the evening. But that night you are throwing a birthday party for the person you are dating and have no time to help your friend's brother. You are going to refuse **him**.

7. A. You are going to enter a short story competition. Your **female** neighbour who is a literature teacher and known to be a harsh critic has heard about it and offered to read the story you have written. You do not want to hear her criticisms; you are going to refuse **her**.

B. You are going to enter a short story competition. Your **male** neighbour who is a literature teacher and known to be a harsh critic has heard about it and offered to read the story you have written. You do not want to hear his criticisms; you are going to refuse **him**.

8. A. While you were out with a group of friends, you met your **female** second cousin. While chatting with her, you realized that she could not take her eyes off one of the guys in your group who is in a relationship. When you are leaving for a restaurant, she asks to come along. Not liking her intentions, you are going to refuse **her**.

B. While you were out with a group of friends, you met your **male** second cousin. While chatting with him, you realized that he could not take his eyes off one of the girls in your group who is in a relationship. When you are leaving for a restaurant, he asks to come along. Not liking his intentions, you are going to refuse **him**.

Appendix B

Classification of Refusals (Beebe et al., 1990)

I. Direct

A. Performative (e.g., “I refuse”)

B. Non-performative statement

1. “No”

2. Negative willingness/ability (“I can’t” “I won’t” “I don’t think so”)

II. Indirect

A. Statement of regret (e.g., “I’m sorry...”; “I feel terrible...”)

B. Wish (e.g., “I wish I could help you...”)

C. Excuse, reason, explanation (e.g., “My children will be home that night.”; “I have a headache.”)

D. Statement of alternative

1. Involved alternative (e.g., “I’d rather...” “I’d prefer...”)

2. Uninvolved alternative (e.g., “Why don’t you ask someone else?”)

E. Set condition for future and past acceptance (e.g., “If you had asked me earlier, I would have...”)

F. Promise of future acceptance (e.g., “I’ll do it next time”; “I promise I will...” or “Next time I’ll...” – using “will” of promise or “promise”)

G. Statement of principle (e.g., “I never do business with friends.”)

H. Statement of philosophy (e.g., “One can’t be too careful.”)

I. Attempt to dissuade interlocutor

1. Threat or statement of negative consequences to the requester

(e.g., “I won’t be any fun tonight” to refuse an invitation)

2. Guilt trip (e.g., waitress to customers who want to sit a while: “I can’t make a living off people who just order coffee.”)

3. Criticize the request/requester, etc. (statement of negative feeling or opinion); insult/attack /e.g., “Who do you think you are?”; “That’s a terrible idea!”)

4. Request for help, empathy, and assistance/trust/respect by dropping or holding the request

5. Let interlocutor off the hook (e.g., “Don’t worry about it.” “That’s okay” “You don’t have to”)

6. Self-defense (e.g., “I’m trying my best” “I’m doing all I can do” “I no do nothing wrong”)

J. Acceptance that functions as a refusal

1. Unspecific or indefinite reply

2. Lack of enthusiasm

K. Avoidance

1. Nonverbal

a. Silence

b. Hesitation

c. Do nothing

d. Physical departure

2. Verbal

a. Topic switch

b. Joke

c. Repetition of part of the request, etc. (e.g., "Monday?")

d. Postponement (e.g., "Gee, I don't know." "I'm not sure.")

III. Adjuncts to Refusals

A. Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement (e.g., "That's a good idea.." "I'd love to...")

B. Statement of empathy (e.g., "I realize you are in a difficult situation")

C. Pause fillers (e.g., "uhh" "well" "oh" "uhm")

D. Gratitude/appreciation

Appendix C

The distribution of the direct (D) and indirect (ID) refusal strategies by gender and power status (items with higher-status interlocutors in grey)

		Female Participant				Male Participant			
		Higher status		Equal Status		Higher status		Equal Status	
		F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
1. Refuse your F/M lecturer when you are asked to join a weekend activity at school.	D	-	-			-	3		
	ID	13	13			10	10		
2. Refuse your F/M close friend when you are asked to take care of her/his cat when s/he is gone.	D			3	3			2	2
	ID			13	13			10	10
3. Refuse your F/M friend when you are asked to give the gift on your two's behalf which you have already bought on your behalf.	D			-	-			1	2
	ID			13	13			10	10
4. Refuse your F/M cousin when you are asked to donate to a non-governmental environmental organization.	D			2	2			2	3
	ID			13	13			10	10
5. Refuse your aunt /uncle-in-law when you are asked to help her/him practice her/his new tablet PC.	D	-	-			-	2		
	ID	13	13			10	10		
6. Refuse your F/M close friend when you are asked to help her/his brother with math.	D			1	1			-	-
	ID			13	13			10	10

7. Refuse your older F/M neighbour when you are asked to hand her/him the short stories you have written.	D	-	-			1	1	
	ID	13	13			10	10	
8. Refuse your F/M second cousin when you are asked to let her/him join your group for restaurant.	D			2	1			- -
	ID			13	13			10 10