

BEYOND STRATEGY: TOWARD AN INTEGRATIVE CULTURAL EVALUATION FRAMEWORK FOR IMPOLITENESS INTERPRETATION IN REFUSAL SPEECH ACTS

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Abstract

Refusal is a pragmatically sensitive speech act that carries significant relational risk. Nevertheless, research in second language pragmatics has largely focused on identifying the linguistic strategies speakers use to refuse, leaving comparatively underexplored the evaluation processes through which recipients interpret these acts. Critically, the relationship between refusal strategies and the social evaluation of impoliteness has not been systematically explained within a single conceptual model. Strategy-oriented studies describe how speakers refuse, but they do not fully account for why structurally similar refusals are interpreted so differently across cultural contexts. This variation points to the role of the recipient's cultural orientation in shaping the evaluative process. This gap points to the need for a framework that positions cultural orientation not merely as background context, but as an active evaluation mechanism in the interpretation process. This article addresses this gap by proposing a conceptual framework that explains the relationship between pragmatic strategies, evaluations of impoliteness, and cultural orientations in interpreting refusals. The proposed framework is called the Cultural Evaluation Framework (CEF). This framework explains that interpretations of impoliteness are formed through a five-stage evaluative process: (1) pragmatic strategy, (2) relational expectations, (3) perceived relational violation, (4) cultural evaluation, and (5) interpretation of impoliteness. Within this sequence, cultural evaluation functions as the central mediating mechanism through which perceived violations of relational expectations are processed before producing a social judgment. This positioning of culture as an evaluative filter, rather than a mere backdrop, constitutes the key theoretical contribution of the framework. This article makes a theoretical contribution to the study of second language pragmatics by providing a structured integrative model that connects three previously separate lines of inquiry: refusal strategy research (Beebe et al., 1990), impoliteness theory (Culpeper, 2011), and rapport management (Spencer-Oatey, 2005) into a coherent explanatory sequence. Unlike previous approaches that treat these domains independently, the CEF traces the interpretive pathway from linguistic form to social judgment in a systematic, empirically testable manner. The proposed framework can serve as a basis for empirical research examining how speakers from different cultural backgrounds assess and respond to perceived acts of impoliteness in cross-cultural interactions.

Keywords – refusal speech act; impoliteness; cultural evaluation; L2 pragmatics

Introduction

In second language pragmatics, the ability to produce grammatically correct utterances does not guarantee the ability to interpret the social meanings those utterances carry in interaction (Taguchi, 2015). This gap becomes particularly pronounced when speakers encounter speech acts that carry high relational risk

– acts that require managing not only communicative intent but also the potential disruption to interpersonal relationships that follows. The evaluative dimension of pragmatics, which concerns how participants read and assess the social meaning of actions in context, is therefore central to understanding how meaning is formed in interactions (Kádár

& Haugh, 2013; Locher & Watts, 2008). What remains underexplored, however, is how this evaluative dimension operates specifically in the context of refusal – an act whose social meaning is not fixed at the point of production but is formed through the interpretive process of the recipient.

In subsequent developments, interlanguage pragmatics explained that learners bring the values and language habits of their first language into their second-language use (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993; Selinker, 1973). This process influences how learners understand the social meaning of an utterance, including the assessment of politeness and impoliteness. Recent research shows that pragmatic transfer remains a dominant factor in cross-cultural interpretation, especially when learners encounter socially ambiguous situations (Ruytenbeek, 2021; Taguchi & Roever, 2017; Zhu, 2023). Ishihara and Cohen (2010) describe this condition as pragmatic failure, which arises from a mismatch between intention and interpretation. Furthermore, studies also emphasize that evaluations of impoliteness are strongly influenced by social relations, power distribution, and interactional norms within a language community (Culpeper et al., 2017; Kádár & Haugh, 2013). This variation demonstrates that a single utterance can be understood differently in different contexts. Social meaning, in this case, is constituted through evaluations made by the interaction participants. Understanding the evaluation process is therefore key not only to explaining how pragmatic meaning is formed in general, but specifically to understanding how speech acts that carry high relational risk — such as refusal — are interpreted across cultural contexts.

Refusal is a speech act with high sensitivity in interactions because it

involves refusing the request, invitation, apology, or suggestion of the interlocutor. Beebe et al (1990) classify refusal strategies into various forms reflecting variations in directness and the use of mitigation. Searle & Vanderveken (1985) position refusal as a potentially face-threatening speech act because it conflicts with the interlocutor's interest. In communication practice, speakers often employ indirect strategies, excuse-making, and expressions of regret to maintain relational balance (Soler & Martínez-Flor, 2008). Cross-cultural research shows that the implementation of refusal is strongly influenced by factors such as social status, relational distance, and politeness norms (Félix-Brasdefer, 2018; Taguchi, 2015). Studies also indicate that variations in the use of refusal strategies are related to cultural orientation toward social harmony and interpersonal relationship management (Al-Gahtani & Roever, 2018; Spencer-Oatey & Kadar, 2016). These findings emphasize that refusal cannot be separated from its surrounding social context, and that understanding how it is evaluated requires attending to the cultural frameworks that shape recipients' interpretive responses.

In recent years, attention has increased to the interpretive dimension of refusal. Research shows that differences arise not only in strategies but also in how these strategies are understood by interlocutors in a specific context (Xiao et al., 2019; Zhu, 2023). Kostromitina & Miao (2024) demonstrate that listeners evaluate the appropriateness of L1 and L2 refusals differently, even when their surface forms are structurally comparable, pointing to the role of evaluative frameworks that operate beyond the utterance itself. This variation is related to differences in orientations toward social relationships and expectations regarding appropriate behavior. In the context of cross-cultural communication, this condition has

implications for the potential for broader misunderstandings (Kádár & Haugh, 2013). Hence, the study of refusal requires an approach that not only describes strategies but also explains the interpretation process. This approach broadens the analytical focus from language production to evaluation in interaction.

Although refusal studies have produced detailed classifications of strategies, most research still places strategy at the center of analysis. This approach makes an important contribution to mapping pragmalinguistic variation, but it fails to explain how these strategies are perceived in real interactions fully. Many studies identify patterns of strategy without examining how interlocutors evaluate these patterns (Bu, 2022; Félix-Brasdefer, 2018). As a result, the relationship between linguistic form and social meaning is not always fully explained. In some cases, strategies deemed appropriate by speakers are perceived differently by interlocutors. This situation indicates a gap between production and interpretation in studies of refusal. Studies that have moved in this direction – such as Kostromitina & Miao (2024) on listeners' perceptions of refusal appropriateness and Ren (2022) on second-language pragmatics – demonstrate that the evaluative dimension is empirically tractable. However, these studies do not offer a unified conceptual model that systematically explains how the pathways from refusal strategy to impoliteness interpretation are mediated. Without such a model, the analysis of refusal remains fragmented: production on one side, perception studies on the other, with the evaluative mechanism left implicit between them. This article addresses that gap directly.

Meanwhile, the study of impoliteness has developed by placing evaluation at the core of pragmatic analysis. Culpeper

(2011) views impoliteness as a phenomenon that arises when an action is judged to violate relational expectations in a particular context. This perspective is reinforced by recent research showing that impoliteness is contextual and dependent on the interpretations of the interaction participants (Culpeper et al., 2017; Haugh, 2015). Furthermore, Spencer-Oatey (2005) emphasizes, through the concept of rapport management, the importance of face sensitivities and social privilege in maintaining interpersonal relationships. Within this framework, disruptions to interpersonal relationships form the basis for negative assessments of language behavior. Recent studies also demonstrate that impoliteness can function as a means of identity negotiation and attitude expression in various communication contexts (Kadar & Marquez-Reiter, 2015). This perspective demonstrates that impoliteness is a complex and dynamic phenomenon. However, the relationship between impoliteness and specific speech acts, such as refusal, has not been systematically explored.

These two lines of research developed in parallel, with little conceptual integration. Refusal studies describe how speakers refuse, while impoliteness studies explain how actions are evaluated in interactions. The closest points of intersection – studies such as Tajeddin et al. (2014) on cross-cultural perceptions of impoliteness in apology acts, or Haugh (2015) on taking offense in initial interactions – reveal that the evaluative response to face-threatening acts varies systematically across groups. However, these studies either focus on different speech acts or treat cultural orientation as a variable to be measured rather than as a mechanism to be theorized. The specific pathway through which a refusal strategy triggers an impoliteness judgment, mediated by cultural evaluation, remains without an explicit conceptual model. Refusal is

often ambiguous and does not always explicitly present conflict, making the evaluation process more complex. Recent studies have shown that perceptions of impoliteness in refusal can vary significantly across speaker groups (Tajeddin et al., 2014). This variation is related to differences in cultural values and relational expectations. Furthermore, responses to perceived impoliteness have not been widely discussed within a structured framework. This situation indicates the need for a model that explains the relationships among strategy, evaluation, and response within a single conceptual framework.

Given the identified gaps, this article proposes a conceptual framework called the CEF for Interpreting Impoliteness in Refusal Speech Acts. This framework explains how refusals are interpreted in social interactions. Specifically, this model encompasses five sequentially ordered stages: pragmatic strategies, relational expectations, perceptions of violation, cultural evaluations, and interpretations of impoliteness. These stages are not merely descriptive labels but represent analytically distinct moments in the evaluative process: from the production of refusal, through the activation of the recipient's relational expectations, to the perception of a potential violation, and finally to the cultural filtering that determines whether that violation is assessed as impoliteness. The framework's central claim is that cultural evaluation does not merely accompany this process. It is the mechanism that decides its outcome. While each of the three theoretical pillars — refusal strategy research, impoliteness theory, and rapport management — has been applied independently to the analysis of pragmatic behavior, no prior model has brought them together into a single explanatory sequence that traces the full pathway from linguistic form to

social judgment. This article proposes such a model.

The proposed framework also has important implications for second-language pragmatics research. This approach shifts the focus from describing strategies to understanding the evaluation process. This model provides a basis for empirical research examining how speakers from different cultural backgrounds evaluate acts of refusal. Furthermore, this framework is relevant for understanding interpretive variation in cross-cultural communication contexts. The framework's cultural evaluation stage, for instance, is particularly relevant for communities in which relational harmony functions as a foundational social norm. In Javanese communicative culture, this is manifest in the concept of *rukun* (the active maintenance of social cohesion) and in the system of *unggah-ungguh* (speech level etiquette), which governs how speech is calibrated according to social hierarchy (Suseno, 1997; Wijayanto, 2025). Within such a cultural framework, a refusal that bypasses expected markers of deference may be perceived not merely as blunt but as a violation of moral social order (Gunarwan, 2001). These culturally specific evaluative norms illustrate precisely how the cultural evaluation stage in the proposed framework operates in practice, and why the same refusal strategy can elicit starkly different interpretive outcomes across communities.

Methodology

This article employs a conceptual research design to develop a theoretical framework for evaluating impoliteness in the speech act of refusal by integrating relevant literature. This approach assumes that theory development can be achieved through a systematic synthesis of empirical findings and established conceptual foundations in pragmatics and

interlanguage pragmatics (Jaakkola, 2020). Jaakkola (2020) identifies four approaches to conceptual article design: theory building, theory testing, theory application, and integrative synthesis. This article follows the integrative synthesis approach, which aims to bring together existing theoretical frameworks into a new explanatory structure that offers greater analytical purchase than a single framework alone.

Sources of theoretical evidence in this article include reputable journal articles, academic books, and empirical studies focusing on three main domains: refusal strategies, impoliteness, and cross-cultural pragmatics. Literature was identified through a systematic search of Scopus, Google Scholar, and the Web of Science database, using the following search terms: 'refusal speech act', 'impoliteness evaluation', 'cross-cultural pragmatics', 'L2 pragmatics', and 'rapport management'. Selection criteria followed Snyder's (2019) guidelines for review-based conceptual research: sources were included based on their direct theoretical relevance to the three core domains, their citation impact within the field, and their capacity to represent developments within the last decade. Sources that addressed adjacent topics – such as requests or apologies – were included only when their findings were directly applicable to the evaluative mechanism under discussion.

The analysis process was conducted in three stages. In the first stage, the conceptual architecture of each theoretical domain was mapped independently: key constructs in refusal strategy research (including the classification of Beebe et al. (1990), and its subsequent extensions), core mechanisms in impoliteness theory particularly (Culpeper, 2011), evaluative framework and Culpeper et al's. (2017), work on contextual variation), and the relational dimensions of rapport

management (Spencer-Oatey, 2005, 2022). In the second stage, points of convergence and tension between these domains were identified, with particular attention to how cultural orientation mediates the relationship between the production of refusal strategies and the interpretation of impoliteness. In the third stage, these convergences were synthesized into the five-stage CEF, with each stage grounded in specific theoretical constructs drawn from the reviewed literature. The result is a model that does not simply aggregate existing frameworks, but reorganizes them around a single explanatory question: how does a refusal strategy become an impoliteness judgment?

Framework Development and Discussion

Refusal as a Pragmatically and Relationally Risky Speech Act

Understanding refusal as a relationally risky speech act requires examining not only how it is produced but also the social variables that shape its reception across different interactional contexts. Cross-cultural research shows that the experience of refusal is strongly influenced by social variables such as power, distance, and the degree of imposition. Shishavan & Sharifian (2013) found that differences in cultural backgrounds produce significant variations in the level of directness and the use of mitigation strategies. In hierarchical relationships, speakers tend to use more indirect forms to maintain harmony. In contrast, in equal relationships, more direct strategies may be considered more acceptable. Al-sallal (2024) confirmed that variations in refusal strategies in L2 contexts are influenced by speakers' cultural orientations, particularly in asymmetrical power relationships. Similarly, Kostromitina & Miao (2024) demonstrate

that proficiency level interacts with cultural background in shaping how refusals are produced and received, with higher-proficiency L2 speakers showing greater sensitivity to contextual expectations. These findings indicate that refusal is always tied to complex social dynamics, and that the analysis therefore needs to consider social and cultural dimensions explicitly.

However, most studies of refusal have focused on identifying and classifying the strategies speakers employ. This approach yields a detailed mapping of pragmalinguistic variation across various communication contexts. In this context, this focus has not fully explained how the strategies employed are understood by interlocutors in interactions. Huang & Lu (2023) point out that difficulties in speech production among second-language learners are often related to limitations in understanding the contextual and evaluative dimensions. In many cases, structurally correct utterances can yield different interpretations when received by interlocutors. This condition indicates that the meaning of refusal does not stop at the form produced but develops during the process of interpretation.

At this point, refusal can be understood as an action whose meaning is shaped by the interaction between the strategies employed and the interlocutor's evaluations. The complexity of refusal lies in how the utterance is interpreted in a given context. This variety of interpretations opens up space for viewing refusal in relation to the evaluation of impoliteness. In some cases, strategies intended as mitigation can be perceived as insincere or even offensive. Conversely, more direct forms can be considered appropriate in certain contexts. This condition indicates that the relationship between strategy and meaning is not linear. A conceptual framework that can trace this non-linear

relationship – one that accounts for the evaluative steps between the production of a refusal and the social meaning it acquires – is what the remainder of this discussion develops.

Evaluative Process of Impoliteness in Refusal Speech Acts

Refusal can no longer be understood as a mere strategic choice but as an action subject to social evaluation. This evaluation involves reading the intended meaning, attitude, contextual appropriateness, and relational impact of the received utterance (Kádár & Haugh, 2013). This analytical direction aligns with developments in interpersonal pragmatics, which places relational aspects at the center of its study (Locher & Graham, 2021). From here, the central analytical question shifts from 'what strategy is used' to 'how is that strategy understood by the recipient in a particular context', reorienting the study of refusal toward its interpretive dimension.

Culpeper's (2010) framework of impoliteness provides a strong foundation for this shift. In his view, impoliteness is not statically inherent to the form of the utterance, but emerges when linguistic behavior is perceived as offensive to face, violating relational expectations, or producing social disharmony (Culpeper, 2010; Culpeper et al., 2017). This position is important because it opens the possibility of viewing refusal as a speech act that can be read differently depending on who is speaking, to whom it is directed, and the situation in which it occurs. A very brief refusal utterance – such as simply saying 'I cannot' with no accompanying explanation – may be understood as appropriately direct and efficient between colleagues of equal status, but read as cold, indifferent, or condescending when addressed from a subordinate to a superior, or from a younger interlocutor to an elder, in

contexts where elaborated refusals signal respect. This is where refusal becomes relevant to the study of impoliteness, as it often takes forms that are not explicitly offensive yet can still trigger negative judgments. This ambiguity makes refusal particularly suitable for reading through an evaluative approach. Thus, refusal opens up a wider analytical space in understanding how the meaning of impoliteness is formed.

The evaluative approach becomes more pointed when read through the lens of Spencer-Oatey's (2005) concept of rapport management. Within this framework, social interaction is understood as an arena in which participants manage their face sensitivities, social rights, and relational goals. Refusal becomes problematic when the act of refusal is read as a disregard for the right to be respected, to be treated fairly, or to expectations of appropriate engagement. In other words, what the recipient evaluates is not only the content of the refusal, but also how it positions themselves and others within the social relationship (Spencer-Oatey, 2022). This perspective helps explain why a grammatically simple refusal can elicit a strong feeling of offense. This attention arises not from the proposition of refusal itself, but rather from the perception that the relationship is being poorly managed. In this context, impoliteness emerges from reading the disruption of rapport, not as a fixed feature of a particular linguistic expression.

Recent research extends this understanding by placing emotion and moral stance within the evaluation of impoliteness. Research by McNab & Mavrou (2025) shows that judgments of impoliteness in L1 and L2 interactions are closely related to the emotional response and moral stance taken by the recipient toward the displayed linguistic behavior. This finding is relevant to refusal because

the act of refusing is often perceived not only as a transactional act but also as an index of the speaker's attitude toward others. The recipient may judge a refusal as impolite when they perceive indifference, a veiled insult, a rejection of solidarity, or a denial of relational obligations. Such judgments demonstrate that impoliteness does not stop at the level of a face attack in the classical sense. These judgments also extend to the area of affect and the morality of the interaction (Kadar & Marquez-Reiter, 2015). They also specifically argue that moral evaluations of impoliteness operate through a community's shared understanding of what constitutes appropriate relational conduct: a point that is directly relevant to understanding how cultural orientation shapes the impoliteness evaluation process in refusal. Under these conditions, refusal becomes a relational offense when the act of refusing is understood as a signal of how the speaker positions the interlocutor socially and morally. This direction brings the discussion of impoliteness closer to the study of cultural evaluation, as emotions and moral stances are always interpreted through the value systems of a speech community.

Cultural Orientation and Relational Expectation in Interpreting Refusal

Evaluation of refusal moves through relational expectations formed within a cultural framework, so meaning cannot be derived directly from this strategic form. In pragmatic studies, culture is understood as an orientation that guides how individuals interpret social relationships, interpersonal obligations, and the boundaries of appropriate behavior (Kádár & Haugh, 2013). This perspective positions refusal as a practice that is always interpreted through conformity to social rights and face sensitivities expected in interactions (Spencer-Oatey, 2005, 2022). In

communities that emphasize relational harmony, refusal tends to be expected to manifest in forms that maintain engagement and avoid the impression of a firm rejection, while in contexts that emphasize clarity, more direct forms can be understood as appropriate (Locher & Larina, 2019). Cross-cultural studies of refusal indicate that differences lie not only in the strategies employed but also in the evaluative criteria employed by speakers and recipients in assessing the act (Babai Shishavan & Sharifian, 2016; Félix-Brasdefer, 2018). Ren (2022) demonstrates that the pragmatic knowledge underlying such interpretive differences is itself shaped by exposure and socialization within a language community, meaning that cultural orientation is not a fixed background variable but an actively developing interpretive resource. In this context, refusal does not carry a fixed meaning from the moment it is produced but rather acquires its meaning through the process of evaluation within the interaction.

To illustrate how cultural orientation operates as an evaluative mechanism, consider a comparative scenario. In Anglophone professional contexts, where communicative directness is generally valued, a refusal such as 'I am afraid I cannot take that on right now' – brief, unelaborated, and accompanied only by a minimal hedge – may be evaluated as appropriately professional and clear. The recipient's relational expectations, shaped by norms of efficiency and individual autonomy, align with this form, and no violation is perceived. In contrast, in Javanese communicative culture, where the concept of *rukun* (social harmony) functions as a foundational relational norm and *unggah-ungguh* (speech-level etiquette) encodes hierarchical respect, the same utterance may be evaluated as inadequate – insufficiently attentive to the relationship, lacking the elaboration that signals care for the interlocutor's face,

and therefore potentially impolite (Suseno, 1997; Wijayanto, 2025). The refusal strategy is structurally identical; what differs is the cultural evaluation stage through which it is processed. This illustrative comparison is not intended as an empirical claim but as a conceptual demonstration of how the CEF's mediating stage operates: the same pragmatic strategy passes through different cultural filters and emerges as distinct social meanings.

Furthermore, the dimension of hierarchy and social position illuminates how cultural orientations operate within this process, particularly when refusal is read as an act that positions the speaker within a particular relationship. In asymmetrical relationships, expectations of respect become more prominent, so a refusal that does not align with these expectations can be perceived as a relational violation (Sifianou & Kavroulaki, 2024; Spencer-Oatey, 2005). Recent studies of impoliteness indicate that such assessments are related to the recipient's emotional and moral stance toward the linguistic act (Kadar & Marquez-Reiter, 2015; McNab & Mavrou, 2025). Research in interpersonal pragmatics more broadly confirms that impoliteness assessments are as much about relational positioning as about propositional content – that is, a refusal is judged not only for what it says but for what it signals about how the speaker regards the recipient (Locher & Graham, 2021). In cross-cultural interactions, these differences in orientation are even more pronounced because participants bring evaluative frameworks that do not always align (Locher & Larina, 2019). Refusal becomes the point at which these differences emerge as diverse interpretations.

Framework for Cultural Evaluation in the Interpretation of Impoliteness

Figure 1 presents the CEF as a sequential model comprising six analytically distinct stages. As illustrated in the figure, the primary flow moves from left to right, beginning with the pragmatic strategy produced by the speaker and culminating in the recipient's interactional response. Two additional elements require specific attention. First, the bidirectional arrow connecting Cultural Evaluation (Stage 4) with Cultural Orientation indicates a reciprocal relationship: cultural orientation shapes how the recipient evaluates a perceived violation, while repeated evaluative experiences may, over time, reinforce or modify the recipient's cultural orientation itself. Second, the feedback loop running from Stage 6 (Interactional Response) back to Stage 2 (Relational Expectations) indicates that the framework is not strictly linear. How a recipient responds to a refusal — whether through acceptance, adjustment, or retaliation — can reshape the relational expectations that govern subsequent interactions between the same participants. The stages are described in detail below.

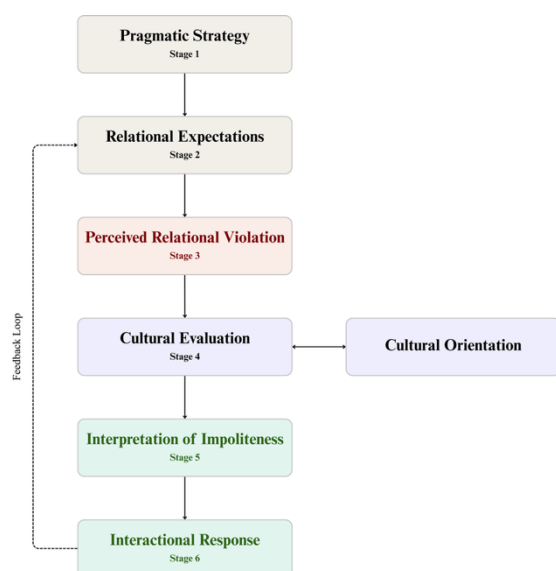


Figure 1: The CEF for Interpreting Impoliteness in Refusal Speech Acts

The first stage in this framework is pragmatic strategy, which refers to the linguistic forms and strategic choices speakers use to refuse. These strategies include variations in directness, the use of mitigation, and combinations of semantic formulas, all of which have been extensively studied in refusal research. At this stage, the meaning remains potential because the recipient has not yet interpreted it. The next stage is relational expectations, the recipient's framework for how actions should be performed in a given context. These expectations are formed from an understanding of social relationships, including distance, power, and the level of involvement considered appropriate (Kádár & Haugh, 2013). The interaction between the strategies used and the recipient's expectations opens up the possibility of interpretive tension. This tension becomes a critical point in the evaluation process because it determines whether actions are understood as harmonious or problematic.

The next stage is perceived relational violation, which refers to the recipient's perception of a discrepancy between an action and relational expectations. At this stage, the recipient begins to assess whether the refusal action violates social rights, diminishes respect, or creates unexpected distance in the relationship. Violations are not always explicit but can arise from forms that are perceived as too brief, too direct or abrupt, or not sufficiently engaging. In some cases, overly elaborate refusals can also trigger negative perceptions if they are read as evasive or insincere – a form of facework that, paradoxically, calls attention to the very threat it attempts to mitigate (Culpeper, 2011). This assessment demonstrates that violations do not depend on a specific strategy type. Rather, they arise from a discrepancy between the action and the expected relational framework. At this stage, evaluations shift from descriptions of the

action to more complex social interpretations.

A key component of this framework lies in the cultural evaluation stage, which serves as a mediating mechanism in the interpretation process. At this stage, the perception of a violation is not directly translated into the meaning of impoliteness but is processed through the recipient's cultural orientation. This orientation encompasses values of harmony, respect, inclusion, and perceived appropriate ways of managing interpersonal relationships (Locher & Larina, 2019; Spencer-Oatey, 2022). Critically, cultural orientation at this stage is not understood as a static background variable that passively 'influences' interpretation – a characterization common in cross-cultural studies that treat culture as an independent variable to be measured. Rather, it is theorized here as an active evaluative filter: a set of internalized normative frameworks through which the recipient actively processes the perceived violation and decides its social significance. This distinction is important because it explains why two recipients from ostensibly similar cultural backgrounds may still evaluate the same refusal differently, depending on their individual exposure to and internalization of community norms. Cultural evaluation determines whether the perceived violation is significant enough to warrant a negative assessment. In some contexts, violations may be tolerated or even ignored if deemed consistent with prevailing norms. In other contexts, the same violation may elicit a strong assessment.

The next stage is the interpretation of impoliteness, the outcome of the evaluation process that determines whether the act of refusal is perceived as impolite, neutral, or acceptable. This stage is analytically distinct from cultural

evaluation: whereas cultural evaluation is the process of filtering a perceived violation through normative frameworks, the interpretation of impoliteness is the resulting judgment. This social meaning is assigned to the act as a consequence of that filtering. In other words, cultural evaluation is the mechanism; the interpretation of impoliteness is its product. This interpretation is not a single concept, but can vary depending on the recipient's cultural orientation, pragmatic experience, and relational sensitivity (Ren, 2022). At this stage, refusal acquires a more stable social meaning within a specific interactional context. The final stage in the framework is the interactional response, which encompasses how the recipient responds to the evaluated action. This response can be acceptance, adjustment, or even retaliation, reflecting the evaluation. In some cases, the response can also serve as an attempt to restore the disturbed relationship.

Conclusions

This article argues that the meaning of impoliteness in the speech act of refusal is not inherent in the linguistic form used, but rather is shaped through an evaluation process involving relational expectations, perceptions of violations, and cultural orientations brought by participants in the interaction. The proposed framework positions cultural evaluation as the primary mechanism for bridging the relationship between pragmatic strategies and social interpretation, enabling a more systematic explanation of variations in the assessment of refusal acts across cultures.

The theoretical contribution of the CEF is specific: it provides an integrative model that traces the full evaluative pathway from refusal strategy to impoliteness interpretation, positioning cultural orientation not as a background variable but as the active mediating mechanism

that determines whether a perceived relational violation becomes a negative social judgment. This distinguishes the framework from strategy-classification approaches, which stop at the level of production, and from impoliteness theories that identify evaluation as central but do not account for the specific pathways through which refusal is processed. This CEF offers a unified explanatory structure that was not previously available in the literature by integrating Beebe et al.'s (1990) strategy taxonomy, Culpeper's (2011) evaluative impoliteness theory, and Spencer-Oatey's (2005) rapport management framework into a sequential five-stage model.

As a conceptual model, the CEF carries inherent limitations that define the empirical work it is designed to generate. The five-stage sequence represents a theoretically grounded proposition, not a verified account of real-time cognitive processing — evaluation in interaction is rarely as orderly as any sequential model implies. The framework has not yet been empirically tested, and its application to Javanese communicative culture, while illustrative, draws on general ethnographic descriptions rather than on data from actual refusal interactions. These limitations are not weaknesses of the conceptual approach per se, but they identify the empirical agenda the framework is intended to open: experimental studies using rating tasks or retrospective verbal reports to test whether the five stages correspond to recoverable evaluative moments, and comparative studies pairing Javanese and Anglophone interlocutors in controlled refusal scenarios to provide empirical grounding for the cultural evaluation stage as theorized here.

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