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# Refusal Expression in L2 and its Comparison with Native Speaker: A Study Case in the Japanese Language

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## SUBMISSION TRACK

Received: January 25, 2020  
 Final Revision: April 07, 2020  
 Available Online: April 26, 2020

## KEYWORD

Politeness strategy, Japanese refusal expression,  
 Indonesian Japanese learners, Pragmatic competence

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## A B S T R A C T

This study aims to fill the gap of the comparison study between Japanese learners and native Japanese speakers, focused on the semantic formula of refusal act. Sixteen Japanese native speakers and twenty-two Indonesian learners are the subjects of this study. We use a questionnaire or Discourse Completion Test (DCT) to collect the data, and we use the semantic formula by Ito and Ikeda to analyze the refusal utterances. This paper reveals that Indonesian Japanese learners tended to not aware of different social status levels and use different semantic formulas in Japanese. The lack of knowledge of the pragmatic competence within the use of speech act is the main problem in Japanese education.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Japanese is referred to as a contextual language. This means that communication is essential in the context of socio-cultural discourse relating to the use of the Japanese language. Studying Japanese, however, should not be separated from the culture of the society to which the language belongs. Many aspects of communication are closely related to their social, cultural, political, and various other contexts. These complex relations between the nature of Japanese discourse and its socio-cultural contexts are problematic for foreign learners. For example, many people say that the refusal expressions in Japanese are ambiguous, especially for foreigners who study Japanese. They often misunderstand and have difficulty understanding these expressions.

Refusals are categorized as face-threatening acts, and the possibility of offending someone is inherent in the act itself (Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990). For this reason, refusals are often regarded as strategies. More direct the refusal, the more the threat to the person's face. Because of this risk, some degree of indirectness usually exists; the

person who refuses may need to soften the force of the refusal. To this end, making reasons for refusal are also crucial for reducing face-threatening. (Taguchi 2008; Campillo, Jordà & Espurz 2009) However, the study of this aspect is limited.

Many studies have investigated refusal expressions from the function of the modality in refusal discourse until a contrastive study with their native language. For example, Grein (2007) compared the speech act of refusal within the languages of German and Japanese in the setting of a dialogic action game. Ito (2006) and Ikeda (2005) analyzed the semantic formula of refusal expression in Japanese.

Some studies have investigated the important speech act performed by language learners (e.g., Al-Kahtani, 2005; Gass & Houck, 2011; Ikeda, 2009; Allami & Naeimi, 2011; Yamada, 2010, Kartika, 2019).

These studies revealed that the generic structure of Japanese refusals to requests has two obligation stages: request/Invitation and refusal. Others, such as initiating, pre-sequence, excuse, apology,

empathy, and alternative, are optional stages. This pattern is relatively similar to the refusals in other languages. However, few studies have investigated the speech act performed by Indonesian Japanese learners and their comparison with Japanese speakers.

The aim of the present paper is twofold: 1) to compare refusal strategies by Indonesian Japanese learners and native Japanese speakers; and 2) to examine and compare the semantic formulas of both Indonesian Japanese learners and native Japanese speakers. The results can contribute to active Japanese language learning for Indonesian learners and smooth communication between Indonesian and Japanese people.

Several studies on cross-cultural conducted throughout the year and one of the primary research in refusal is by Beebe et al. (1990). Beebe et al. conducted survey research to see and clarify pragmatic transfer from its mother tongue Japanese to English of English learners whose mother tongue is Japanese. On that process of investigation, this study uses a semantic formula for refusal in English American whose mother tongue is American, and a refusal of Japanese language whose mother tongue is Japanese. Therefore, the difference between American English and Japanese becomes clear. According to Beebe et al., in Japanese refusal expression, we can either choose to be part of it or not.

Ito Emiko (2006) stated that “Longer expressions are politer than shorter expressions with regards to refusals under the condition that the expression is appropriate.” The results of the present study show a necessary implication for learners of the Japanese language. The Japanese language is considered HC communication (High Context). This means that the context of communication is essential for socio-cultural discourses regarding Japanese language use. If these socio-cultural expressions of communication are not followed, communication is considered incomplete (Hall 1976). This suggests that learners also need to be able to estimate the appropriate level of politeness in a close relationship and to use acceptable expressions when speaking with native Japanese speakers.

Gass and Houck (2011) studied interlanguage refusal by non-native speakers. The results reveal

that learners negotiated their way by using various means to establish solidarity. Their findings suggest that refusal by non-native speakers should be analyzed in a broader range of communicative resources, such as discourse tactics and turn takings.

A study by Okto Primasakti (2006) investigated refusals by native Indonesian speakers. The result is that native Indonesian speakers use different semantic formulas and adjuncts of refusals following the status levels. For example, they use apologies to speakers of low status less frequently than those of equal status and use more often to those of high rank.

Wijayanto (2019) compared refusals in Javanese and English. The findings showed that Javanese and British native speakers used similarly indirect refusal strategies. Furthermore, they found minor differences in the way they chose semantic formulas to mitigate the refusals.

In recent years, some studies such as Gustini (2018) examined refusal in the Indonesian language and compared it to the Japanese language, focusing only on working situations. This study investigates the differences and similarities in the politeness strategies of refusal. The results are that Indonesians use reason to state the refusal act clearly. Meanwhile, the Japanese considerably use *aimai* reason. However, few of the studies have compared the use of refusal between native Japanese speakers and Indonesian learners of Japanese. Therefore, the present study is an attempt to analyze refusal strategies by Japanese learners of Indonesia with native Japanese speakers. The findings might reveal the knowledge of refusal strategies by Japanese learners and their various means to negotiate the strategy.

## II. METHODS

### Participants

This study compared refusal strategies and their semantic formulas employed by two groups of participants: (1) Indonesian Japanese learners as Group 1 (G1), and (2) native Japanese speakers as Group 2 (G2). Group 1 consisted of 22 participants from S University, and group 2 consisted of 16 participants living in Osaka city, Japan, selected through a random sampling technique.

## Instrument

In providing data, researchers use a questionnaire called discourse completion test (DCT) to collect data from both sides, Japanese and Indonesian. DCT is usually used as a test of intercultural communicative competence and pragmatic competence. A DCT consists of a one-sided roleplay containing a situational prompt that a participant will read to elicit the responses of another participant. Two initiating acts of refusal (invitation and request) were used as the setting situation of the refusals act. The DCT questionnaire was designed to be as realistic as possible in both Japanese and Indonesian contexts. For this purpose, the situation was developed by consulting with native speakers of Japanese and Indonesia, who were all lecturers of language studies.

## Procedure

Data collection was administered in Semarang Indonesia for Indonesian Japanese learners. For the native Japanese speaker's participants, data collection was conducted in Osaka, Japan. Before answering the DCTs, the participants received some explanation about their roles in the scenarios. The refusal strategies were analyzed by the semantic formulas that were classified by Ito (2005) and modified by Ikeda (2008).

Semantic formula classified by the meaning content of an expression that use by people to refuse something. The content of the expression commonly used "apology," "excuse," "alternative," and so on. (Ikoma and Shimura, 1993).

## Data Coding

The first is the refusal of an invitation to a welcome party; the Second situation is the refusal of a request to substitute him/her for a part-time job. The last setting is the situation of refusal to request to be an interpreter.

Moreover, the degree of intimacy is set and classified as follows:

1. A close senior(older)
2. Not very close senior(older)
3. Close friend(same age)
4. Not very close friend(same age)
5. A close junior(younger)
6. Not very close junior(younger)

**Table 1 Semantic formulas and examples**

| Semantic formula          | example   |
|---------------------------|---|
| Apology                   | Gomen, sumimasen, moushiwake arimasen   |
| Implicit refusal          | (Xwa)chotto...sekkaku desuga,   |
| reason                    | Tsukarete iru node,<br>Yakusoku/youji/yoteo ga aru node,                                      |
| Conclusion                | Direct : ikemasen/ ikimasen/ dame desu.<br>Indirect : ie ni kaeritai desu. Jikan ga nai desu. |
| Empathy                   | Zannen desuga, benkyou shitai no desuga,  |
| Gratitude                 | Arigatou gozaimasu.   |
| second apology            | Hontou ni sumimasen.  |
| expectation for next time | Mata kondo onegai shimasu.<br>Ashita (hoka no hi ni) ukagatte mo ii deshouka.                 |
| alternative               | (youji ga) hayaku owattara, renraku shimasu.<br>Jibun de benkyou shimasu.                     |

## III. RESULT

### The usage of direct and indirect strategies

In the early the 1990's, Beebe et al. classified semantic formulas into three main categories which are: 1) direct refusals such as execution and improper; 2) indirect refusals such as apologies, excuses, and alternatives; and 3) adjunct to refusals such as: Gratitude and filler.

In the first setting of the refusal of an invitation, Indonesian Japanese learners use more "indirect refusal" than native Japanese speakers for "not so close senior," and "not so close friend."

In Japanese classes, they learned about the Japanese *uchi-soto* concept. The *uchi-soto* concept is a human relation concept in Japanese that divides between person close to the speakers as an *uchi* group. Such as family, the person who the same office with him/her. The person outside the inner circle of his/her as a *soto* group. In the questionnaire, Indonesian Japanese learners know the concept and use it in the situation of these refusal acts. Below is an example of indirect refusal by Indonesian Japanese learners.

(1) "aa sou desuka, demo pa-ti ni iku no wa Amari suki jyanai node, sumimasen. Chotto..."

(Oo..really, I don't like going to a party. I am sorry. I don't think....)

Meanwhile, native Japanese speakers equally use direct refusal and indirect refusal. These results show that in Japanese daily life, the more intimate the opponent, the speaker could easily and directly refuse the invitation.

In the use of “direct refusal” for the invitation situation, Indonesian Japanese learners use to “a close senior” and “close friend.” On the other hand, native Japanese speakers mostly use “close friends” and “close Junior.” Below is an example of direct refusal by native Japanese speakers.

(2) "pa-ti wa sukijyanai node ikanaide okou to omou"

(I think I can't come to the party because I do not like a party.)

The second situation is the refusal expression used on a request to substitute him/her for a part-time job. Indonesian Japanese learners mostly use “indirect refusal”, regardless of the interlocutors their facing. Meanwhile, native Japanese speakers mostly use “indirect refusal” to the “not so close friend” and “a close friend.” We conclude that Japanese Indonesian learners lack pragmatic competency because the “indirect refusal” usage is high for all the interlocutors without considering the degree of intimacy. These results may also show that they have a limited refusal expression variety.

The third situation is the refusal of a request to be an interpreter. Indonesian Japanese learners have the same tendency as in the other situation, which is that they use more indirect refusal regardless of the interlocutors they are facing in conversation. Meanwhile, native Japanese speakers use less

“indirect refusal” and give more to the “not so close senior” and “not so close friend.”

In the use of “indirect refusal” and “direct refusal”, between Indonesian Japanese learners and comparison with native Japanese speakers, we can see that Indonesian Japanese learners tend not to notice the degree of intimacy, and the refusal strategies usage differs from native Japanese speakers.

The semantic formula of Refusal Expression by Indonesian Japanese learners and Native Japanese Speakers

In this section, we compare refusal expression with its semantic formula for Indonesian Japanese learners (G1) and native Japanese speakers (G2). The semantic formula was analyzed with classification as follows: (apologies), (reason), (refusal implicit), (emphaty/gratitude), and (alternative).

Figures 1 shows that, in the apology semantic formula, Indonesian Japanese learners tend to use apology much more than native Japanese speakers, regardless of whom they are talking. The native Japanese speakers use apology only to “not so close senior,” “a close senior,” and “not so close friend.” In Japanese, being polite, such as using apology before making a refusal act use, not to all the interlocutors, but mainly to the person in *the soto* group or older than him/her. Therefore, a native Japanese speaker uses different strategies towards the speaker whom they are talking about.

Meanwhile, in the semantic formula of reason, native Japanese speakers mostly add a reason in their refusal act. Similarities occurred in the answers

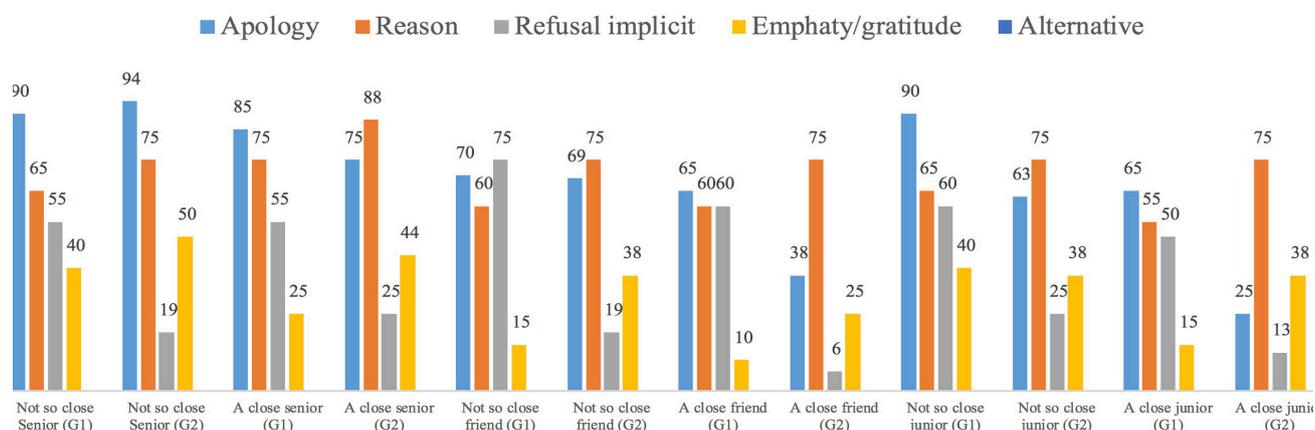


Fig 1: Situation 1 —Refusal on an invitation to a welcome party —(G1:n=20, G2: n=16)

from Indonesian Japanese learners. They also tend to add a reason for their refusal act. It is somehow stated that both use reason as an act of politeness to lower the FTA or Face Threatening Act. And giving a reason is maybe one of the politeness strategies in both Indonesian and Japanese.

The third semantic formula of refusal expression is refusal implicit. Refusal implicit in Japanese generally uses an ellipsis sentence such as “chotto...” and so on. In figure 1, the usage of refusal implicitly by Indonesian Japanese learners is higher than native Japanese speakers. This kind of ellipsis sentence was taught in Japanese classes as one of the refusal expressions. Therefore, many learners thought that adding “chotto...” as an act of refusal in Japanese.

In Japanese, refusal expression uses an ellipsis to give a polite refusal without providing any explanation adding. It is to show that they do not explicitly refuse the offer to make the speaker comfortable regarding who is the opponent of the conversation. They use a different strategy for refusal expression.

Below is an example of ellipsis expression in the refusal interaction.

1. Example of Indonesian Japanese learner (G1)  
 "Hontou ni sumimasen, pa-ti ni iku no wa Amari suki dewa nai node, chotto..."  
 (I am sorry, I don't like going to a party, so its....)
2. Example of a Japanese native speaker (G2)  
 "Suimasen, sono hi wa chotto youji ga ate... honto ni ikitain desukedo, sumimasen. Mata

onegai shimasu!"

(I am sorry, on that day, I have something to do. I am like to come. I am sorry. Next time, please invite me again!)

Another strategy in the refusal semantic formula in figure 1 is adding a feeling of gratitude or expressing empathy. Japanese speakers use more empathy and gratitude strategies to their refusal expression rather than Indonesian Japanese learners. Figures 1 shows that Indonesian Japanese learners give feeling regret by showing and expressing an apology. However, Japanese native speakers tend to use another strategy different from the opponent's talking.

Figures 2 shows the result in the second situation for refusal of a request to substitute in the part-time job. Japanese native speakers use the strategy of an apology based on the degree of intimacy; they use the politer expression of apology if the opponent is a senior or the person is older. In both situations of refusal expression, Indonesian Japanese learners mostly use a semantic formula of apologies, regardless of whom they are talking. In a situation of refusal to request, both learners and native Japanese speakers use apologies as one of the refusal strategies.

Meanwhile, the same tendency also occurred in the semantic formula of an excuse or reason. High usage of the reason was seen in both Japanese learners and native speakers' refusal strategies.

However, refusal implicit such as ellipsis expression use less by native Japanese speakers, and not by the learners. This has the same results as the first

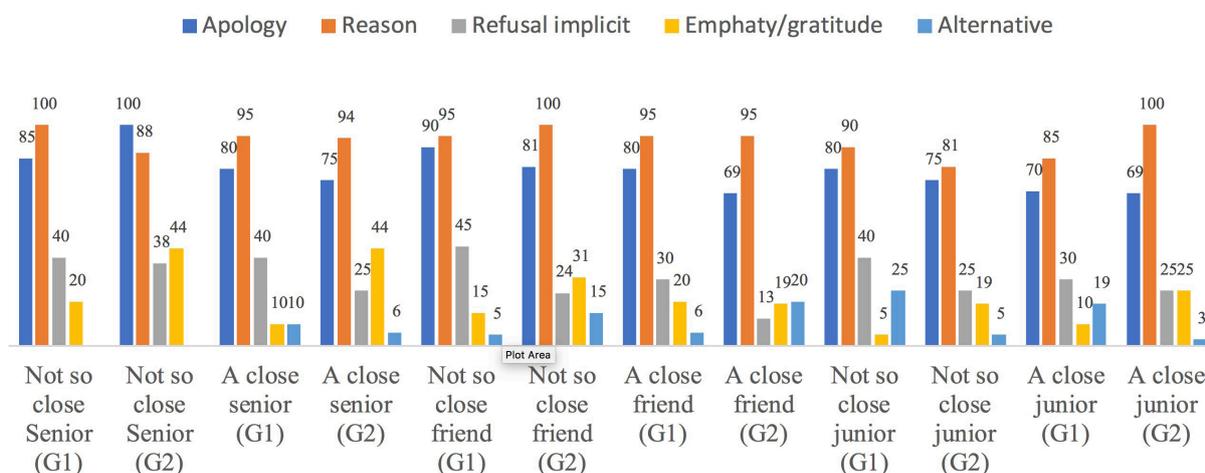


Fig 2: Situation 2— Refusal on a request to substitute him/her for a part-time job —(G1:n=20, G2: n=16)

situation on the refusal of an invitation.

Meanwhile, native Japanese speakers have seen that they used more empathy or gratitude than Japanese learners. They also give an alternative plan as refusal strategies to give more polite acts to their interlocutor. Below is an example of the use of alternative plan semantic formulas.

1. Alternative plan on refusal expression by Japanese learners

"Raishuu no kinyoubi wa youji ga arimasu kara, hoka no hito wa dou deshouka."  
(I have something to do in next Friday, how about I ask other people?)

2. Alternative plan on refusal expression by native Japanese speakers  
"Yaa, youji aru... Gomen ne. Dareka hoka no hito ni kite mite ageyokka?"

(No, I have some errand. Sorry. I will ask someday how about it?)

Figures 3 shows the semantic formula of the third situation of refusal on request to be an interpreter. As in the previous situation on refusal to request, here, Indonesian Japanese learners also mainly added apologies to the semantic formula of refusal strategies regardless of the interlocutors their facing. Both learners and native Japanese speakers much less use the semantic formula of an alternative plan, as this result may relate to the topic of the speech act they're giving to which is a request to be an interpreter. An alternative plan may also suggest a solution giving by the speaker to the interlocutors. This shows that they feel regret

and confirm if they use another alternative to help.

In this request situation, we can see that the empathy strategy is less used. There is an entirely different tendency of the use of ellipsis expression for an invitation situation and a request situation. Japanese learners tend to use a much more elliptical expression in an invitation situation instead of in a request situation.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

In Japanese refusal interaction, a Japanese native speaker uses a different expression to the interlocutors in regards to showing politeness. They use direct refusal and sometimes provide no apology if the opponent intimate and close. In contrast, Indonesian Japanese learners use refusal strategies regardless of whom they are talking. Moreover, they also tend to make an indirect refusal and express a feeling of sorry by showing apology regardless of the opponent's facing.

In this study, the DCT scenarios were made with the social status and social distance between the speakers and the interlocutors.

Japanese native speakers varied the refusal strategy to with whom they were talking. However, Indonesian Japanese learners differ. In the Japanese language, the refusal strategy is complicated; they use a variety of different kinds of apology or giving refusal implicit, and so on.

Related to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, strategies for negative politeness preferred in Japanese. On the contrary, Indonesian expression

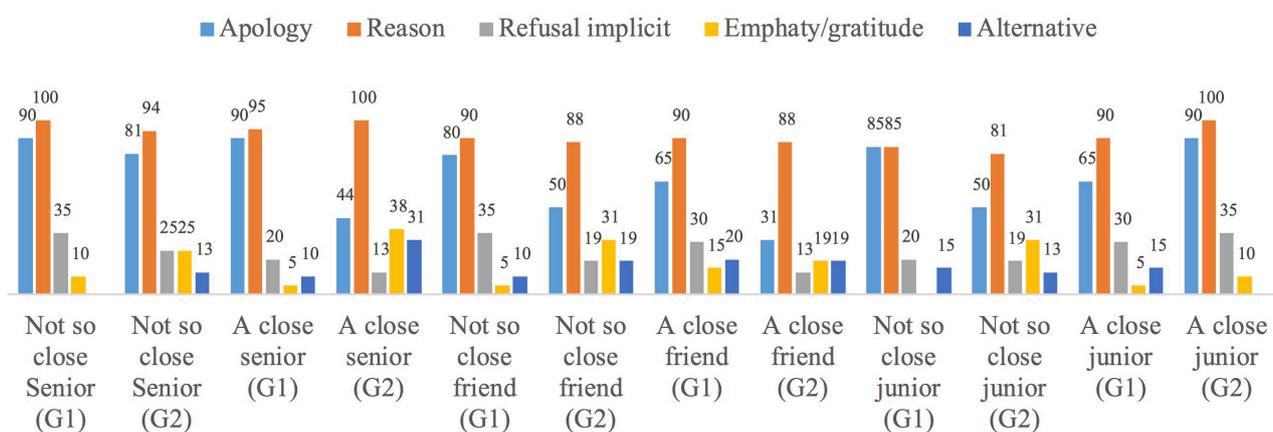


Fig 3: Situation 3—Refusal on request to be an interpreter —(G1:n=20, G2: n=16)

tends to express positive politeness because it uses an indirect form. Japanese learners give a formal expression somewhat different from Japanese. Indonesian learners use apology form when they represent refusal regardless of the interlocutor's social status. However, the Japanese show politeness by giving a feeling expression of regret or gratitude and sometimes adding an alternate plan to its refusal utterance.

According to Aziz (2000), an Indonesian native speaker commonly gives a direct refusal expression (strategy #1), although a variety of ways smoothens directness. Indonesian speakers often do not reveal the refusal and make indirect refusal by making words around in circles and inconsistent. This strengthens the claim that Indonesian learners tend to use indirect refusal, as explained above.

The degree of intimacy that was chosen above has a close-range relationship, senior student, friends, and junior. In Japanese, as explained above, we can see that Japanese native speakers use a different kind of strategy in refusal interaction.

Moreover, Indonesian Japanese learners tend to use ellipsis much more than Japanese native speakers. In the Indonesian language, there is no called and ellipsis expression such as "chotto...", "~node...". However, in Indonesian, according to Aziz (2000), there is some strategy to refuse by making vague words. It is also assumed that strategy is the influence of the mother tongue.

The use of reason as a strategy in the refusal semantic formula for both Japanese learners and Japanese native speakers is high. We conclude that to give politeness feeling on its refusal utterance,

both speakers are somewhat the same. By using an explanation adding to a refusal expression could provide a more formal expression so that the opponent would not hurt their feelings.

This result is a preliminary investigation; the percentage shows above might differ if the object was more in number. However, we can head up the situational and linguistic expressions that differ both by Japanese learners and Japanese native speakers. This study implies that Indonesian Japanese learners still influence their first language when using refusal expressions. Because of their lack of pragmatic competency in Japanese, they tend not to use a variety of refusal expressions based on the interlocutor's social distance and social status.

## V. CONCLUSION

This study shows different usage of refusal expressions between Indonesian Japanese learners and native speakers. Indonesian Japanese learners mostly use apologies in their indirect refusal, regardless of whom they are talking. Meanwhile, native Japanese speakers use negative politeness and use different refusal strategies and consider their degree of intimacy with the interlocutors.

The data employed in this study are limited; the results should be examined using more data. However, the results of the current study are to contribute to intercultural communication studies and the need for the introduction to pragmatic competency in Japanese learning.

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## Appendix

(Questionnaire 1. Refusal on an invitation to a welcome party situation)

### Shinkan Kompa : [Welcome Party]

Bamen: Anata wa shitashikunai sempai ni shinkan kompa ni sanku suru youni sasowaremasu. Shikashi, anatawa pa-ti ni iku no wa Amari suki dewa nai node, sono shinkan kompa ni sanku dekinai to kotowaritai desu.

[Situation: You are encouraged to join the welcome party by seniors who are not so close to you. But, you do not like going to parties so much, so you would like to refuse to participate in the party.]

Sempai: Asatte no shinkan kompa, ikanai?

[Senior]: Will you go to the welcome party the day after tomorrow?

Watashi:

Me:

(Questionnaire 2 Refusal on a request to substitute him/her in a part-time job situation)

### Arubaito [Part-time]

Bamen: Anata wa yuujin ni hoka no hito no kawari ni baito o shite hoshii to tanomaremasu. Shikashi, sono hi anata wa youji ga arimasu node, kotowaritai desu.

[Situation: You are asked by a close friend to replace another person for a baito. But, that day, you have some errands and wants to refuse.]

Sempai: B san, raishuu no kinyoubi, kitemoraenai? Jitsu wa kinoshita san ga yasumu mon dakara, kawari o sagashite irun dakedo...

[Senior] B san, can you please come next Friday? Sakashita san will be absent, so I am looking for a substitute...

Watashi:

Me:

(Questionnaire 3: Refusal on request to be an interpreter situation)

### Tsuuyaku [Interpreter]

Bamen: Anata wa shitashii kohai ni Ahmad sensei no kyouju no kouenkai de tsuuyaku suru you tanomaremashita. Shikashi, ichido mo tsuuyaku o shita koto ga arimasen shi, senmon yougo mo shirimasen. Kotowaritai desu.

Situation: You were asked to help as an interpreter at Prof. Ahmad lecture by your close junior. But, you never did it. So, you want to refuse the offer.

Kohai: B san, Kyouju no kouenkai de tsuuyaku wo shitekureru hito wo sagashite irun dakedo, onegai dekinai?

Junior: B san, I'm looking for a person who can help with interpreting Professor lecture, could you help?

Watashi:

Me: