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## Directness vs. indirectness: Egyptian Arabic and US English communication style

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### Abstract

This study investigated the similarities and differences between Egyptian Arabic and US English communication style by focusing on the speech act of making refusals. A modified version of the 12-item discourse completion test (DCT) developed by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (in: R. Scarcella, E. Anderson, S. Krashen (Eds.), *Developing Communicative Competence in a Second Language*, Newbury House, New York, 1990, p. 55) was used to elicit data. The DCT consisted of three requests, three invitations, three offers, and three suggestions. Each situation type included one refusal to a person of higher status, one to a person of equal status, and one to a person of lower status. To more closely simulate real-life communication and because Arabic is a diglossic language, an interviewer read the situation aloud and the participants responded verbally on audiotape, Egyptians in Arabic and Americans in English. Audiotapes were transcribed, the Egyptian tapes into Arabic and the American tapes into English. Thirty US interviews resulted in 358 refusals and 25 Egyptian interviews resulted in 300 refusals. The refusals were divided into strategies. Using a modified version of the coding categories developed by Beebe et al., two trained coders categorized the strategies. Inter-coder reliability was 89% for the US data and 85% for the Arabic data. Data were analyzed according to frequency types of strategies, the direct/indirect dimension of communication style, gender, and status. Results suggest that both groups use similar strategies with similar frequency in making refusals. They differ, however, in the frequency of indirect strategies with Egyptian males using less indirection than Americans. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Communication style; Directness; Indirectness; Arabic; American; Refusals

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## 1. Communication style

Communication style is difficult to define. Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) define it as a “meta-message that contextualizes how individuals should accept and interpret a verbal message” (p. 100). One dimension of communication style that has been identified, studied, and used to describe communication differences between Arabic and English speakers is the direct/indirect dimension.

The direct/indirect dimension refers to the “extent speakers reveal their intentions through explicit communication” (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988, p. 100). A direct style of communication refers to explicitly stating one’s feelings, wants, and needs; the speaker says what he or she means. An indirect style, on the other hand, refers to “verbal messages that camouflage and conceal speakers’ true intentions in terms of their wants, needs, and goals in the discourse situation” (p. 100).

The literature on Arabic communication style proposes that indirectness is one of its defining characteristics (e.g., Cohen, 1987, 1990; Feghali, 1997; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Katriel, 1986; Zaharna, 1995). Studies on Arabic communication style have been heavily influenced by Hall’s (1976) model of high- vs. low-context cultures. According to Hall, a high-context communication or message is “one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message” (p. 91). Conversely, in low-context communication, most of the information is in the explicit code (i.e., in the words). According to Hall’s model, Arab culture is considered to be high context (i.e., less direct) and American culture is low context (i.e., more direct). In spite of the oversimplification that results from dichotomizing cultural patterns, Hall’s model continues to be used by some communication scholars, in part, because the model makes complex differences in communication understandable and also because empirical research has supported many of Hall’s contentions (e.g., Gudykunst, 1983; Gudykunst, Matsumoto, Ting-Toomey, Nishida, Kim, & Heyman, 1996; Gudykunst & Nishida, 1986).

Cohen (1987, 1990), borrowing from Hall, explains the indirectness of Arabic communication style within the context of political negotiations involving Egypt, Israel and the US over a 30-year period. He maintains that the Arabic language reflects a high-context culture, in which “what is not said is sometimes more important than what is said” (p. 42). English, on the other hand, reflects a low-context culture in which “words represent truth” (p. 42). Cohen (1990) points out that in Arabic, directness is much disliked and that great pains will be taken to avoid saying no and that “circumlocution, ambiguity, and metaphor help to cushion against the danger of candor” since a refusal will cause embarrassment (p. 43). In contrast, Cohen (1987) proposes that Americans prefer communicating “straight from the shoulder”, stating explicitly “what has to be said” (p. 31).

In an ethnographic study, Katriel (1986) contrasts the indirectness of Arabic communication style with the Hebrew *Dugri*, a communication style used by the Israeli Sabra culture that emphasizes “speaking straight to the point” (p. 10). She also contrasts *Dugri* with the Tough Talk of American culture. The intent of the Tough Talker is illustrated in Katriel, “I say what I mean. If I mean the same thing

twice, I say the same thing twice, and I don't care if it offends the so-called rules of so-called graceful prose" (p. 102). According to Katriel, Arabic communication style can be described as Sweet Talk since it is based on the cultural ethos of *Musayara*. *Musayara* refers to "metaphorically 'going with' the other, on humoring, on accommodating oneself to the position or situation of the other" and "reflects a concern for harmonious social relations and for the social regulation of interpersonal conduct" (p. 111). This "going with" reflects the indirect style of the language which, according to Katriel's informants, "is in the blood of every Arab person" (p. 111). Katriel also notes the importance of status in Arabic, pointing out that the (Arab) person "lower in hierarchy is usually required to do *Musayara* to the one higher up" unlike the Israeli Sabra, who speaks his or her mind under any circumstance (p. 112).

Based on theoretical models of communication style differences, Zaharna (1995) compares cultural variations of messages in American and Arab communication preferences. Zaharna concludes that the American culture shows a preference for direct, accurate, clear and explicit communication while Arab culture exhibits an indirect, symbolic, ambiguous, and implicit style. Feghali (1997) reviewed the research on Arabic communication patterns and concludes that Arabic speakers communicate indirectly, that they often conceal "desired wants, needs, or goals during discourse" (p. 358).

Studies on American communication style include Okabe (1983), who in a study comparing Japanese and Americans, concluded that "Americans' tendency to use explicit words is the most noteworthy characteristic of their communication style" (p. 36). In a study of the development of communication style in children, Johnson and Johnson (1975) note that American children are socialized to speak the truth, to be honest, and Miller (1994) claims that Americans are characterized as "always forthright, direct, and clear" (p. 37).

## 2. Rationale for study

As humans, we learn the norms and rules of social interaction in specific contexts through socialization (or "culturalization") processes (Ochs, 1986). These context-specific norms regulate our interaction behaviors and perceptions of the behavioral interactions of others. They also vary from group to group and, as the descriptions of Arabic and English communication style indicate, attempts have been made to "characterize such differences across languages and cultures" (Rose, 1996, p. 67). While some of the generalizations about language use may be valid, more comprehensive accounts of language use are needed. In particular, such descriptions of communication styles in Arabic and American English are problematic because they represent generalizations that are drawn from non-empirical models (e.g., Hall, 1976) and often from personal experiences and impressions rather than from empirical data. In addition, such descriptions present Arabic and English linguistic and cultural patterns as neatly homogeneous, overlooking the differences that exist among the various communities in terms of status, gender, and context. Cross-cultural examinations of communication style and patterns should be based on data,

systematically collected and analyzed, that take into account status, gender, and context. This paper presents such a study.

### 3. Refusals

One method of examining communication style is to use small and comparable units of discourse. Speech acts have been used for this purpose (e.g., Rose, 1992, 1996). The term, speech act, has been defined as a minimal unit of discourse (Searle, 1969) and as a basic and functional unit of communication (Cohen, 1995). Examples of speech acts include giving and responding to compliments, asking questions, apologizing, leavetaking, making introductions, and giving refusals. The speech act of refusing was selected as the unit of comparison because refusals often call for strategies of indirection; refusals are face-threatening, and the possibility of offending someone is inherent in the act itself (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989). According to Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), in a face-threatening act, the objectives of communicating clearly and protecting face are brought into conflict. In making a refusal, an individual rejects an offer initiated by another or backs out of an agreement, and risks offending the initiator. The more direct the refusal, the more the threat to the person's face. Because of this risk, "some degree of indirectness usually exists" (Brown & Levinson, 1978, p. 56); the person who refuses may need to cushion the force of the refusal.

Several comparative studies have been conducted on refusals. A major study (Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990) compared the refusals given by native speakers of Japanese and native speakers of English,<sup>1</sup> using a Discourse Completion Test (DCT). A DCT usually consists of structured written discourse—part of which is left open and part of which is closed, "providing both the speech act and the rejoinder" (Cohen, 1995, p. 24). The DCT situations in Beebe et al.'s study consist of three requests, three invitations, three offers, and three suggestions.

The findings of Beebe et al. (1990) clearly demonstrate the importance of status in the refusal strategies selected by the respondents. Americans, in refusing *requests* from higher-, equal-, and lower-status persons, usually employed a form of indirect communication. In contrast, the Japanese tended to use more direct strategies if the respondent were addressing a lower-status person. Status was also an important factor in refusing *invitations*. As with requests, the Japanese respondents were more likely to use direct strategies in refusing invitations from someone of lower status. However, in refusing invitations from persons of higher status, the Japanese were more polite, using more indirect strategies than in addressing persons of lower status. On the other hand, Americans used similar indirect strategies in refusing all

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<sup>1</sup>The primary purpose of the study by Beebe et al. (1990) was to investigate the amount of transfer from Japanese when native speakers of Japanese made refusals in English. In their study, they included other groups of participants (e.g., Japanese speaking English). We did not include these groups in the review of literature because we are comparing Arabic and English refusals and not investigating language transfer. A study by Houck and Gass (1995) also investigated transfer by analyzing English refusals made by native Japanese speakers.

invitations. With status equals, Americans often ended the refusal with a “thank you”.

American and Japanese refusals were also studied by Saeki and O’Keefe (1994), using an experimental design. Participants responded to a scenario, refusing to hire a candidate looking for a job, by writing what they would say to the person in the situation. Three independent variables were nationality, relationship to candidate (friend or stranger), and qualification of candidate (qualified or unqualified). The dependent measures were constructed by analyzing the responses according to idea units. Americans and Japanese were similar in that both elaborated more when the candidate was unqualified and both employed more literal and direct strategies than that the researchers had anticipated.

A six-item written DCT was employed by Liao and Bresnahan (1996) to compare American English and Mandarin Chinese refusal strategies. Their analysis revealed that, overall, Americans used more strategies than the Chinese in making refusals. The Chinese tended to begin the refusal with an apology, an indirect strategy, followed by a reason. The researchers attribute this brevity to a concern for ending the refusal quickly because it is an awkward interaction. Respondents from both cultures varied their refusal strategies according to the status of the requester.

Stevens (1993) studied Arabic and English refusals using a written DCT. The DCT consisted of 15 situations, eight requests and seven offers/invitations. His findings, similar to those of Beebe et al. (1990), revealed that refusals involve multiple strategies and that interlocutors seldom refuse outright. His analysis indicated that both Arabic and English speakers used many of the same strategies (e.g., explanations, non-committal strategies, partial acceptances, and white lies). Steven’s study is valuable in that it is one of the first studies to compare Arabic and English refusals, yet, the study does not investigate the role of status nor the degree of indirection in making refusals. It also does not indicate the frequency of each strategy type.

Hussein (1995) discusses making refusals in Arabic as part of a larger study of speech acts in Arabic. He lists some of the strategies used by Arabic native speakers in refusals and maintains that indirect refusals are used with acquaintances of equal status and with close friends of unequal status. Hussein’s study is descriptive in nature and is based on examples, which he gathered by means of participant observation. A problem exists, however, with his examples. Although he maintains that the data occurred naturalistically (i.e., the utterances were spoken), most of the examples used are written in Modern Standard Arabic, a formal variety of Arabic that is not used for daily communication. In a study of Jordanian Arabic refusals, AL-Issa (1998) found that Jordanians were more likely to express regret (e.g., “I’m sorry”) than Americans and that both groups employed explanations and reasons more than any other strategy. AL-Issa used a written DCT to obtain his data. Thus, the Arabic refusals were written and not spoken. As has already been discussed, the variety of Arabic used in writing is different than the variety used in speaking.

Five important patterns emerge from these studies that inform the present study. One pattern is that status appears to affect the amount of directness a person uses in making a refusal (Beebe et al., 1990; Liao & Bresnahan; 1996). A second pattern is

that Japanese (Beebe et al., 1990; Saeki & O'Keefe, 1994) subjects employed more direct strategies in making refusals than the US subjects or than the researchers expected. This finding is surprising because the intercultural literature frequently characterizes the Japanese as preferring indirect communication strategies (e.g., Hall & Hall, 1987). An important methodological pattern is that, in all but one of the above studies, the use of writing is used for collecting data that are supposed to be spoken (i.e., the subjects are asked to write what they think they would say in a given situation). Finally, gender is not discussed as a factor that might influence refusal strategy use nor is the frequency of each strategy type presented. The present study builds on earlier studies by investigating both status and gender, by eliciting oral refusals instead of written ones, and by providing frequencies for each type of refusal strategy.

#### **4. The present study**

This study investigated American and Egyptian perceptions of how they believe they would make refusals in particular situations. The research questions are:

1. According to their perceptions, do Egyptians and Americans use similar strategies in making refusals?
2. According to their perceptions, do Egyptians and Americans differ in their use of indirectness to soften the impact of refusals?
3. According to the perceptions of the respondents, are status and gender significant factors in relation to indirectness in making refusals?

##### *4.1. Subjects*

Fifty-five subjects participated in this study: 30 English-speaking Americans in the US and 25 Arabic-speaking Egyptians in Egypt. The US subjects were between 24 and 40 years of age; half were female and half male. All of the US subjects were white, had bachelors' degrees and lived in Atlanta, Georgia although many were originally from other parts of the US. Eight were graduate students, 16 worked in business (e.g., software engineering), and six were teachers. The Egyptian subjects were between 19 and 39 years of age and lived in Cairo; 15 were male and 10 were female. Fourteen were students, three from a private university and 11 from public universities. The others had bachelors' degrees from public universities; five were accountants, two auditors, one teacher, and one secretary. Before the interviews, the interviewers (i.e., two of the researchers and graduate research assistants) asked interviewees if they were willing to be interviewed on audiotape for a sociolinguistic study. If they agreed, they signed a consent form giving their permission.

#### 4.2. Method of data collection

Wolfson (1981, 1983) and others (Hymes, 1962; Wolfson, Marmor, & Jones, 1989) have argued for the study of naturally occurring speech act data using ethnomethodology. Other researchers, however, have pointed out the limitations of ethnographic data collection for cross-cultural studies due to problems of comparability (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989) and problems of controlling gender and status, of notetaking that relies on the researcher's memory, of the infrequent use of speech act being studied, and of the time-consuming nature of data collection (Cohen, 1996). Other limitations include lack of information about speaker's status and cultural background (Kasper & Dahl, 1991) and data that are biased by the linguistic utterances of friends, relatives, and associates. The methodology proposed by Wolfson and others has also been criticized as being "reduced" because it relies on utterances that can be written down in a notebook without the "rich and varied means of data collection used by ethnographers" (Boyle, 2000, p. 28).

In this study, a modified version of the DCT used by Beebe et al. (1990) was used to collect the data. We chose to use the DCT because (1) in cross-cultural studies, the constancy of situations enhances comparability (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989); (2) the situations had already been developed and piloted and (3) our results could be more easily compared with those of other researchers. We did, however, slightly modify the method. First, instead of subjects reading the situation and responding in writing, an interviewer read each situation aloud to the subjects and asked them to respond verbally on audiotape. Spoken elicitation and the corresponding refusals were used because they more closely resemble real-life communication than written role plays. Evidence that supports the use of spoken elicitations and responses is provided by Beebe and Cummings (1995). They compared two methods of eliciting telephone data: talk versus written questionnaire responses. They found that subjects talked four times more than they wrote. In addition, oral responses are more appropriate for Arabic speakers. Arabic is a diglossic language with a version (*FuSHaa*) that is mainly written and a version (*‘aammiiyya*) that is mainly spoken. To ask respondents to write their responses would be unrealistic since they would be producing formal responses that they do not use in real life.

Secondly, one situation in the DCT was slightly changed at the suggestion of the Egyptian researcher. In item 1 of the original version of the DCT, an employee asks for an increase in pay. Since it is uncommon for employees to ask for pay increases in Egypt, the situation was changed. In the version used in this study, the employee asks to take the weekend off.

The instrument consists of 12 situations that demand a refusal: three requests, three invitations, three offers, and three suggestions. Each situation type includes one refusal to a person of higher status, one to a person of equal status, and one to a person of lower status (see Appendix A for the complete instrument). Requests are defined as polite demands for something; the requester asks a favor of the other person (e.g., asking to borrow class notes). Invitations are types of requests (e.g., asking someone to come to dinner); however, instead of asking a favor, the inviter is

usually attempting to be thoughtful and kind. Offers refer to asking individuals if they want something (e.g., a piece of cake). Suggestions are ideas put forward for people to consider (e.g., to lecture less in class).

To insure the equivalency of the Arabic and English version of the elicitation instrument, Barnlund and Araki's (1985) method of translation was followed for the Arabic version. First, the English version was translated into Arabic by one of the researchers, a native speaker of Arabic. Second, the Arabic version was assessed by two other individuals fluent in Arabic and English. Finally, the Arabic version was back-translated into English by a professional translator. The existing discrepancies were resolved during discussions between the translator, the Egyptian researcher, and another bilingual.

After the interviews were completed, the audiotapes were transcribed. The American tapes were transcribed into English and the Egyptian tapes into Arabic. The Arabic transcriptions were also translated into English, but the primary analysis of the Arabic refusals was based on the Arabic transcripts, and not the English translations. The 30 US interviews resulted in 358 American English refusals (two interviews yielded 11 refusals). The 25 Egyptian interviews resulted in 300 Egyptian Arabic refusals.

## 5. Data analysis

In order to arrive at a set of strategies, the researchers first divided the utterances into idea units (Chafe, 1980). These units are also referred to as strategies and often consist of a single independent clause. For example, the US refusal below was divided into four strategies.

- (1) (i) We really need you right now
- (ii) and we've lost some good workers lately.
- (iii) So you won't be able to leave.
- (iv) I'm sorry. (AF1)<sup>2</sup>

For the Egyptian data, the Arabic transcripts were used to parse the refusals into strategies. Dividing the refusals into formulas also keeps the researchers analytically honest; all the data are accounted for. As Miles and Huberman (1994) argue, qualitative data should be quantified as a test for possible researcher bias.

While parsing the refusals into strategies, the researchers became familiar with the data. They observed that the strategies seemed similar to the strategies discussed in Beebe et al. (1990). To determine if the data from this study did, in fact, match the classification system used in Beebe et al., the researchers, in a preliminary analysis, classified the data using the system developed by Beebe et al. As a result of this

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<sup>2</sup>The A or E in front of the utterance refers to American or Egyptian; the F or M refers to female or male speakers; and the number refers to the particular interview.

preliminary analysis, the classification system was slightly modified to fit the data. Categories, used in Beebe et al., that were not found in our data, were omitted.

The English data were then coded by two trained native-English-speaking graduate research assistants. The Arabic data were coded by two native Arabic speakers, one of the researchers and a graduate research assistant. The coders worked independently and coded all of the strategies in each refusal. The intercoder reliability was 89% for the English data and 85% for the Arabic data. For items on which there was disagreement, the coders reviewed the coding guidelines and recoded the data until they came to a consensus. Since we were comparing two groups, the “units of analysis need[ed] to be non-overlapping” (Ryan & Bernard, 2000, p. 780); in other words, each unit of analysis belonged to only one category. In addition, the categories were exhaustive (i.e., all data were represented in one of the categories). A composite of all the coded strategies is presented later in Table 1.

After the initial coding was completed, data were analyzed according to the directness or indirectness of each refusal. An indirect refusal was defined as containing a strategy that would soften the blow of the refusal. Using the direct/indirect categories in Beebe et al. (see Table 1), two of the researchers independently coded the strategies. The intercoder reliability was 92%. For the disagreements, a third coder was consulted, so that in the end, reliability was 100%.

The effects of country, gender, and status on directness/indirectness were examined through analysis of variance (ANOVA). For each respondent, directness scores were calculated. If a refusal contained one or more direct strategies, a score of 1 was assigned; otherwise, a score of 0 was given. Total scores within each status situation were calculated with a maximum of 4 (i.e., all of the four refusal situations for high [or equal or lower] status contained a direct strategy) and a minimum of 0 (i.e., none of the refusal situations for a particular status level contained a direct strategy). Thus, each subject had three directness scores, one for high-status situations, one for equal status, and one for low status.

## 6. Results

Results were analyzed according to the frequency of strategy use and directness as related to country, gender, and status.

### 6.1. *Frequency of strategies used*

By analyzing the coded data, we determined the sets of strategies used by this set of US English and Egyptian Arabic speakers for each situation. As noted by Houck and Gass (1995), refusals are complex speech acts “primarily because they often involve lengthy negotiations as well as face-saving maneuvers” (p. 49). This complexity is illustrated by the number of strategies in each refusal. In the US data, the average number of strategies is 5.4 with a range of 1–19. The Egyptian refusals average 3.2 strategies with a range from 1 to 11.

Table 1  
Classification of refusal strategies<sup>a</sup>

I. *Direct*

- A. Performative (e.g., “I refuse.”)
- B. Non-performative statement
  - (1) “No”
  - (2) Negative willingness (e.g., “I can’t.” “I won’t be able to give them to you.”)

II. *Indirect*

- A. Statement of regret (e.g., “I’m so sorry.”)
- B. Reason (e.g., “I have other plans.” “I’m going to be studying until late tonight.”)
- C. Statement of alternative (e.g., “If you work half the day, I’ll give you the afternoon off.”)
- D. Set condition for future or past acceptance (e.g., “Oh, if I’d checked my e-mail earlier, I wouldn’t have made other plans”)
- E. Promise of future acceptance (e.g., “I’ll do it next time”; “Let’s make it another day”)
- F. Statement of principle (e.g., “I don’t believe in fad dieting.”)
- G. Criticize the request/requester (e.g., “Who do you think you are?”)
- H. Postponement (e.g., “I need to think about it.”)
- I. Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement (I’d love to...)
- J. Statement of empathy (e.g., “While I appreciate...)
- K. Let interlocutor off the hook (e.g., That’s okay; don’t worry about it.”)
- L. Gratitude (e.g., “Thanks.”)
- M. Hedging (e.g., “Oh, I’m not sure.”)

<sup>a</sup> A modified version of the classification scheme used by Beebe et al. (1990). Strategies not used in the data generated for this study were omitted from Beebe et al.’s classification scheme.

In order to compare the frequency of strategies used by the US and Egyptian subjects, the number of each strategy type was counted. As shown in Table 2, 18 categories accounted for approximately 94% of the strategies used in both the American and Egyptian refusals. There were 1605 strategies used in the US refusals. By far, the greatest number of strategies were identified as providing a reason or excuse for the refusal. The reasons accounted for 498 or 31% of the total number of strategies used. Negative willingness (e.g., “I can’t”) was the second most-popular strategy and was used 204 times, accounting for 13% of the strategies. Strategies were coded as non-performative “no” and gratitude was accounted for 7% of the total.

There were 963 strategies used in the Egyptian refusals. The most common strategies used by the Egyptian respondents were similar to those used by the US respondents. Reasons were the most common strategy used with 408 or 42% of the strategies coded as reasons. Negative willingness was the second most-common strategy 141 or 15% of the strategies. Non-performative “no”s were used in 58 or 6% of the refusals.

To illustrate common refusal strategies used by the Egyptian and American respondents, examples are provided. In the first, the respondent is refusing a request from a higher-status person: A boss asks an employee to spend an extra hour or two at work. An Egyptian female responds

Table 2  
Frequency of strategies in each category for American and Egyptian refusals

Coding categories	Americans (n = 1605)	Egyptians (n = 963)
Performative	23 (01%)	10 (01%)
Non-performative “No”	109 (07%)	58 (06%)
Negative willingness	204 (13%)	141 (15%)
Statement of regret	95 (06%)	73 (08%)
Reason	498 (31%)	408 (42%)
Statement of alternative	104 (06%)	63 (07%)
Condition for future/past acceptance	21 (01%)	12 (01%)
Promise of future/past acceptance	15 (01%)	18 (02%)
Statement of principle	44 (03%)	23 (02%)
Criticize requester	06 (00%)	15 (02%)
Let off hook	80 (05%)	27 (03%)
Repetition of request	15 (01%)	04 (0.5%)
Postponement	34 (02%)	21 (02%)
Hedging	56 (04%)	04 (0.5%)
Statement/positive feeling	82 (05%)	12 (01%)
Statement of empathy		19 (01%)
Gratitude	111 (07%)	14 (01%)
Other	89 (06%)	58 (06%)
Total	1605 (100%)	963 (100%)

(2) *ana laazim arawwaH dilwa’ti* (reason)

(“I have to leave now”)

*laakin mumkin aagi bukra S-SubH wa-khallaS illi ana ‘ayzaa* (statement of alternative)

(“but could come tomorrow morning to finish what I need,”)

*laakin dilwa’ti mish Ha’dar* (negative willingness)

(“but now I cannot.”) (EF4)

In the same situation, an American male explains

(3) I would really love to, (wish)

But family matters are pressing. (reason)

I really have to get home. (reason)

Can we please do it another time? (statement of alternative)

I’d be glad to make it early tomorrow morning or evening. (statement of alternative) (AM24)

In another situation, an Egyptian female refused an invitation to dinner from someone of equal status by saying

(4) *la’* (non-performative)

(“No”)

*ma’leshsh*<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>*ma’leshsh* has many meanings, including “sorry”, “what can you do?” and “never mind”.

*khalliha yum taani* (statement of alternative)  
 (Make it another day.)  
*s-sabt g-gayy, ana mashguula khaaliS* (reason)  
 (I am very busy next Saturday.) (EF 16)

When an Egyptian male is offered a piece of cake by a status equal, he refuses by saying

- (5) *la'* (non-performative)  
 (“No”)  
*bi-SaraaHa ana <sup>c</sup>andi HumuuDa* (reason)  
 (“Frankly, I suffer from some acidity”)  
*mish Ha'dar aakul keek* (negative willingness)  
 “and will not be able to eat cake.”  
*ma<sup>c</sup>lishsh* (EM13)

When an American male refused cake from a status equal, he commented

- (6) No, (non-performative statement)  
 Thanks. (expression of gratitude)  
 I'm on a diet. (reason) (AM29)

The Egyptian respondents differed from the US respondents in that expressions of gratitude were used in only 14 or 1% of the refusals. The following refusals illustrate the use of gratitude by US respondents and the non-use by Egyptian respondents. In this situation, a boss offers employees a raise and promotion if they are willing to move to a small town. Many of the US refusals contained an expression of gratitude, often at the beginning or the end. An example is given below.

- (7) As much as I'd like to say yes, (statement of positive opinion)  
 for a lot of professional and certain personal reasons, (reason)  
 I just can't. (negative willingness)  
 Thanks for the offer. (gratitude) (AM5)

In this situation (an offer for a raise and promotion), none of the Egyptian respondents stated an expression of gratitude. The Egyptian respondents also differed from the US respondents in that most of them did not cushion the refusal in the opening statement. The majority began their refusals with negative willingness or non-performative statements. A typical example is given in refusal (8).

- (8) *ma'darsh aruuH* (negative willingness)  
 (“I cannot go,”)  
*a<sup>c</sup>ud hinaak li-waHdi* (reason)  
 (“and stay there by myself.”)

- (*hiyya*) *bi'iida gidan 'an ahli* (reason)  
 (“It is very far from my family.”)  
*kamaan, laazim aakhud baali min mumti* (reason)  
 (“Besides, I also have to take care of my mother.”)  
*wa ma'darsh asaafir l-masaafa di kullaha* (reason)  
 (“I cannot travel all this distance.”)  
*wa-<sup>x</sup>ud li-waHdi fi l-wagh l-'ibli* (reason)  
 (“and live alone in Upper Egypt.”) (EF2)

## 6.2. Directness as related to country, gender, and status of interlocutors

The ANOVA revealed no significant effects of either country or gender on directness when all types of refusals were grouped together. However, analysis of data by status of interlocutor (high, low, equal) did uncover significant main effects for the country. For low-status interlocutors, there was a significant main effect for country ( $F = 5.984$ ,  $df 1, 51$ ,  $p = 0.042$ ) and an interaction between country and gender ( $F = 4.33$ ,  $df 1, 51$ ,  $p = 0.042$ ). The findings for high-status interlocutors were similar but did not quite reach statistical significance ( $F = 3.739$ ,  $df 1, 51$ ,  $p = 0.059$  for country;  $F = 3.939$ ,  $df 1, 51$ ,  $p = 0.053$  for gender). No differences were found for interlocutors of equal status. Thus, inspection of group means reveals that differences were found in the behavior of the males in this data set. The Egyptian males were more likely to include a direct strategy than either the American males or females from either country when refusing either a higher- or lower-status interlocutor. American and Egyptian women in this study tended to use direct strategies to about the same extent in each status situation.

## 7. Discussion

This study investigated similarities and differences in one aspect of Egyptian Arabic and American English communication style: directness. The situations selected for this study asked respondents to make refusals. The first research question asks if Egyptians and Americans use similar strategies in making refusals. Consistent with the work of Stevens (1993), both groups employed similar strategies when making refusals and many were used with equal degrees of frequency. For example, in both groups, frequent strategies included providing reasons, making statements of negative willingness, using non-performatives, and stating alternatives. Although overall, the groups used similar strategies, the American refusals were longer than the Egyptian refusals. This finding is rather surprising in that repetition and elaboration are commonly thought to be features of Arabic discourse (Almany & Alwan, 1982; Nydell, 1997; Shouby, 1951; Suleiman, 1973). In a study of Egyptian Arabic compliments (Nelson, El Bakary, & Al Batal, 1993, 1995), the Arabic compliments were not only longer than American compliments, but repetition was a common characteristic (e.g., *eeh l-Halaawa di! eeh sh-shiyaaka di!* (“What is all this

beauty! What is all this chicness!’’)). This contrast between the language used in making refusals in Arabic and in giving compliments in Arabic emphasizes the point made earlier concerning the importance of examining communication style and language use according to particular speech act situations.

Research question two refers to the amount of indirection used to cushion the impact of the refusals. Although Arab culture has been described as preferring an indirect communication style and the US has been characterized as preferring direct communication (Cohen, 1987, 1990; Feghali, 1997; Johnson & Johnson, 1975; Katriel, 1986; Okabe, 1983; Zaharna, 1995), the findings of this study reveal that overall, the frequency of direct and indirect refusal strategies used in Egypt and the US are approximately the same. This discrepancy between the literature on Arabic communication style and the findings of this study again highlights the importance of investigating small units of discourse such as speech acts. It also illustrates the danger of making generalizations about the communication style of a language or culture as if one style (e.g., direct vs. indirect) is used unilaterally regardless of situation, gender, age, and status.

The role of status in relation to the use of indirect strategies is addressed in the third research question. Katriel (1986) proposes that among Arabic speakers, a person in a lower-status position frequently uses indirect communication strategies when addressing a person in a higher-status position. The findings of this study do *not* support Katriel. On the contrary, Egyptian males employed more *direct* strategies when refusing individuals of either higher or lower status than the Americans. The findings are, however, consistent with those of Beebe et al. (1990), who found that in refusing requests from both higher- and lower-status individuals, Americans often employ indirect strategies.

At least three caveats need to be raised concerning the methodology of this study. Although the participants responded orally to the DCT refusal situations, they still gave projected responses: what they believed, they would say in a particular situation. Another methodological concern relates to the order of the situations. It is possible that the way respondents answered the first status situation influenced the way they responded to the following situations. However, although there may be some small effects on the responses based on the order in which the questions were provided, the order was consistent between language groups. Also, we acknowledge that one means of data collection is not sufficient to provide all insights into Egyptian and US refusal strategies and the amount of directness/indirectness involved. As Rose and Ono (1995) point out, “we should not expect a single data source to provide all the necessary insights into speech act usage” (p. 207). A third methodology caveat concerns the subjects. Although both groups include both students and professionals, the Egyptian group includes more students than the US group.

Another concern relates to generalizability. The results of this study cannot be generalized to other Arabic-speaking countries or perhaps even from this relatively young sample of urban Egyptian Arabic speakers to an older generation. However, in spite of these caveats, it is important to question the belief that Arabic speakers use an abundance of indirect strategies in face-threatening situations. Arabic

speakers do not necessarily use “circumlocution, ambiguity, and metaphor to help cushion against the danger of candor” (Cohen, 1987, p. 43), nor is an indirect communication style “in the blood of every Arabic person” (Katriel, 1986, p. 111). The danger in accepting the universality of an indirect communication style in Arabic is that multiple opportunities for cross-cultural misunderstandings arise. For instance, non-Arabs, who have been taught that Arabs use indirect communication, may perceive Arabs as impolite, rude, or arrogant if they use direct strategies in refusing or in other face-threatening acts when, in fact, they are behaving appropriately according to the norms and rules with which they were socialized.

### *7.1. Future research*

In a special issue of *IJIR*, Landis and Wasilewski (1999) reflect on 22 years of research in the area of intercultural communication and note 18 themes that have informed past research and “could occupy researchers in the years ahead” (p. 544). One of the umbrella issues they raise relates to research on communication style. In the context of a discussion on research in the social sciences, often putting “people into little boxes” (p. 539), they ask “How come it took social scientists so long to perceive that social conditions impact...reality?” (p. 539). Much of the research on communication style could be characterized as putting people into little boxes, for instance, as communicating directly or indirectly; or elaborately or succinctly.

What is needed to better understand communication style is knowledge of the social conditions that inform interactions. Examples of social conditions are place/context, status, gender, age, relationship of interlocutors, and social constraints surrounding an event. Many research methodologies meet these criteria; for example, conducting ethnographies, analyzing discourse, videotaping role plays, and responding to speech act situations. In addition, the language itself should be recorded and analyzed by native speakers of the language. In other words, Arabic speaking researchers should be involved in the collection and analysis of Arabic data.

Why study Arabic communication style? As Feghali (1997) notes, research on Arab cultural-communication patterns has been “rooted in brief and dated anecdotes” and “applied to all peoples in the region” (p. 369). In addition, approximately 75% of published intercultural studies have investigated the US, Israel, and Japan (Landis & Wasilewski, 1999). One reason for studying Arabic communication, therefore, is that so little is known. Of the limited number of studies on Arabic communication style, many lump all Arabic-speaking countries together (e.g., Shouby, 1951). Another reason for studying Arabic communication relates to the misunderstanding of the Arab world by many outside the Arab world (e.g., Cohen, 1987). Building on earlier studies that characterize Arabic as flowery, elaborate, repetitious, and indirect (e.g., Suleiman, 1973; Zaharna, 1995), future studies might examine these characteristics in particular settings. For example, in what situations do villagers from upper Egypt use elaboration in their speech? What

functions do elaborations serve? Do men and women use elaboration differently? If so, how? Is elaboration used more in public or private speech?

That Egyptians and Americans differ in the level of directness used in face-to-face communication is valid. In the past, particularly when the field of intercultural communication was developing, identifying patterns of cultural difference in communication style was important in order to interpret the “others’ ” messages, as accurately as possible. In other words, without the knowledge of communication-style differences, an American might very well interpret a message from an Egyptian from an American cultural viewpoint and vice versa. Although generalizations about the communication patterns of cultural groups have served a useful purpose within the field of intercultural communication, no single characterization can adequately describe communication patterns employed by any one group in every context. In fact, over the last decade, such generalizations have been increasingly criticized as reductionist or essentialist. While research does provide evidence for the observation that Arabic speakers tend to be more indirect than American English speakers in some situations, this study suggests that the direct/indirect dimension of communication style is complex and that we need to investigate communication style in specific situations.

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### **Appendix A. Refusal situations: modified discourse completion test (Respondents responded orally on audiotape)**

1. You are the owner of a bookstore. One of your best workers asks to speak to you in private. The worker says, “I know that this will be a busy week-end at the store, but it’s my mother’s birthday and we have planned a big family get together. I’d like to take the week-end off.” (Request: Person of lower status makes the request).
2. You are in your third year of college. You attend classes and you take really good notes. Your classmate often misses a class and asks you for the lecture notes. On this occasion, your classmate says, “Oh no! We have an exam tomorrow but I don’t have the notes from last week. I am sorry to ask you this, but could you please lend me your notes once again?” (Request: Equal status).

3. You are the president of a printing company. A salesman from a company that sells paper invites you to an expensive dinner. The salesman says, “We have met several times to discuss your purchase of my company’s products. I was wondering if you would like to be my guest at the (name of expensive restaurant) in order to firm up the contract.” (Invitation: Person of lower status makes the invitation).
4. You are a top executive at a very large accounting firm. One day, the boss calls you into his office. He says, “Next Sunday my wife and I are having a little party. I know it’s short notice, but I’m hoping that all of my top executives will be there with their spouses. What do you say?” (Invitation: Person of higher status makes the invitation).
5. You are at a friend’s house watching TV. The friend offers you a snack. You turn it down, saying that you have gained some weight and don’t feel comfortable in your new clothes. Your friend says, “Hey, why don’t you try this new diet I’ve been telling you about?” (Suggestion: Equal Status).
6. You are at your desk trying to find a report that your boss just asked for. While you are searching through the mess on your desk, your boss walks over and says, “You know, maybe you should try and organize yourself better. I always write myself little notes to remind me of things. Perhaps you should give it a try.” (Suggestion: Person of higher status makes the suggestion).
7. You arrive home and notice that your cleaning lady is extremely upset. She comes rushing up to you and says, “Oh God, I’m so sorry! I had an awful accident. While I was cleaning I bumped into the tables and your china vase fell and broke. I just feel terrible about it.” (Offer: Person of lower status makes the offer).
8. You are a teacher at a university. It is just about the middle of the term now and one of your students asks to speak to you. The student says, “Ah, excuse me. Some of the students were talking after class recently and we kind of feel that you lecture a lot in class. Could you give us more application or case studies in class?” (Suggestion: Person of lower status makes the suggestion).
9. You are at a friend’s house for lunch. Your friend says, “How about another piece of cake?” (Offer: Equal status).
10. A friend invites you to dinner, but you really cannot stand this friend’s fiancé. Your friend says, “How about coming over for dinner Saturday night? We’re having a small dinner party.” (Invitation: Equal Status).
11. You have been working in an advertising agency now for some time. The boss offers you a raise and a promotion, but it involves moving. You do not want to go. Today, the boss calls you into his office. He says, “I’d like to offer you an executive position in our new offices in (name of smaller town). It’s a great town—only three hours from here by plane. And, a nice raise comes with the position.” (Offer: Person of higher status makes the offer).
12. You are at the office in a meeting with your boss. It is getting close to the end of the day and you want to leave work. But your boss says, “If you don’t mind, I’d like you to spend an extra hour or two tonight so that we can finish this.” (Request: Person of higher status makes request).

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