

Refusals in Japanese and Spanish: Pragmatic Transfer in L2

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Abstract

The article presents a heuristic approach to studying the strategies of refusal employed by advanced Japanese learners of Spanish as a foreign language when compared with those of native speakers of Spanish and of Japanese. It examines responses of refusal to requests, invitations, offers, and suggestions while observing the linguistic phenomena of pragmatic transfer used by the speakers. We administered a discourse completion to elicit refusal strategies from participants. The data include 1101 strategies employed in 432 responses formulated by 54 participants comprising advanced Japanese learners of Spanish, native speakers of Spanish, and native speakers of Japanese. We found that linguistic ability among Japanese learners correlated positively with pragmatic transfer. The findings demonstrate how cultural priming and the degree of freedom with which learners prompt their responses are interrelated within their mental pragmatic interface in given situations.

Keywords: interlanguage pragmatics, politeness, pragmatic transfer, speech acts, refusals

Povzetek

Članek predstavlja hevristični pristop k preučevanju strategij zavračanja, ki jih uporabljajo japonski učenci španščine kot tujega jezika, v primerjavi s strategijami naravnih govorcev španščine in japonščine. Preučuje odzive zavračanja na prošnje, povabila, ponudbe in predloge, pri čemer opazuje jezikovne pojave pragmatičnega prenosa, ki jih uporabljajo govorci. Izvedli smo nalogo dokončanja diskurza, da bi pridobili strategije zavračanja od udeležencev. Podatki vključujejo 1101 strategij, uporabljenih v 432 odzivih in oblikovanih s strani 54 udeležencev, vključujoč napredne japonske učence španščine, naravne govorce španščine in naravne govorce japonščine. Ugotovili smo, da je jezikovna sposobnost med japonskimi učenci pozitivno korelirala s pragmatičnim prenosom. Ugotovitve kažejo, kako sta kulturna usmeritev in stopnja svobode, s katero učenci podajo svoje odgovore, v določenih situacijah medsebojno povezana v njihovem miselnem pragmatičnem vmesniku.

Ključne besede: medjezikovna raba, vljudnost, pragmatični prenos, govorna dejanja, zavrnitve



1 Introduction

1.1 The study of interlanguage pragmatics

As its name suggests, the study of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) arises from the union of two other fields of knowledge: interlanguage and pragmatics. Each of these fields is itself interdisciplinary. Initially, the field of pragmatics examined language from the perspective of the speaker—particularly in terms of the choices the speaker makes, the sociocultural constraints encountered when communicating, and the effects of the language itself on the interlocutor (Crystal, 1997). Likewise, interlanguage is the production of a particular type of language by foreign language learners during the learning process (Selinker, 1992). This means that ILP studies how non-native speakers acquire pragmatic knowledge of the second language (L2) and its use (Rose & Kasper, 2001). Beyond this, research in L2 pragmatics focuses mainly on the study of speech acts, as well as on implicatures and conversational structures.

Within the scope of interlanguage research, the study of pragmatics includes transfer at the pragmatic level as an important component of communicative competence. Today, the nature of pragmatic transfer and its influence on L2 acquisition is a substantial area of ILP research. This estimation is established around two assumptions about the comprehension and linguistic production of language learners: that their interlanguage is influenced by pragmatic knowledge of the first language (L1) as well as by pragmatic failure (Thomas, 1983), which is often caused by the reversal of L1 pragmatic conventions (Kasper, 1992; Takahashi, 1996; Ishihara & Cohen, 2014).

Each culture has different interpretations and understandings of what constitutes politeness and appropriate behaviour. Many ILP studies thus show that even when the communicative behaviour of foreign language learners is advanced in terms of knowledge of speech acts, these learners often differ from the semantic conventions of the target language. This results in cultural misunderstandings and communication gaps. It can also lead to detrimental consequences, as the speaker may come to feel that the interlocutor has evaluated them as impolite (Bardovi-Harling, 1999; Takahashi & Beebe, 1987; Wolfson, 1989).

1.2 Pragmatic transfer across linguistic contexts

Pragmatic transfer occurs when a foreign language speaker uses the speech rules of their native linguistic community when interacting with individuals from another host community. Coined by Kasper (1992), pragmatic transfer refers to the influence of the speaker's pragmatic knowledge of their L1 on the comprehension, production, and learning of pragmatic information of their L2. It is thus considered a major factor shaping the pragmatic knowledge of non-native speakers.

In this framework, Kasper distinguishes between positive and negative pragmatic transfer. Positive pragmatic transfer facilitates language acquisition in such a way that “language-specific conventions of use are demonstrably non-universal but shared between L1 and L2” (Kasper, 1992, p. 212). Negative pragmatic transfer is when L1-based pragmatic conventions are projected into L2 contexts but differ from the pragmatic perceptions and behaviours of the target community, often leading to miscommunication. Speakers in cross-cultural contexts may draw on their cultural repertoires of the L1, but these repertoires blend with elements emerging in the new context to become new norms—ones that are multicultural and hybrid, such as translanguageing (Garcia & Kano, 2014; MacSwan, 2017).

Given the inseparable relationship between language and culture, it is worth mentioning the sociopragmatic facet of discussion on pragmatic transfer. Sociopragmatic transfer occurs when L2 learners perceive and interpret contexts in the target language similarly to L1 contexts. These contexts may actually differ across the two cultural communities, which can result in the transfer of perceptions and interpretations about how to act in a given situation from the L1 context to that of the L2 (Kasper, 1992, pp. 209–213). In Japanese culture, for instance, the figure of the teacher occupies a higher social status than in Spain. In a Spanish context, this leads the Japanese speaker to behave toward a teacher in a way that is more respectful than normally expected and thus commit a sociopragmatic error. The error occurs when Japanese learners of Spanish as a foreign language (SFL) use semantic conventions and value judgements specific to the L1 in intercultural communication.

For all these reasons, teaching about sociopragmatic elements of language is a delicate matter and should be treated carefully. On the one hand, foreign language learners should never be encouraged to neglect

their value system when communicating in their L2. On the other, social reality argues for a linguistic identification closer to the native community of the speakers of a language. This requires the learner to be pragmatically skilled to avoid miscommunication.

In light of this, previous studies have shown that some learners can transfer their pragmatic patterns and indirect semantic formulas from one language to another (Blum-Kulka, 1982; House & Kasper, 1987; Faerch & Kasper, 1989; Olshtain & Cohen, 1989). Several studies have indicated that speech acts of refusal are affected by the level of L2 proficiency; the evidence suggests that learners with higher language proficiency are more likely than lower-level learners to transfer sociocultural norms from their L1 to L2, because they have an L2 command sufficient to express their feelings (Beebe et al., 1990). Other research has revealed that compared with learners at lower levels of proficiency, higher-level learners rarely used L1 pragmatic formulas and thus showed no signs of pragmatic transfer (Maeshiba et al., 1996; Robinson, 1992; Takahashi & DuFon, 1989).

Beebe et al. (1990) undertook a compelling study that reflected on the idea of L1 transfer as a sociolinguistic phenomenon—often as cultural reaffirmation. They argued that sociolinguistic transfer normally occurs to fulfil a given language function that one does not know how to express in the L2. Another study that emphasised interference in the elaboration of refusals, which involved nine Japanese learners of American English, examined the influence of time in the target environment over pragmatic transfer and the impact of metapragmatic instruction on students (Yamagashira, 2001).

Other researchers have observed the production of refusals and transfer in advanced English learners of different nationalities. Wannaruk (2008) examined the speech act of refusal by Thai learners of English, for instance, elucidating the advantages of explicit instruction of language functions. Abed (2011) investigated pragmatic transfer from Arabic to English to classify the refusal strategies used to perform this speech act, among which he included nonverbal language. Kwon (2014) centred the role of language competence in the pragmatic transfer of refusal by Korean learners of English in various situations with different variables, such as degree of familiarity and social position or status. Similarly, Jiang (2015) studied the speech act of refusal produced by Chinese high school students through written data collected from a discourse completion task (DCT) that

contemplated four situations with four stimuli: a request, an offer, an invitation, and a suggestion.

In line with such work, this study also aims to contribute to our understanding of the linguistic phenomena of pragmatic transfer across two different cultures. In this case, we examine transfer involving Peninsular Spanish and Japanese learners employing a speech act of refusal.

1.3 The relationship between refusal and culture

Research on ILP suggests that the inappropriate use of speech acts can lead to pragmatic error as different cultures use different formulation strategies (Thomas, 1983; Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). In the case of refusals, the speaker must deny someone in response to their request, invitation, offer, or suggestion. Given that refusals are a face threatening act involving a certain level of offence to the person extending the request, initiation, offer, or suggestion, the application of inappropriate refusal strategies can make L2 learners appear disrespectful and impolite in some situations (Félix-Brasdefer, 2004, 2008).

In addition, many cultures attach more importance to how “no” is evoked than to the response itself. The speaker must know when to use the appropriate form and the function served by the speech act, considering its sociopragmatic elements. Okazaki (1993) and Hasegawa (2014) point out that when faced with a discursive negotiation, Japanese speakers use communicative strategies such as *enryo-sasshi* (遠慮・察し). This strategy is characterised by avoiding the use of expressions provoked directly by thoughts and feelings (*enryo*; “modesty”) and the listener’s susceptibility to the message (*sasshi*; “consideration” or “anticipation”).

The Japanese approach to refusal differs from that of Western cultures (such as Peninsular Spanish) whose social factors determine linguistic uses, conditioning content more strongly and clearly (Bravo, 2005; Briz, 2007). When refusing, native Spanish speakers employ politeness strategies classified as supportive and deferential (Pedrosa García, 2020). Solidarity politeness stimulates the reinforcement of affinity, establishing bonds of camaraderie in relationships of less social distance and more familiarity. Deferential politeness strategies serve to maintain distance, formality, and respect between interlocutors (Escandell et al., 2020).

In contrast, native Japanese speakers use words of apology, expressions of regret, and self-deprecating comments as mitigating mechanisms. Owing to the damage that a refusal can cause to interpersonal relationships, it may even be considered acceptable to present a fictitious reason for non-commitment. If native Japanese speakers employ such a strategy in a different cultural context, however, this could lead to misunderstandings and miscommunication (Osuka, 2021; Haristiani et al., 2023). In cross-cultural conversations, the situation is complex even when interlocutors speak the same language simply because they do not share the same communication norms.

Refusal has a threatening nature that can, if not properly formulated, offend the interlocutor. Within the context of intercultural communication, pragmatic failure produces more serious consequences than grammatical errors because these latter types of errors simply reveal that the speaker is less competent in the language (Morkus, 2021). Given that refusals are part of pragmatics and that the teaching of pragmatic and socio-cultural aspects in the classroom is an inseparable part of language teaching, we consider research in this regard to be essential.

2 Methodology

2.1 Research questions

Research into the phenomenon of pragmatic transfer in the context of speech acts of refusal is in its infancy. As such, the relationship between pragmatic transfer and L2 proficiency requires additional investigation. Moreover, there has been only limited research undertaken on how L1 conventions affect L2 learners' refusal performance (pragmatic transfer). The purpose of this study is thus to examine the degree of pragmatic transfer in refusals by Japanese learners of Spanish, and to assess the extent to which such transfer is influenced by learners' L2 proficiency. The research questions include:

1. What L1 pragmatic strategies do Japanese learners of Spanish as a foreign language (JLSFL) use?
2. How does social status influence the refusal responses of native speakers of Spanish (NSS) and JLSFL?
3. How do the pragmatic strategies used by NSS and JLSFL differ?

The first research question analyses the L1 pragmatic strategies used by JLSFL in response to a speech act of refusal in their L2 (Spanish); a description of each refusal strategy is provided in Appendix 1. The second research question examines whether social status affects how the speaker responds. To answer the third research question, we analysed and compared the strategies used by NSS and native speakers of Japanese (NSJ) with that of JLSFL in relation to the speech act of refusal.

2.2 Profile of study participants

Our study participants consisted of 18 JLSFL at the University of International Studies of Kanda. This group of Japanese students comprised 10 females (55%) and 8 males (45%) between the ages of 20 and 30 years ($AV = 21.66$, $SD = 2.82$, median = 22.5). All students were at an advanced stage of their Spanish language learning; specifically, they were at reference level C1 (CEFR; [Council of Europe, 2001](#)). Only 4 students (22%) had been in Spain for a period of 3 or more months. The choice to include only students at an advanced stage of study was based on our assumption that the higher the level of L2 proficiency, the greater the likelihood that the speaker would employ pragmatic strategies of speech in the target language. In such cases, the incidence of pragmatic transfer should be lower.

At the same time, we also included another group of NSJ. This group comprised 18 other students at the same centre: 9 males (50%) and 9 females (50%) between the ages of 20 and 30 years ($AV = 20.33$, $SD = 2.98$, median = 21.5), all of whom volunteered to participate. Participants in both groups were speakers of other languages, including Spanish.

For comparison, we included a third group of 18 NSS who were former students of Nebrija University. This group comprised 9 males (50%) and 9 females (50%) between the ages of 20 to 30 years ($AV = 24.75$, $SD = 3.49$, median = 24) who were born or raised in Spain and shared a general profile. This third group served to compare the pragmatic formulas bounded by JLSFL and NSJ with respect to the speech act of refusal.

2.3 Research design

To initially quantify and compare the frequency of use of each type of refusal strategy, we used a mixed methodology that promotes a focused descriptive qualitative and quantitative study. We aimed to observe the linguistic

phenomenon of pragmatic transfer made by JLSFL through an inductive process. Based on our observations, we then aimed to classify, describe, and contrast the types of pragmatic formulas used by both cultures in different situations requiring a speech act of refusal in written form.

Our process involved the following steps:

1. Given the absence of an existing classification system for refusals in Japanese and Peninsular Spanish, we created our own based on previous research ([Beebe et al., 1990](#); [Félix-Brasdefer, 2008](#); [Salazar Campillo et al., 2009](#)). This involved establishing the categories that we considered necessary for qualitative analysis of the corpus. The categories are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Classification of refusals ([Pedrosa García, 2020](#))

REFUSAL	
Direct strategies	
A. Explicit refusal	
B. Negation of the proposition	
Indirect strategies	
A. Excuse/explanation	
B. Regret/apology	
C. Wish	
D. Dissuasion/disagreement	
E. Promise of future acceptance	
F. Avoidance	1. Verbal
	2. Non-verbal
G. Refusal on principle/belief	
H. Conditioning of future/past acceptance	
Adjuncts to refusal	
1. Positive opinion/feeling or agreement	
2. Solidarity/empathy	
3. Gratitude/appreciation	

2. Using these categories, we identified refusal strategies in the written examples from our corpus and processed the results in Microsoft Excel and Jamovi ([2024](#)).
3. We contrasted the pragmatic strategies employed in both cultures and in their respective languages (L1).

4. We classified the specific refusal strategies used by participants and counted them according to the respective social status of the participants in the written interaction.
5. We generally identified, counted, and classified refusal strategies as direct, indirect, or adjunct.
6. We analysed the results to determine whether participants performed pragmatic transfer when using these types of strategies.

2.4 Corpus analysis and compilation

To elicit a (written) speech act of refusal from our participants, we administered two DCTs in Japanese and Spanish to each group. The DCTs consisted of situational descriptions specifying a communicative context. Each situation was followed by a blank space in which participants were asked to provide the appropriate linguistic formulas for effecting the refusal to the best of their ability and as if they were speakers in a real-life interaction. The DCTs used in our study were originally used by Beebe et al. (1990), who configured them around 12 situations and four stimuli designed to elicit a refusal speech act: three requests, three invitations, three offers, and three suggestions (for more detail, see Appendix 2).

Across each group of speech acts serving as a stimulus, participants needed to articulate a refusal within three different situations: a request from a person of higher social position or status, a request from a person of equal social status, and a request from a person of lower social status. In this way, the social positioning of the refused and the refuser was based on the disparity of social status between the two interlocutors in the communication.

3 Results

We found evidence for all of the refusal strategies included in this study (for examples, see Appendix 3). All of the research questions formulated above could be answered through analysis of the data collected from the available samples.

3.1 The pragmatic strategies of Japanese learners of Spanish

Direct refusals were used more often by the NSS and JLSFL groups than by the NSJ group. On average, native speakers of Spanish used substantially more direct refusal strategies and a greater number of adjuncts than native speakers of Japanese. A *t*-test showed this difference to be statistically significant (direct refusal strategies: $t = 0.67$, $p < 0.05$). (see Table 2).

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of refusal strategies by group

Strategies		Group			Group		
		NSS	NSJ	<i>t</i> Value	NSS	JLSFL	<i>t</i> Value
Direct	Mean	45	16	0.67*	45	37.5	0.14
	SD	56.56	22.62		56.56	50.20	
Indirect	Mean	24	29.22	-0.38	24	23	0.08
	SD	22.84	33.68		22.84	27.57	
Adjuncts	Mean	22	26.33	-0.34	22	24.33	-0.27
	SD	9.53	19.65		9.53	11.23	

* $p < 0.05$.

The data show varying degrees of clarity when it comes to the use of bounded strategies by each participant group. The NSS group was more direct in refusing a proposition, whereas the NSJ group was the most indirect. The data on the JLSFL show an intermediate variability between the two reference groups that falls closer to the pragmatic performance of the NSS group. In terms of the frequency and content of the refusal, Table 3 shows a general tendency among JLSFL to use indirect communicative strategies in Spanish (such as excuse/explanation or avoidance, along with adjuncts to refusal such as positive opinion) homologous to their native-speaking reference group (NSS).

This means that despite an advanced level of proficiency in the L2, the influence of the L1 on the JLSFL group was palpable. Holistically, however, their performance was similar to that of the NSS group and they adapted on a sociopragmatic level to each situation detailed in the questionnaire using a similar range of semantic formulas.

Table 3: Distribution of strategy use across total number of responses

Codified categories	Group							
	NSS		JLSFL		NSJ		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Explicit refusal	5	1.34	2	0.56	0	0	7	0.64
Negation of the proposition	85	22.85	73	20.56	32	8.56	190	17.26
Subtotal – Direct	90	24.19	75	21.13	32	8.56	197	17.89
Excuse/explanation	64	17.2	89	25.07	107	28.61	260	23.61
Regret/apology	27	7.26	33	9.3	54	14.44	114	10.35
Wish	9	2.42	12	3.38	10	2.67	31	2.82
Alternative	8	2.15	7	1.97	3	0.8	18	1.63
Dissuasion/disagreement	61	16.4	34	9.58	37	9.89	132	11.99
Promise of future acceptance	12	3.23	1	0.28	10	2.67	23	2.09
Avoidance	10	2.69	20	5.63	26	6.95	56	5.09
Refusal on principle/belief	20	5.38	9	2.54	11	2.94	40	3.63
Conditioning of future/past acceptance	5	1.34	2	0.56	5	1.34	12	1.09
Subtotal – Indirect	216	58.06	207	58.31	263	70.32	686	62.31
Positive opinion	16	4.3	27	7.61	41	10.96	84	7.63
Solidarity/empathy	17	4.57	12	3.38	4	1.07	33	3
Gratitude/appreciation	33	8.87	34	9.58	34	9.09	101	9.17
Subtotal – Adjuncts	66	17.74	73	20.56	79	21.12	218	19.8
Total Results	372	100	355	100	374	100	1101	100

The JLSFL group also used a range of pragmatic formulations similar to that of the NSS group, especially in terms of direct refusals ($n = 75$) and adjuncts such as solidarity/empathy ($n = 12$). No unique preferences in terms of strategy use were observed for this group. Still, the JLSFL strategy use appears to be a sort of hybrid compared with the other two reference groups, with a notable use of dissuasion/disagreement ($n = 34$) and avoidance ($n = 20$) strategies.

3.2 The impact of social status on refusal responses

For both groups, direct refusals were more frequent when both interlocutors occupied the same social position. Although the use of indirect strategies was predominant regardless of the presence or absence of social power, the JLSFL group used direct strategies in a manner similar to that of the NSS group. However, the latter used the same proportion of adjuncts to

refusal when they occupied a higher social status. In contrast, Japanese learners used more adjuncts to help maintain a positive image of themselves in the eyes of the interlocutor.

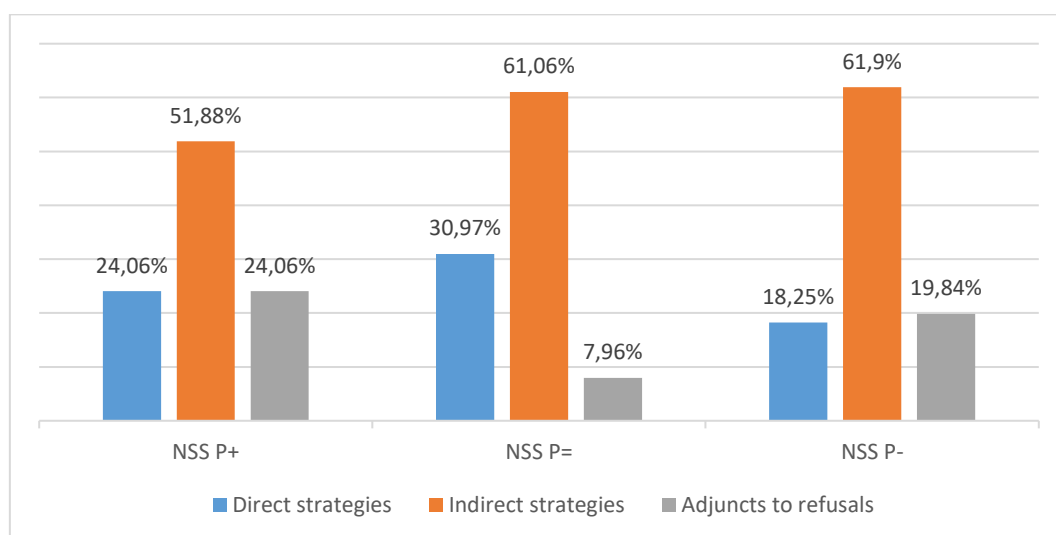


Figure 1: Percentage distribution of refusals among NSS according to social status

The use of direct strategies and adjuncts to refusal among participants who occupied a higher social position stands out at 24.06% compared with 18.25% and 19.84%, respectively, when the participant occupied a lower position. However, NSS were more direct, with a percentage of 30.97 when there was no disparity in social status across among interlocutors.

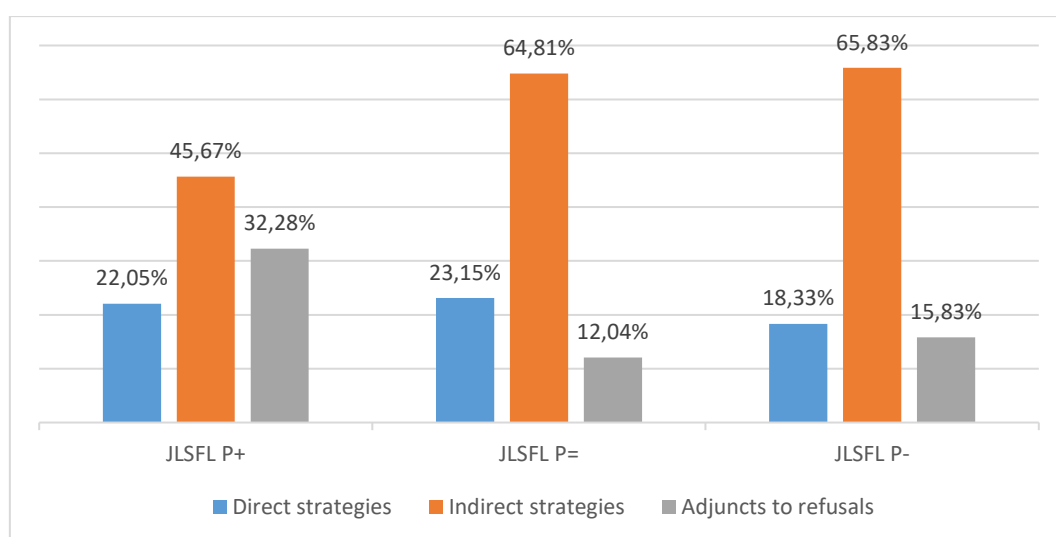


Figure 2: Percentage distribution of refusals among JLSFL according to social position

The JLSFL group also exploited indirect strategies to a greater extent when refusing the interlocutor, regardless of the social position in which they found themselves. But their use of adjuncts to refusal stands out at 32.28% when occupying a higher social position than the interlocutor (compared with 22.05% of direct refusals). As with the NSS group, the data reveal that the JLSFL participants were more inclined to use direct strategies than adjuncts for refusal when they occupied a social position equal to that of the interlocutor. The same pattern occurred when the social status of the participant was lower than that of the interlocutor, with a slight decrease in the use of direct strategies (18.33%) and an increase in the use of adjuncts when refusing (15.83%).

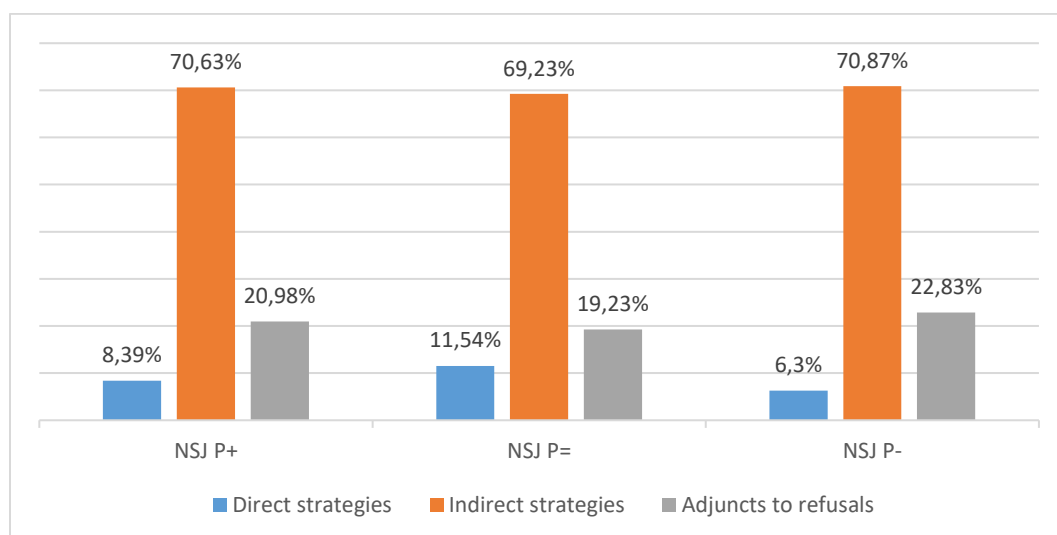


Figure 3: Percentage distribution of refusals among NSJ according to social position

In contrast to NSS and JLSFL groups, the NSJ group used more indirect refusals as a percentage of all other strategies, regardless of their social power. The NSJ group consistently utilised adjuncts to refusals as a strategy in all contexts, regardless of their social status. This group minimally employed direct refusals, using them only 8.39% of the time when they held higher social status and 11.54% when the social positions of the interlocutors were equal.

3.3 Types of refusal strategies across language speakers

The typology of strategies varied in accordance with the pragmatic antecedent to which our participants were responding. In response to

requests (see Table 4), the NSS group formulated more direct strategies that were accompanied by a range of indirect strategies and adjuncts to refusal. The JLSFL group behaved similarly; however, they employed more indirect strategies alongside their counterpart group of native speakers (NSJ).

Table 4: Distribution of refusal strategies used in response to requests

Stimulus Group	Request					
	NSS		JLSFL		NSJ	
Strategies	n	%	n	%	n	%
Explicit refusal	1	0.98	1	0.99	0	0
Negation of the proposition	28	27.45	19	18.81	9	8.49
Excuse/explanation	18	17.65	26	25.74	32	30.19
Regret/apology	8	7.84	17	16.83	25	23.58
Wish	4	3.92	3	2.97	5	4.72
Alternative	2	1.96	2	1.98	3	2.83
Dissuasion/disagreement	19	18.63	11	10.89	13	12.26
Promise of future acceptance	5	4.9	1	0.99	2	1.89
Avoidance	2	1.96	6	5.94	5	4.72
Refusal on principle/belief	2	1.96	2	1.98	0	0
Conditioning of future/past acceptance	1	0.98	1	0.99	0	0
Positive opinion	3	2.94	6	5.94	9	8.49
Solidarity/empathy	4	3.92	1	0.99	0	0
Gratitude/appreciation	5	4.9	5	4.95	3	2.83
Total	102	100	101	100	106	100

In the case of invitations (Table 5), this etiquette is repeated in the same fashion. The NSJ group resorted with a higher percentage to indirect semantic formulas such as excuse/explanation, followed by the JLSFL group with a close percentage and less by the counterpart group of NSS. It can be observed that the NSS used a varied range of semantic formulae in comparison to the JLSFL group and the NSJ, who showed a predilection for certain strategies in particular such as regret/apologies and adjuncts to refusals in order to maintain their positive self-image.

Table 5: Distribution of refusal strategies used in response to invitations

Stimulus	Invitation					
Group	NSS		JLSFL		NSJ	
Strategies	n	%	n	%	n	%
Explicit refusal	2	2.22	0	0	0	0
Negation of the proposition	21	23.33	10	11.76	6	6.06
Excuse/explanation	18	20	31	36.47	33	33.33
Regret/apology	17	18.89	12	14.12	25	25.25
Wish	5	5.56	7	8.24	2	2.02
Alternative	4	4.44	3	3.53	0	0
Dissuasion/disagreement	6	6.67	3	3.53	1	1.01
Promise of future acceptance	2	2.22	0	0	2	2.02
Avoidance	2	2.22	2	2.35	7	7.07
Refusal on principle/belief	2	2.22	0	0	0	0
Conditioning of future/past acceptance	3	3.33	0	0	4	4.04
Positive opinion	1	1.1	4	4.71	7	7.07
Solidarity/empathy	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gratitude/appreciation	7	7.78	13	15.29	12	12.12
Total	90	100	85	100	99	100

The same pattern emerged in the case of offerings but once the eliciting stimulus occurred, there were divergences in the formulation of strategies across participants (see Table 6). Compared with the other two reference groups, the JLSFL group employed a greater proportion of direct strategies (such as negation of the proposition). Although the NSS group was also sufficiently direct, they exhibited a noticeable preference for adjuncts such as solidarity/empathy.

Table 6: Distribution of refusal strategies used in response to offerings

Stimulus	Offering					
Group	NSS		JLSFL		NSJ	
Strategies	n	%	n	%	n	%
Explicit refusal	2	2.04	1	1.08	0	0
Negation of the proposition	27	27.55	36	38.71	16	17.02
Excuse/explanation	19	19.39	14	15.05	26	27.66
Regret/apology	1	1.02	1	1.08	4	4.26
Wish	0	0	2	2.15	1	1.06
Alternative	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dissuasion/disagreement	13	13.27	11	11.83	14	14.89

Promise of future acceptance	0	0	0	0	0	0
Avoidance	2	2.04	1	1.08	1	1.06
Refusal on principle/belief	2	2.04	0	0	5	5.32
Conditioning of future/past acceptance	0	0	0	0	0	0
Positive opinion	7	7.14	7	7.53	10	10.64
Solidarity/empathy	11	11.22	9	9.68	4	4.26
Gratitude/appreciation	14	14.29	11	11.83	13	13.83
Total	98	100	93	100	94	100

With regard to the refusal of suggestions, the NSS and JLSFL groups used direct strategies in a similar fashion (see Table 7). However, the JLSFL group used the same indirect strategies as the NSJ group, such as avoidance to divert the focus of the interlocutor's attention. The JLSFL and NSJ groups also used the same adjuncts, such as positive opinion to avoid devaluing the interlocutor's suggestion or damaging their image in the event of the next refusal.

Table 7: Distribution of refusal strategies used in response to suggestions

Stimulus	Suggestion					
Group	NSS		JLSFL		NSJ	
Strategies	n	%	n	%	n	%
Explicit refusal	0	0	0	0	0	0
Negation of the proposition	9	10.98	8	10.53	1	1.33
Excuse/explanation	9	10.98	18	23.68	16	21.33
Regret/apology	1	1.22	3	3.95	0	0
Wish	0	0	0	0	2	2.67
Alternative	2	2.44	2	2.63	0	0
Dissuasion/disagreement	23	28.05	9	11.84	9	12
Promise of future acceptance	5	6.1	0	0	6	8
Avoidance	4	4.88	11	14.47	13	17.33
Refusal on principle/belief	14	17.07	7	9.21	6	8
Conditioning of future/past acceptance	1	1.22	1	1.32	1	1.33
Positive opinion	5	6.1	10	13.16	15	20
Solidarity/empathy	2	2.44	2	2.63	0	0
Gratitude/appreciation	7	8.54	5	6.58	6	8
Total	82	100	76	100	75	100

Overall, the NSS group used strategies such as explicit refusal and negation of the proposition (see Table 3) to express themselves more directly and assertively in their responses to the interlocutor. They focused more on their autonomy by exhibiting feelings and thoughts with a greater degree of clarity. In the same context, the NSJ group considered whether their refusal would wreak havoc on their image or that of the interlocutor.

4 Discussion

Our study appears to indicate that the use of specific language conventions is not universal, but shared across L1 and L2 (Kasper, 1992). Japanese learners of Spanish transfer pragmatic patterns and indirect strategies from their L1 when articulating a refusal, facilitating communicative expression and avoiding pragmatic error (Blum-Kulka, 1982; Faerch & Kasper, 1989; House & Kasper, 1987; Olshtain & Cohen, 1989). Their approach thus translates as positive transfer, as indicated in preceding studies by Abed (2011) and Jiang (2015).

These results address Maeshiba et al.'s (1996) hypothesis of negative correlation between language proficiency and pragmatic transfer as there are no signs of L1 transfer in obvious proportions for advanced-level Japanese learners. This finding contradicts the work of previous research such as Yamagashira (2001) or Kwon (2014), which found that Japanese and Korean learners at an advanced proficiency level in American English transferred more operational norms from their L1 as they had more control over expressing their feelings in their L2 (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987). Our results also contradict those of Beebe et al. (1990), who found that Japanese learners with advanced proficiency in English transferred more pragmatic refusal strategies from their L1.

Our native Spanish speakers were less sensitised to social status, whether it fell positively to the respondent or the interlocutor. This could be because Spanish culture is characterised by closeness, creating an appeal to reduce the social distance between interlocutors (Bravo, 2005; Briz, 2007). The data also revealed that when it came to refusing the proposal of an interlocutor with higher social status (such as a boss), the NSS participants seemed to choose their excuses carefully: "No creo que pueda aceptarlo, aunque el componente salarial es muy importante para mi vida, desplazar mi vida entera a otro pueblo y con mi edad, no creo que pueda con tanta

carga emocional”).¹ This provided a more urgent reason than the strategy itself to be able to refuse it. Through such explanations, NSS were able to mitigate the face threatening act of refusal.

For our native Japanese speakers, mentioning family matters was one of the best reasons they could use to avoid damaging their image. This influence on the choice of content for excuses/explanations could stem from the Confucian moral standard dictated by Japanese society. Whether consciously or unconsciously, both the NSJ and JLSFL groups attributed family-related issues in their reasons for refusal to save face for both interlocutors in the dialogue: “Nos hubiera gustado participar, pero ese día tenemos una junta de familia”;² “Tengo una cita con mi hija este domingo, por lo que no podré asistir (*konshū nichiyōbi wa musume to no yakusoku ga aru node, o ukagai dekimasen* 今週日曜日は娘との約束があるので、お伺いできません)”.³

Although the NSS group also offered alternative refusals, these differed from the alternative reasons of the NSJ. This is because the alternatives of the NSS group revealed an unwillingness to help the interlocutor, resulting in criticism of their proposition through the use of strategies such as dissuasion/disagreement: “Llevamos mucho tiempo quedándonos de manera sistemática en la oficina más de la cuenta sin retribución ni agradecimiento. Nos iremos si no tenemos, al menos, tres días libres”.⁴ In contrast, the Japanese respondents (both NSJ and JLSFL groups) showed a willingness to assist the interlocutor: “Estoy muy contento con su trabajo diario y le subiría el sueldo ahora mismo, pero siento decirle que eso sería imposible.”;⁵ “Si quieres hablar de negocios, te veré en mi oficina (*bijinesu no ohanashideshitara ofisu de ukagaimasu yo* ビジネスのお話でしたらオフィスで伺いますよ)”.⁶ The distinction in these responses can again be partly

¹ “I don't think I can accept it, even though the salary component is very important for my life, moving my entire life to another town and at my age, I don't think I can handle so much emotional burden.”

² “We would have liked to participate, but that day we have a family gathering.”

³ “I have plans with my daughter this Sunday, so I won't be able to attend.”

⁴ “We have been systematically staying late at the office for a long time without any compensation or appreciation. We will leave if we do not get at least three days off.”

⁵ “I am very pleased with your daily work and would give you a raise right now, but I regret to say that it is impossible.”

⁶ “If you want to talk business, I'll see you in my office.”

explained by the cultural roots of Japanese society, which is generally accepted as collectivist in that group interests are considered to be more important than individual ones and high value is attached to the perseverance of balance and harmony among group members (Beebe et al., 1990; Yamagashira, 2001). Through the use of strategies such as principle/belief refusal, the NSJ and JLSFL groups manifested their intention to be polite and thus maintain the positive image of the interlocutor and equanimity among dialogue participants: “¿No tienes herida, estás bien? No te preocupes. Tal vez al jarrón le ha llegado su fin de vida. Las cosas son cosas y todo tiene su fin.”;⁷ “No creo en este tipo de cosas (*shinjinai yo kō iu no wa* 信じないよこういうのは).”⁸

5 Conclusions

In terms of L1 influence on the formulation of refusals by the JLSFL group, no tacit interference was observed at the level of frequency and content that would impair their discourse and induce pragmatic error. Although Japanese learners of Spanish used pragmatic formulas contiguous to those of the NSS group, such as avoidance and positive opinion or a higher percentage of excuse/explanation strategies, these formulas were appropriate within the context of communication and thus resulted in positive transfer.

In light of this, our study reveals that linguistic competence appears to facilitate pragmatic transfer within a context of limited exposure to the L2 (Spanish) for Japanese learners. With sufficient knowledge, advanced learners have the means to transfer their preferred pragmatic conventions from L1 to mitigate the impact of the communicative act of refusal in various L2 situations. While target sociocultural contexts generally offer more opportunities for pragmatic development to learners than home settings, the dynamic relationships between context, intention, and pragmatic transfer indicate that individual differences play a more significant role than exposure to the target community. This is why theory, research, and—most importantly—language pedagogy must evolve to address the complexity and difficulty of developing and assessing pragmatic competence.

⁷ “You’re not hurt, are you? Are you okay? Don’t worry. Maybe the vase has reached the end of its life. Things are just things, and everything has an end.”

⁸ “I don’t believe in this kind of things.”

Abbreviations

DCT	discourse completion task
ILP	interlanguage pragmatics
JLSFL	japanese learner(s) of Spanish as a foreign language
L1	first language(s)
L2	second language(s)
NSJ	native speaker(s) of Japanese
NSS	native speaker(s) of Spanish
SFL	Spanish as a foreign language

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Additional material

Appendix 1: Refusal strategies included in the study: Categories and definitions

Refusal strategies	Definition
Direct	
Explicit refusal	An evoked utterance accompanied by a linguistic feature that intensifies the perlocutionary act of refusal.
Negation of the proposition	Includes expressions containing negations constructed simply by “not” or with verbs negating the proposition.
Indirect	
Excuse/explanation	A stated intention to accept were it not for some reason, excuse, or witty explanation. This strategy is used to attenuate the illocutionary force of the refusal.
Regret/apology	An expression of regret for the speaker’s inability to comply with the interlocutor’s request.
Wish	An expression of intention to help the interlocutor, as well as an inability to do so, in order to reduce the likelihood of causing the interlocutor to lose face.
Alternative	The offering of other options to the interlocutor to attenuate the illocutionary force of the refusal. This strategy attempts to negotiate the request to lessen the likelihood of damaging the speaker’s own image.
Dissuasion/disagreement	A request for consideration and understanding for the speaker’s inability to comply with the request. This approach serves to argue with criticism, assign blame, or defend the speaker. It is used to divert the focus of the interlocutor from the illocutionary force of the refusal.
Promise of future acceptance	A commitment to accept a similar request at some point in the future. This approach aims to mitigate the illocutionary force of the refusal and help the speaker save face.
Avoidance	The use of verbal mechanisms such as repeating part of the proposition, joking, changing topics, or evasion. Non-

	verbally, an expression of hesitation or uncertainty about what to say. This strategy buys the speaker time and prepares the listener for the impending refusal.
Refusal on belief/principle	An explanation that the refusal stems from certain beliefs or principles, not because the speaker does not want to comply with the request. This strategy is used to mitigate the illocutionary force of the refusal.
Conditioning of future/past acceptance	The expression of conditions for accepting the request. The speaker shows a willingness to accept if the situation were different, distracting the interlocutor from the negative impact of the refusal.
Adjuncts	
Positive opinion/feeling or agreement	The use of semantic units that antedate refusals and express good opinions, feelings, or agreements towards the interlocutor's proposal.
Solidarity/empathy	The expression of concern and empathy for the interlocutor, which is intended to convey a positive attitude towards the interlocutor.
Gratitude/appreciation	The use of semantic units that express gratitude to diminish the illocutionary force of refusal.

Appendix 2: Description of the internal structure of the DCT

Stimulus	Social position of the refuser	Item in the DCT	Situation
Request	Lower	#12	Staying up late at night
Request	Equal	#2	Lending class notes
Request	Higher	#1	Asking for a pay rise
Invitation	Lower	#4	Party hosted by a boss
Invitation	Equal	#10	Dinner at a friend's house
Invitation	Higher	#3	Going to a fancy restaurant
Offer	Lower	#11	Promotion with a move to a new location
Offer	Equal	#9	A slice of cake
Offer	Higher	#7	Paying for a broken vase
Suggestion	Lower	#6	Writing small reminder notes
Suggestion	Equal	#5	Trying a new diet
Suggestion	Higher	#8	More conversation in language class

Appendix 3: Refusal strategies included in the study: Categories and examples

Refusal strategies	Example
Direct	
Explicit refusal	1. NSS: "Ni de coña." ⁹ ("Not a chance.") 2. NSS: "Ufff, no, de verdad." ("Ufff, no, really.")
Negation of the proposition	1. JLSFL: "Pues no puedo en este momento." ("Well, I can't right now.") 2. NSJ: 「意向に沿うことが出来ないのです。」 Ikō ni sou koto ga dekinai nodesu. ("I cannot comply with the intention.")
Indirect	
Excuse/explanation	1. NSS: "Es que no me los he traído." ("It's just that I didn't bring them with me.") 2. JLSFL: "Es que el próximo domingo es la boda de mi sobrina." ("The thing is, next Sunday is my niece's wedding.") 3. NSJ: 「家族旅行が入っております。」 Kazoku ryokō ga haitte orimashite. ("I am on a family trip.")
Regret/apology	1. NSJ: 「申し訳ない。」 Mōshiwakenai. ("Excuse me.") 2. NSS: "Sintiéndolo mucho..." ("Unfortunately...")
Wish	1. NSS: "Me encantaría poder pagarte más, pero..." ("I would love to pay you more, but...") 2. JLSFL: "Por supuesto que me encantaría." ("Of course, I would love to.") 3. NSJ: 「お手伝いしたいのは山々ですが。」 Otetsudai shitai no wa yamayamadesuga. ("I would love to help you a lot.")
Alternative	1. NSS: "Como alternativa, puedo venir más temprano mañana o quedarme alguna tarde la semana que viene." ("As an alternative, I can come in earlier tomorrow or stay late one afternoon next week.") 2. JLSFL: "¿No podéis esperar hasta entonces?" ("Can't you wait until then?") 3. NSJ: 「誰か他の人貸してくれないかな？」 Dare ka hokanohito kashite kurenai ka na. ("Could someone else lend them to you?")

⁹ The evoked pragmatic strategies are drawn from our corpus.

Dissuasion/disagreement	<p>1. NSS: "Esto de costumbre no me gusta nada." ("I really don't like this as a habit.")</p> <p>2. NSJ: 「もう一度考え直していただけないでしょうか。」 Mōichido kangaenaoshite itadakenaideshou ka. ("Could you reconsider it?")</p>
Promise of future acceptance	<p>1. NSJ: 「今度始めてみるよ。」 Kondo hajimete miru yo. ("I will try it soon.")</p> <p>2. NSS: "Ya en el segundo semestre hablaremos más." ("We will talk more in the second semester.")</p>
Avoidance	<p>Verbal</p> <p>1. NSS: "¿Ahora?" ("Right now?")</p> <p>2. NSJ: 「イメージしながらエアーケーキ食べるわ。」 Imēji shinagara eākēki taberu wa. ("I will imagine myself eating a mousse cake.")</p> <p>Nonverbal</p> <p>1. JLSFL: {Me quedo callado, con la cara triste como que estoy a punto de llorar} (I stay silent, with a sad expression as if I'm about to cry.)</p>
Refusal on belief/principle	<p>1. NSS: "Pienso que hay que comer de todo, pero con moderación." ("I think you should eat a little bit of everything, but in moderation.")</p> <p>2. NSS: "Creo que mi sistema es mejor, aunque puede fallar si tengo un mal día." ("I think my system is better, although it can fail if I have a bad day.")</p> <p>3. NSJ: 「モノはいつかは壊れるものです。」 Mono wa itsuka wa kowareru monodesu. ("Things will eventually break.")</p>
Conditioning of future/past acceptance	<p>1. NSS: "Si me hubiera avisado con tiempo no tendría ningún problema, pero ahora me resulta imposible cancelarlo." ("If you had informed me earlier, I wouldn't have any problem, but now it's impossible for me to cancel it.")</p> <p>2. NSS: "¡Tendrías que haberme avisado y habría tenido cuidado con lo que comía en esta semana!" ("You should have told me, and I would have been careful with what I ate this week!")</p> <p>3. NSJ: 「また次の機会にお誘いいただければ嬉しいです。」 Mata tsugi no kikai ni osaso i itadakereba ureshīdesu. ("I would be glad if you invited me next time.")</p>

Adjuncts	
Positive opinion/feeling or agreement	<p>1. JLSFL: "Sí, es verdad." ("Yes, that's true.")</p> <p>2. JLSFL: "Es una sugerencia muy buena." ("That's a very good suggestion.")</p> <p>3. NSJ: 「お気持ちは受け取りました。」 Okimochi wa uketorimashita. ("I understand your feelings.")</p>
Solidarity/empathy	<p>1. NSS: "Ha sido un accidente que nos puede pasar a cualquiera." ("It's been an accident that could happen to anyone.")</p> <p>2. JLSFL: "Te entiendo." ("I understand.")</p> <p>3. NSJ: 「しょうがないよ。」 Shōganai yo. ("What can we do?")</p>
Gratitude/appreciation	<p>1. NSJ: 「アドバイスありがとうございます。」 Adobaisu arigatōgozaimasu. ("Thank you for the advice.")</p> <p>2. JLSFL: "Agradezco su oferta." ("I appreciate your offer.")</p>