

## A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF REFUSALS PERFORMED BY THE CHARACTERS IN STEVE MCQUEEN'S *12 YEARS A SLAVE*

By: **AnandaChastaliaAsri**

Yogyakarta State University  
anandachastalia@gmail.com

### Abstract

*This research investigates refusals performed in Steve McQueen's 12 Years a Slave. The objectives of the research are to identify the types, to describe the realizations, and to analyze the functions of refusals performed by all characters in 12 Years a Slave.*

*The research applied descriptive-qualitative method. The data were in the form of utterances spoken by all characters in 12 Years a Slave, while the contexts of the data were the dialogues among the characters. The source of data was 12 Years a Slave movie. The data analysis was conducted by watching the movie; transferring the data into data sheet; identifying the data into the types, realizations, and functions of refusals; applying trustworthiness; and drawing conclusions. To enhance trustworthiness of the data, the data was triangulated by the researcher's supervisors and fellow linguistic students.*

*The results of the research are described as follows. First, there are three types of refusals which are performed by the characters in 12 Years a Slave. The types of refusals are direct type, indirect type, and adjuncts to refusals. Indirect type becomes the main type of refusals which is performed by the characters. Second, each type of refusals has particular realizations. Direct type is realized in the form of non-performative statement. Meanwhile, indirect type is in the form of the statement of an alternative, avoidance, excuse/reason/explanation, the attempt to dissuade the interlocutor, and the statement of a principle/philosophy. Then, adjuncts to refusals are realized in the form of gratitude/appreciation. Third, there are eight functions of refusals found in 12 Years a Slave. The functions of refusals include (1) showing a determination in refusing; (2) showing unwillingness to comply with the request, offer, suggestion, or invitation; (3) negotiating the request, offer, suggestion, or invitation; (4) avoiding a conflict or ending an argument with the refusee; (5) demanding understanding from the refusee; (6) mocking the refusee or the request, offer, suggestion, or invitation; (7) implying the unfairness of the request, offer, suggestion, or invitation; and (8) showing gratitude to the refusee.*

**Keywords:** pragmatics, refusals, *12 Years a Slave*

### INTRODUCTION

As the member of society, people are constantly communicating with one another in order to keep in touch with them and to gain as well as to give information. Various linguistic expressions are used when people conduct a communication, specifically in face to face conversation. In performing linguistic expression, the speaker will be influenced by the context. Context is the physical environment in which a word is used (Yule, 1996: 21). In linguistics, some approaches such as sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and pragmatics can be employed to analyze a conversation, especially the language used by the speakers. However, among the approaches, pragmatics is the most appropriate approach to

analyze expressions in a conversation due to its focus on language in context.

In pragmatics, people can perform an action through utterances. This is called speech acts. Yule (1996:47) states that in attempting to express themselves, people do not only produce utterances containing grammatical structures and words, they perform actions via those utterances. Some linguists have distinguished speech acts into several types, one of which is commissive speech acts. Refusals are the examples of commissive speech acts. Chen, Ye, and Zhang (1995: 121) state that refusals are responses to an initiating act and they are considered as speech

acts by which a speaker fails to engage in an action proposed by the interlocutor.

Refusals are very interesting to be studied because they happen in daily life. Wierzbicka in Phuong (2006: 16) states that refusals mean the speech acts of saying *no*, expressing the addressee's non-acceptance, and declining of or disagreeing with a request, an invitation, a suggestion or an offer. People will not accept other's suggestion, request, offer, or invitation all the time; however, they sometimes need to refuse them. They express their refusals by employing refusing expressions. In refusing, the refuser can simply say *No* in order to refuse something. According to Beebe, Takahashi, and UlissWelz (1990: 72-73) this style of refusals is called direct type of refusals. In addition, the refuser can also use indirect type to refuse the refusee. As the example, when the refuser says *My mom is sick*, he refuses the refusee by making a reason. The refuser can also precede his refusals as in *Thank you, but I have a plan for tonight*. According to Beebe, Takahashi, and UlissWelz (1990: 72-73) this type of refusals is called adjuncts to refusals.

Refusals can be seen not only in the real life, but also in a movie or a film. *12 Years of a Slave* movie becomes the subject this research. Related to the research focus, the research objectives are (1) to identify the types of refusals performed by the characters in *12 Years a Slave*, (2) to describe the realizations of refusals performed by the characters in *12 Years a Slave*, and (3) to analyze the functions of refusals in *12 Years a Slave*.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This research was conducted by using descriptive-qualitative method. Wiersma (1995: 12) defines descriptive-qualitative research as a research that describes phenomenon in the form of word instead of number or measure. Furthermore, Vanderstoep and Johnson (2008: 7)

state that qualitative research produces narrative or textual description of the phenomena under study. In other words, the finding in the qualitative research is presented in a narrative form or textual description rather than in a statistical form. Therefore, the result of data analysis in this research was presented in the form of word rather than number.

The data of this research were in the form of utterances which were uttered by the characters in *12 Years a Slave*. The contexts of the data were the dialogues among the characters containing refusals. Meanwhile, the data were taken from *12 Years of a Slave* movie.

Since this research employing qualitative method, the primary instrument of this research is the researcher. Meanwhile, the secondary instrument is the data sheet. The data sheet was used to note important information related to the objectives of the research which was found in the characters' utterances.

In collecting the data, the researcher conducted several steps. First, the researcher watched the movie which was used as the object of the research followed by downloading its transcript. Second, the researcher re-watched the movie and checked the accuracy of the transcript. Third, the researcher collected the data found in the movie in accordance with the objectives of the research. Fourth, the researcher classified all the collected data into the data sheet.

To measure the reliability and objectivity of the findings, this research employed triangulation. Patton (2002: 560) proposes four type of triangulation strategies, one of which is multiple analyst strategy. Patton (2002: 560) explains that multiple analyst strategy is having two or more persons who independently analyze the same qualitative data and compare the findings. Therefore, the researcher asked her fellow linguistic students to review and recheck the finding of the research by analyzing the

researcher's data. In addition, the data were also reviewed by the researcher's supervisors.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

There are three types of refusals proposed by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Welz. They are direct type, indirect type, and adjuncts to refusals. In this research, all the types of refusals are performed by the characters in *12 Years a Slave*.

Each type of refusals is realized differently. There are two realizations of direct type. However, only one realization is found in the movie, i.e. non-performative statement. On the other hand, the type of direct type which is not found in the movie is performative statement. Performative statement is not performed performative refusals for daily conversation sounds too direct.

Meanwhile, indirect type is realized in five realizations. The realizations of indirect type are (1) the statement of an alternative, (2) avoidance, (3) excuse/reason/explanation, (4) the attempt to dissuade the interlocutor, and (5) the statement of a principle/philosophy. There are four realizations which are not found in *12 Years a Slave*, namely promising to the future acceptance, setting a condition for future or past acceptance, stating a wish, and showing an acceptance that functions as refusals. The four realizations are not found in the movie because all the characters tend to make their refusals clear at a time the refusing statement is uttered. They state their refusals without indicating their desire or promise to comply with the request, offer, suggestion, or invitation.

Then, adjuncts to refusals only occur in one datum because the characters rarely express their solidarity or respect to other characters due to conflict.

Furthermore, there are eight functions for performing certain refusals found in the movie. The functions are classified under direct type,

indirect type, and adjuncts to refusals. The functions of direct type emerged in the movie are (1) showing a determination in refusing and (2) showing unwillingness to comply with the request, offer, suggestion, or invitation. Meanwhile, the functions of indirect type include (1) negotiating the request, offer, suggestion, or invitation; (2) avoiding a conflict or ending an argument with the refusee; (3) demanding an understanding from therefusee; (4) mocking the refusee or the request, offer, suggestion, or invitation; and (5) implying the unfairness of the request, offer, suggestion, or invitation. On the other hand, the function of adjuncts to refusals is showing gratitude to the refusee.

### a. Direct Type

The first example is depicted in the following conversation between Patsey and Solomon. Their conversation occurred in the middle of the night. Patsey woke Solomon because she asked Solomon a favor. She wanted Solomon to end her life.

Patsey : I ask; end my life. Take my body to the margin of the swamp—

Solomon : **No.**

(Datum 24)

Patsey asked Solomon to kill her because she could not handle her uncomfortable life as a slave anymore. However, he refused Patsey's request by saying *No*.

In reference to this context, Solomon's refusal is categorized as direct type because he directly refuses the request by saying *No*. In this datum, he wants to make his refusal firmer. Solomon can directly refuse Patsey's request since he and Patsey are in the same social level. Furthermore, they have a close relationship. In refusing, he does not need to try to be polite. Moreover, he is not afraid to offend Patsey since he thinks that Patsey's request is impossible to be performed. It is not possible for him, as a fellow slave, to kill Patsey with his own hand.

In regard to the function of refusals, Solomon's refusal is functioned to show a determination in refusing. Solomon is so convinced that he does not want to kill Patsey, therefore he directly and clearly refuses Patsey's request.

The conversation between Tibeats and Solomon is another example of direct type. The conversation occurred in Ford's weaving house.

Tibeats: Strip yer clothes. Strip.

Solomon: **I will not.**

(Datum 11)

When Solomon worked to build a weaving house for Ford, Tibeats scolded Solomon for not following his instruction. However, Solomon explained to Tibeats that he had done everything as instructed. Solomon's explanation made Tibeats angry. He asked Solomon to strip his clothes because he wanted to whip him. However, Solomon refused Tibeats' request by showing his negative willingness.

In reference to this context, negative willingness is indicated in the statement *I will not*. Hence, Solomon's refusal is classified as direct type.

In relation to the function of refusals, Solomon's refusal is functioned to show unwillingness to comply with the request, offer, suggestion, or invitation. Solomon knows that Tibeats will whip him, therefore he refuses the request.

#### b. Indirect Type

An example of indirect type is shown in the in the conversation between Solomon and Eliza. Their conversation occurred in Ford's slave shack. Solomon asked Eliza to stop crying because she had been crying for days.

Solomon : Stop. Stop your wailing.  
You let yourself be  
overcome by sorrow. You  
will drown in it.

Eliza : **Have you stopped crying  
for your children?** You

make no sounds, but will  
you ever let them go in  
your heart?

(Datum 10)

In regard to this context, Eliza's refusal is realized through the attempt to dissuade the interlocutor by criticizing. Therefore, her refusal is classified as indirect type. Eliza refuses Solomon's request because she thinks that crying is her only way to weep for her children. Since Ford buys her, she is separated from her beloved children. Her loss of her children has not diminished. Therefore, she criticizes Solomon when he asks her to stop crying. She says that actually Solomon, who is a father, also weeps for his children. He might look fine, but deep in his heart he also cries for his children.

In regard to the function of refusals, Eliza's refusal is functioned to mock the refusee or the request, offer, suggestion, or invitation. In this datum, the function of indirect type is to mock Solomon.

The next example is in the conversation between Solomon and Patsey. Their conversation occurred in Mr. Shaw's terrace. Solomon asked Patsey to return to Epps' plantation because Epps wanted her to come back.

Solomon : Patsey, Master wishes yo  
return.

Patsey : **Sabbath day. I's free ta  
roam.**

(Datum 17)

In regard to this context, Patsey's refusal is classified as indirect type since she implicitly refuses the request. In this datum, Patsey provides an explanation by saying *Sabbath day. I's free ta roam* in order to show her refusal. On Sabbath day, all slaves are allowed to do their own chores. By providing an explanation, she tries to avoid offending Solomon and tries to maintain her relationship with him.

(Datum 26)

In relation to the function of refusals, Patsey performs indirect type in order to demanding understanding from Solomon. By providing an explanation, Patsey intends to seek Solomon's understanding of why she does not want to comply with his request.

Another example is also in the conversation between Solomon and Patsey. Their conversation occurred in the middle of the night. Patsey woke Solomon because she has a favor for Solomon. She asked Solomon to kill her.

Patsey : There is God here! God is merciful, and He forgives merciful acts. Won't be no hell for you. Do it. Do what I ain't got the strength ta do myself

Solomon : **(says nothing and backs to sleep)**

(Datum 28)

In reference to this context, Solomon's refusal is categorized as non-verbal refusal. Hence, it is classified as indirect type.

In relation to the functions of refusals, Solomon's refusal is functioned to avoid a conflict or end an argument with the refusee. He has clearly told Patsey that he does not want to comply with her request, however Patsey keeps bagging him. He goes back to sleep in order to show Patsey that he wants to end his argument with her.

Another example can be seen in the conversation between Patsey and Solomon. Their conversation occurred in the middle of the night. That night, Patsey asked Solomon to kill her.

Patsey : How can you not know? I got no comfort in this life. If I can't buy mercy from yah, I'll beg it.

Solomon : **There are others.** Beg them

In reference to this context, Solomon's refusal is classified as indirect type because Solomon indirectly refuses Patsey's request by providing an alternative. He does not state *No* or *I don't want to*, but Solomon gives an alternative in order to refuse the request.

In relation to the function of refusals, Solomon's refusal functions to negotiate Patsey's request. He suggests Patsey to ask for the other slaves' help. By negotiating her request, Solomon expects that Patsey's request can be performed by the other slaves.

The last example of indirect type can be seen in Epps and Solomon's conversation. Solomon has finished Epps' task to fetch Patsey from Mrs. Shaw's house.

Epps : Come here!

Solomon : **I got her, just as instructed**

(Datum 22)

Epps accused Solomon for talking to Patsey when he summoned her. However, Solomon did not admit his accusation. Epps was furious because he knew that Solomon lied. However, Solomon refused Epps' request when Epps asked him to come closer because he knew that Epps would give him punishment.

In relation to this context, Solomon's refusal is categorized as indirect type because he performs the attempt to dissuade the interlocutor. In this datum, Solomon uses self-defense in order to refuse the request. Solomon's self-defense is indicated in the statement *I got her, just as instructed*.

In relation to the function of refusals, Solomon's refusal is functioned to imply the unfairness of the request, offer, suggestion, and invitation. Solomon's refusal implies that Epps' request is unfair. He has finished the task he gives, so Solomon thinks that he does not deserve to get a punishment.

### c. Adjuncts to Refusals

Another example is the conversation between Mrs. Shaw and Epps.

Mrs. Shaw : Do you drink tea?  
Solomon : **Thank you, Mistress,  
but I don't dare.**

(Datum 18)

Mrs. Shaw offered Solomon to have a cup of tea. However, he refused the offer because he thought that it was not appropriate for a slave like him to have a cup of tea with a mistress.

In reference to this context, *Thank you, Mistress, but I don't dare* is an example of refusing by showing a gratitude/appreciation. Hence, Solomon's refusal is categorized as adjuncts to refusals. Solomon shows his gratitude to precede his refusal because he does not want to offend Mrs. Shaw. Mrs. Shaw is a mistress, so Solomon tries to make his refusal more polite. In relation to the function of refusals, Solomon performs adjuncts to refusals in order to show his gratitude to Mrs. Shaw for offering a cup of tea.

The characters in *12 Years a Slave* perform all types of refusals. Each type of refusals is realized differently. In addition, the findings show that different refusals have different functions. As an example, when the characters provide an excuse/reason/explanation in refusing, the function of their refusals is to demand the understanding from the refusee.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

### Conclusion

It can be concluded that, first, all types of refusals are performed by the characters in *12 Years a Slave*. Indirect type becomes the main type of refusals which are performed by the characters. The characters prefer to perform indirect refusals since they want to emphasize that the request, offer, suggestion, or invitation is impossible to be performed and they want to maintain their relationship with the refusee. The distant relationship with the refusee also

becomes the consideration of the characters in choosing indirect refusals.

Second, there are fifteen realizations of refusals. Direct type consists of two realizations. Based on the data findings, the characters in *12 Years a Slave* only employ non-performative statement. Non-performative statement is mostly used to refuse the request, offer, suggestion, or invitation from the refusee who has the same social level with the characters. The characters do not afraid to offend the refusee since they come from the same social level. In addition, the characters have an intimate relationship with the refusee.

Indirect type consists of nine realizations. However, the characters in *12 Years of a Slave* only perform five realizations namely the statement of an alternative, avoidance, excuse/reason/explanation, the attempt to dissuade the interlocutor, and the statement of a principle/philosophy. Meanwhile, the attempt to dissuade the interlocutor becomes the main realization of indirect type since the characters from a higher social level mostly perform the attempt to dissuade the interlocutor to show their superiority over the characters from the lower social level.

Adjuncts to refusals consist of four realizations. However, there is one realization of adjuncts to refusals found in the movie, i.e. showing gratitude/appreciation. The conflict among the characters affects the characters to rarely perform adjuncts to refusals.

Third, a total of eight functions of refusals are found in *12 Years a Slave*. Among all the functions of refusals, demanding understanding from the refusee becomes the most occurred function of refusals as it lessens the negative impact of refusals.

### Suggestions

After concluding the research, the researcher proposes three suggestions. First, the

students of English Language and Literature particularly who are majoring in linguistics are suggested to conduct a research on refusals since the research on refusals has not gained much attention.

In addition, future researchers who have an interest in conducting a research with the same topic are suggested to analyze other aspects besides types, realizations, and functions. Other researchers can investigate some aspects which influence people's preference in performing certain types of refusals.

Furthermore, readers in general are expected can get more information about refusals. They can have more knowledge that refusals are performed in different ways.

## REFERENCES

- Beebe, L. M., T. Takahashi and R. Uliss-Weltz. 1990. "Pragmatic Transfer in ESL Refusals". In R. C. Scarcella, E. S. Andersen, and S. D. Krashen (Eds), *Developing Communicative Competence in Second Language*, pp. 55–73. New York: Newbury House.
- Chen, X., L. Ye, and Y. Zhang. 1995. "Refusing in Chinese". In G. Kasper (Ed.), *Pragmatics of Chinese as Native and Target Language* (Technical Report #5), pp. 119–163. Honolulu: Second Language Teaching & Curriculum Center, University of Hawaii at Manoa.
- Patton, M. Q. 2002. *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (3<sup>rd</sup>ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication, Inc.
- Wiersma, W. 1995. *Research Methods in Education: an Introduction*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Yule, G. 1996. *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Phuong, T. M. N. 2006. "Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: Refusals of Request by Australian Native Speakers of English and Vietnamese Learners of English". *Master's Dissertation*. Queensland: The Faculty of Arts, University of Queensland.