Linguistic Politeness of the World: Strategies Used by Organizers of Youth International Conferences in Writing Rejection Letters

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Abstract

The study explores the politeness strategies deployed in rejection letters from youth international conferences. It aims to identify the politeness marker(s) that characterize a specific politeness strategy. Furthermore, this paper attempts to describe the general macrostructure of the said rejection letters by analyzing the strategic positioning of politeness strategies in these letters. Thirty (30) rejection letters written by organizers of youth international conferences served as the corpus of the study. By utilizing Brown and Levinson's or B&L's (1987) Politeness Theory Model and Baresova's (2008) framework, the researchers examined these letters of rejection and identified the politeness strategies employed in writing them. The findings revealed that being optimistic and noticing or attending to the hearer are the two most commonly used politeness strategies in rejection letters from youth international conferences. These strategies are often marked by optimistic phrases (i.e., presuming an applicant's willingness to cooperate and a positive outcome), and thank-you phrases (i.e., expressing gratitude upon interest in the conference). Moreover, the results suggest that the general macrostructure of the rejection letters follows the proposed refusal sequence that includes (1) preparation for rejection, (2) actual rejection, and (3) remedy. This paper affirms the applicability of B&L's politeness theory in writing rejection letters for youth international conferences, while also describing the linguistic features of politeness.

Keywords: Politeness strategies, rejection letters from youth international conferences, letter writing

1.   Introduction

In the recent years, refusal or rejection is among those speech acts that have received a great deal of inquiry (Aliakbari & Changizi, 2012; Delen & Tavil, 2010; Felix-Brasdefer, 2006; Gass & Houck, 1999; Morkus, 2014) aside from requests, apologies, and compliments. Refusal or rejection is a speech act by which a speaker "denies to engage in an action proposed by the interlocutor" (Chen Ye & Zhang, 1995, as cited in Gass & Houck, 1999, p. 2). Rather than an act initiated by the speaker, it is simply a response to a former act initiated by another interlocutor. By its very nature, "*rejection* is one of the most offensive speech acts, and if not done politely, is quite likely to negatively impact the hearer's self-image" (Baresova, 2008, p. 11, emphasis added). For this reason, Gass and Houck (1999) note that refusals or rejections are often done in a manner that involves not only a negotiation for a favorable outcome but also face-saving schemes to accommodate the noncompliant nature of the act. In other words, rejection implies the use of different politeness strategies to lessen its negative impact.

As a linguistic phenomenon, politeness has been explored in several studies because of its relevant theoretical and practical issues (Baresova, 2008; Cutrone, 2011; Gagne, 2010; Gonzales, 2002; Hammouda, 2013; Janssen & Janssen, 2010; Kitamura, 2000; Pishghadam & Navari, 2012). Baresova (2008) describes politeness as a naturally occurring phenomenon, especially within a stretch of a discourse or an utterance. Pragmatically, politeness functions as a sociocultural manifestation that lessens and prevents risks associated with communication conflict (Lakoff, 1973, as cited in Hammouda, 2013). According to Gonzales (2002), politeness demonstrates a special way of taking into account another person's feelings. Indeed, in the communication process where meaning is negotiated, politeness is expressed with respect to one's feelings.

Interestingly, it appears innate to people to use politeness systems when communicating. While each culture has its own perception of politeness, it also possesses a distinct form of expressing it, which is usually embedded in a language. As Pishghadam and Navari (2012) suggested, based on the specific sets of politeness strategies used in discourse, cultures can be differentiated from one another. While it is also true that several studies have been conducted focusing on politeness strategies in refusals, it appears that none has been done yet on rejection letters in youth international conferences.

Since recent global advancements, particularly in the bilateral relations of many countries, these youth international conferences have become prevalent and have served as channels in preparing youths for the upcoming international integration. Thus, youth international conferences are a timely and relevant subject matter that requires attention from researchers. Despite the fact that the organizers of these conferences are a conglomeration of different and distinct cultures, the politeness that these groups of writers embody remains untheorized. Hence, the study would like to contribute to a better understanding of this cultural phenomenon in a global scale.

In this case, the researcher decided to explore the writing culture underlying the rejection letters from youth international conferences and investigate the nuances of such letters, with emphasis on their use of politeness strategies.

The importance of politeness conveys a potential effect it may cause to a listener or reader. With a heightened chance of offending the hearer, much caution or politeness is applied. In this light, the primary objective of this study is to examine the politeness strategies the representatives or organizers utilize in writing rejection letters for youth international conferences. Specifically, it seeks answers to the following questions:

1. What politeness strategies are employed in rejection letters written by organizers of youth international conferences?
2. What politeness markers characterize such politeness strategies?
3. What is the macrostructure of these rejection letters with respect to textual organization (i.e., how politeness strategies are strategically organized)?

1.1 Politeness Phenomenon: A Theoretical Overview

In the field of pragmatic linguistics, proponents, like Lakoff (1973) and Leech (1983), have attempted to define politeness by theorizing and providing some specific rules in maintaining a conversation. On the one hand, Lakoff (1973) formulated maxims which, he assumed, guide people in an exchange or utterance. His three maxims state the things that ought and not ought to be done while conversing: (1) do not impose, (2) give options, and (3) make the receiver feel good. These rules propound formality, deference, and camaraderie, which result in a better relationship among members of a society. On the other, Leech's (1983) ideas focused on the "goal-oriented speech situation in which a speaker uses language to produce a particular effect in the mind of a hearer" (as cited in Pishghadam & Navari, 2012, p. 162). Like Lakoff, Leech (1983, as cited in Svennevig, 1999) also formulated his politeness principle (PP), which says that "people should minimize (all things being equal) the expression of impolite beliefs," and "maximize (other things being equal) the expression of polite beliefs" (p. 39).

However, among the several politeness models proposed, that of Brown and Levinson's (1987) has received the greatest attention because of its proposed concept of universality. This politeness model consists of a fundamental theory concerning the nature of politeness and how it functions in interaction, and a list of politeness strategies, drawing on examples mainly from three languages (i.e., English, Tzeltal, and Tamil) (Cutrone, 2011). The basic principle of the model is that during interaction, all interlocutors maintain two types of face: the positive face and the negative face. Brown and Levinson (1987) define positive face as the positive and consistent image people have of themselves and their desire for approval. On the other hand, negative face is "the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, and rights to non-distraction" (Kitamura, 2000, p. 1).

Brown and Levinson's (1987, as cited in Wagner, 2004) politeness theory is anchored on the premise that several speech acts are intrinsically threatening to the face. Speech acts, which are generally opposing the face wants or the public self-image of a speaker (S) or an addressee (A), are identified by Brown and Levinson as face-threatening acts (FTAs).

This occurs in social interactions in which the face of the S or the A is being threatened, such as when one makes a request, disagrees, gives a piece of advice, and the like. The potential severity of an FTA is determined by these factors: the social distance (D) of the S and the A; the relative power (P) of the S and the A; and the absolute ranking (R) of imposition in a particular culture (Cutrone, 2011).

Brown and Levinson (1987) expound on the idea of FTAs by classifying them according to two parameters: (1) "whose face is being threatened (the speaker's or the addressee's)," and (2) "which type of face is being threatened" (the positive or the negative face) (p. 65). Acts threatening to an addressee's positive face include those in which a speaker demonstrates that he or she does not approve of or support the addressee's positive face or self-image (e.g., complaints, criticisms, accusations, mentions of taboo topics, interruptions). Acts that threaten an addressee's negative face, on the other hand, involve instances when the addressee is pressured to accept or to reject a future act of the speaker (e.g., offers, promises) or when the addressee has a reason to believe that his or her goods are desired by the speaker. Examples of FTAs to the speaker's positive face can include apologies, acceptance of a compliment, self-humiliations, and confessions, while some of the FTAs threatening to the speaker's negative face include expressing gratitude, accepting a thank you, apologizing or offering, and making promises (Brown & Levinson, as cited in Wagner, 2004).

"In compliance with the idea that everyone tries to keep his face in the duration of social interaction as much as possible, it can be expected that all those involved in interactions try to reduce face-threatening acts (FTAs)" (Pishghadam & Navari, 2012, p. 162). In this light, the speaker, in order to execute the required action, has to select a manner by which he or she would like to address the FTA.

As shown in Figure 1, Brown and Levinson (1987) explain that an FTA can be performed either on *record* or *off record* (emphasis added). On record strategy can either be bold and literal (without redressive action), or it may be expressed in a friendly (positive politeness) and respectful (negative politeness) language (Baresova, 2008). By utilizing the notion of face, politeness is characterized into two distinct categories: positive politeness and negative politeness. Positive politeness is expressed by satisfying the positive face in two ways: (1) indicating similarities among interlocutors, or (2) expressing an appreciation of the
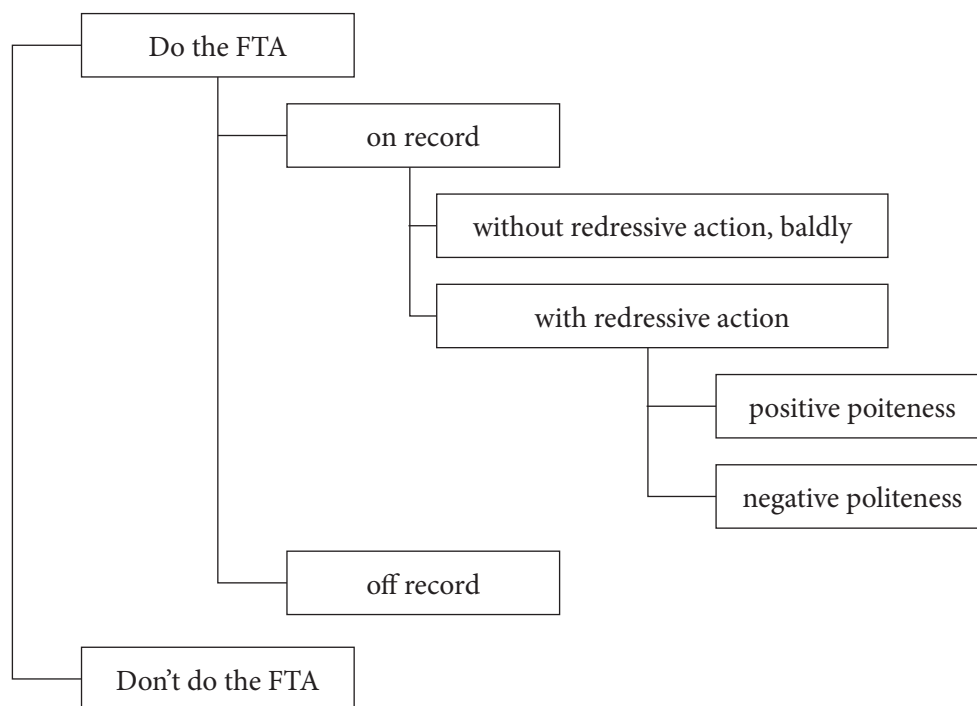

Figure 1. Possible strategies to deliver an FTA (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 69)

interlocutor's self-image. Negative politeness can also be expressed in two ways: (1) saving the interlocutor's face (either negative or positive) by mitigating face threatening acts (FTAs), or (2) satisfying the negative face by indicating respect for the addressee's right not to be imposed on. In short, politeness strategies are employed not only to minimize FTAs but also to satisfy the interlocutors' face regardless of whether an FTA occurs or not (Kitamura, 2000). In addition, politeness strategies are utilized to maintain harmony and undamaged face (Gilks, 2010).

1.2   Literature Review

Over the years, several studies have explored the universal relationship of speech acts and politeness strategies. The succeeding paragraphs provide a comprehensive literature on refusal as a speech act and as a politeness strategy. Furthermore, these studies were gathered to emphasize or display the intimate linking of refusal as a speech act and mitigating devices or politeness strategies, which help minimize an FTA that is considered a potential threat to the receiver.

Aliakbari and Changizi (2012) discovered several refusal strategies employed by Persian and Kurdish speakers, and how these strategies are elicited with respect to interlocutors' status. The results revealed that 'direct refusal,' 'regret,' 'excuse and reason,' 'wish,' and 'postponement' were the most frequently used semantic formulas to express refusal. Likewise, requests were mostly refused by an 'excuse/reason' accompanied by a statement of 'regret' when a person is refusing someone of higher status. On the contrary, 'direct refusal' is employed when a person is refusing someone of lower status. These findings can contribute to the overall understanding of refusal as a speech act and to reduce miscommunication in general.

Felix-Bradsdefer's (2006) study examined the linguistic strategies and perceptions of politeness among male university students during refusal interactions in three politeness systems: solidarity, deference, and hierarchy. The analysis led to the conclusion that factors such as power (P) and distance (D) play a crucial role in determining the appropriate degree of politeness in Mexican society. Moreover, these speakers' negotiation of face (face-saving act) is indirectly achieved through constant attempts of (re) negotiating a successful resolution politely.

Delen and Tavil (2010) collaborated to investigate whether Turkish learners of English use strategies when performing three speech acts, namely, requests, refusals, and complaints. On the use of strategies when making requests, the subjects were aware that factors such as social distance (D) and social status/power (P), along with indirectness in making request, contribute to the execution of the act. As for refusal strategies, the subjects used a variety of indirect strategies to lessen the potential damaging effect of refusals since they are considered offensive acts by nature. Lastly, the analysis of complaint strategies showed that despite clarity in the performance of the act, the subjects were less sensitive as compared with their performance in requests and refusals. The results suggest that in different speech acts, a corresponding strategy is employed by a performer to express himself or herself clearly.

On a cross-cultural level, Baresova (2008) analyzed Japanese and American employment rejection letters and discovered that "while members of the same culture have an understanding of what politeness strategies to employ and expect in a particular situation, an application of the same means in cross-cultural communication may result in pragmatic failure" (p.115). The results revealed that patterns of particular speech acts differ from culture to culture as a result of different norms and values. Thus, American and Japanese perceptions of politeness provided empirical evidence that a speech act executed under comparable social constraints may, in two different cultures, elicit varied politeness strategies.

Another study conducted by Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2011, as cited in Hammouda, 2013) in French, which utilized Brown and Levinson's politeness model, expounded the idea of FTA. Kerbrat-Orecchioni argued that viewing politeness solely as an aid to mitigate 'face-threatening acts' is misleading because politeness is more than just repairing threats. It also includes 'anti-threats,' which push people to work to save face and enhance it. Consequently, she proposes what she calls 'face-flattering acts' (or FFA, also 'face-enhancing or face-giving) as a counterpoint to FTA. Whereas FTAs are softened (through politeness strategies), FFAs are reinforced (also with the use of politeness strategies) (Hammouda, 2013).

In the Philippine context, Correo (2014) studied the politeness strategies deployed by Filipinos

in asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC). Results affirmed Walther's (1992, as cited in Correo, 2014) Social Information Processing Theory, which proposed that individuals deploy not only discursive strategies but politeness strategies as well to maintain the equilibrium between functional and interpersonal use of language in computer-mediated discourses. Also, the findings highlight the applicability of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory in the Philippine context with emphasis on CMC. The study argues that Filipinos are highly concerned about their relationships with people not only in their face-to-face encounters but also in CMC.

In the same endeavor of examining cross-cultural differences in the writers' use of politeness strategies, Gonzales's (2002) study on politeness in letters to the editor in Philippine English, American English, and Singaporean English affirmed the importance of applying politeness theory not only in spoken interaction but also in written communication. The results revealed that writers of letters to the editor design their own FTAs and counterbalance them by equally producing politeness strategies. The study also attested to the effects cultural influences have on a writer's use of politeness strategies. For Singaporean writers, it is their use of standard form of reference; for Americans, the direct opposition to the other writer's opinion; and for Filipinos, the high tendency to use politeness markers and politeness strategies.

1.3   Theoretical Framework

1.3.1   Politeness Strategies

Politeness strategies, according to Baresova (2008), are based on a speaker's volition rather than the prescribed norms. These are schemes employed out of volition with respect to politeness. In this light, a speaker may choose from a wider range of means to express politeness.

Brown and Levinson (1987) developed a detailed list of politeness strategies that provided an extensive framework of linguistic means of expressing politeness. This framework would serve as the theoretical underpinning of the study and would be utilized to analyze the corpus (see 2.2 Procedure).

1.3.1.1 Positive Politeness Strategies

Brown and Levinson (1987) enumerated strategies that exemplify positive politeness. These strategies have three subclassifications: (a) claiming a common ground, (b) conveying that the speaker and the addressee are cooperators, and (c) fulfilling the hearer's wants.

Under the first subclassification, that is, claiming a common ground, the strategies include (1) noticing, attending to hearer (his interests, wants, needs, goods); (2) exaggerating (interest, approval, sympathy with hearer); (3) intensifying interest to hearer; (4) using in-group identity markers; (5) seeking agreement; (6) avoiding disagreement; (7) presupposing/ raising/ asserting a common ground; and (8) joking.

The second set of positive politeness strategies intends to convey that the speaker and the hearer are cooperators. These strategies include (1) asserting or presupposing speaker's knowledge of and concern for hearer's wants (i.e., cooperative communication); (2) offering a promise; (3) being optimistic; (4) including both speaker and hearer in the activity; (5) giving (or asking for) reasons; and (6) assuming or asserting reciprocity.

The last subclassification of positive politeness strategies that aims to fulfill the hearer's wants includes only one strategy, which is to directly give gifts to the hearer (e.g., goods, sympathy, understanding, cooperation). In this manner, the speaker anticipates the hearer's wants (whether tangible or intangible), shows support toward their fulfillment, and/or makes efforts to satisfy, particularly the desire for goodwill. Something of this nature is often found at the end of rejection letters (Baresova, 2008).

1.3.1.2 Negative Politeness Strategies

Negative politeness is essentially based on avoiding or minimizing an imposition. It redresses the imposition using apologies, deference, and various kinds of hedges, impersonalizing, and any other devices (Baresova, 2008).

Similarly, Brown and Levinson (1987) also provided an exhaustive list of strategies conforming to negative politeness. These strategies include (1) being conventionally indirect, (2) questioning/hedging, (3) being pessimistic, (4) minimizing the imposition, (5)

giving deference, (6) apologizing, (7) impersonalizing speaker and hearer, (8) stating the FTA as a general rule (e.g., *shoes are for outside*), (9) nominalizing, and (10) going on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting hearer.

1.3.1.3 Off-record Strategies

This type of politeness strategies, unlike positive and negative politeness strategies, is very indirect in nature and could elicit several interpretations. Neither the speaker nor the hearer can be held responsible for the intended meaning; thus, context usually determines the intended interpretation (Baresova, 2008). Brown and Levinson (1987) classify off-record strategies according to what Gricean maxims (i.e., Relevance, Quantity, Quality, and Manner) these strategies violate. It should be noted though that in his notion of Cooperative Principle (CP), Grice (1989 [1975]) argues that these maxims help in communicational cooperation, for such a theory posits that talk exchanges "are, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts" (p. 26).

Brown and Levinson (1987, pp. 213-217) expound on these off-record strategies that violate the Gricean maxims. The first set of strategies violates the Maxim of Relevance. The strategies include these: (1) "give hints," (2) "give association clues," and (3) "presuppose" with implied criticism (e.g., *I had to clean the house again today* – implying that the speaker should not have done it). The next set of strategies is a violation of the Maxim of Quantity: (1) "understate," (2) "overstate," and (3) "use tautologies." Another set of strategies which are done by stating something that is not accurate, thus, forcing the hearer to find the true meaning of an utterance, is a violation of the Maxim of Quality. These acts include: (1) "use contradictions," (2) "be ironic,' (3) "use metaphors," and (4) "use rhetorical questions." Finally, the last set of off-record strategies violates the Maxim of Manner. These strategies are used to make meanings indefinite when they could threaten the hearer's face. These include: (1) "be ambiguous"; (2) "be vague"; (3) "over-generalize"; (4) "displace H" or hearer (e.g., "We have received many qualified applicants and cannot employ them all."; i.e., "We cannot employ you."); and (5) "be incomplete, use ellipsis."

1.3.2 Baresova's Refusal Sequence

As purported by Baresova (2008), the refusal sequence of rejection letters often contains three basic parts (see Figure 2.): (1) a preparation for the rejection, (2) the actual rejection, (3) and some remedy. The preparation and remedy phases function as supportive moves. Moreover, the rejection itself may also include some supportive moves to soften its impact.

The preparation phase can be divided into two parts, neither of which is obligatory: (1) an opening, which usually includes an expression of gratitude or acknowledgment of receiving the application; and (2) a transition, which is usually in the same sentence as the rejection or immediately precedes it.
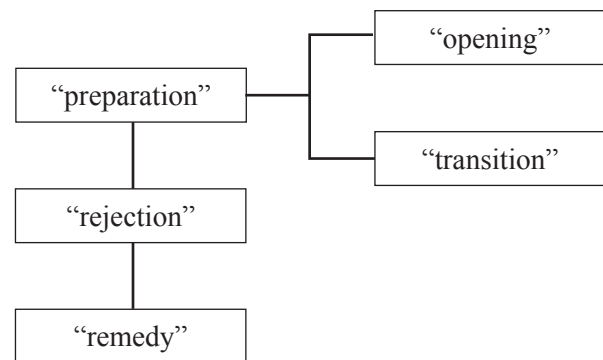

Figure 2. Refusal sequence in rejection letters

The rejection remedies, taking various forms from apology to compensation, were analyzed in terms of Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies to emphasize cultural distinction in the overall conveyance of the rejection.

These two models, Baresova's (2008) refusal sequence and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory model, were used as tools for the analysis of the corpus.

2. Method

2.1 Study Corpus

Thirty (30) rejection letters written by organizers of youth international conferences were gathered and used for this study. The rejection letters collected were written in the year 2014. The organizers who wrote these letters belong to youth-oriented groups that are

either nongovernment-affiliated (NGOs), or national and international councils governed by ASEAN and United Nations Alliance, which use English as their primary language in official work communications and business correspondence. This criterion was specifically established in order to filter out other letters written in different languages.

The researchers acquired these letters from different university students who received them after being rejected by youth international conferences they applied for. These youth international conferences were mostly about leadership-skills building and cultural-awareness campaigns. One of their primary requirements for application is age, which may range from 18 to 30 years old. Thus, the researchers chose to collate the data from university students, primarily because they represent the age group the data of the present study would want to explore. In addition, another salient requirement when applying for youth international conferences is educational background. With the premise that education is a prerequisite to join the conferences, the researchers opted to select university students as the resource of data since they qualified for the aforementioned criteria. Moreover, it was ideal and more convenient (for data-gathering purposes) for the researchers to select these people since they study and work in a university. Hence, the said data were collected from university students.

2.2   Procedure

The analysis conducted for this research first attempted to identify the politeness strategies and politeness markers found in rejection letters for youth international conferences. It also endeavored to give an overview of the textual organization of these letters through examining the moves underlying the rejection letters. In this light, each letter was analyzed at the speech act level (i.e., every utterance that has a performative function in the letter), which functions as the unit of analysis in this study.

2.2.1   Unit of Analysis

Speech act level as a unit of analysis in Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework follows Austin's (1975) doctrine of performative and constative utterances. The speech acts under the performative function are identified as illocutionary acts, which are either: (1) the performance of which one must make to some other person as a clarification that the act is performed, or (2) the performance of which involves the production of what

Dear applicant,

*PF$_1$ Thank you for applying to the XXXXXXXXX.

PF$_2$ We are privileged to have the opportunity to review applications from highly qualified individuals such as yourself.

PF$_3$ This made the task of the Selection Committee in choosing successful candidates an extremely difficult one.

PF$_4$ We deeply regret that, despite your impressive application, we are unable to offer you a slot in this program.

PF$_5$ We sincerely hope that you will continue to show interest in our future international programs.

PF$_6$ We wish you success in all your future endeavors.

Best regards,

International Programs Secretariat
XXXXXXXXX

*PF = Performative Function

Figure 3. Sample rejection letter from a youth international conference

Austin (1975, p. 23) calls "conventional consequences" (e.g., rights, commitments, or obligations).

Figure 3 shows a sample of an analyzed rejection letter.

After determining the Performative Functions in all the letters, they were classified according to how they served as politeness strategies: Positive Politeness (PP), Negative Politeness (NP), and Off-Record (OR). The categorization was further guided by the extensive list of politeness strategies developed by Brown and Levinson (1987). Using Figure 3 as an example, the classification is as follows:

Positive politeness:

1. PF_1 *Thank you* for applying to the XXXXXXXXXX. (notice, attend to hearer)
2. PF_2 We are privileged to have the opportunity to review applications from *highly qualified* individuals such as yourself. (exaggerating)
3. PF_5 We sincerely *hope* that you will continue to show interest in our future international programs. (avoiding disagreement, i.e., highlighting positive aspect of a negative item)
4. PF_6 We *wish you success* in all your future endeavors. (fulfilling hearer's wants, i.e., anticipation of hearer's wants)

Off-record:

1. PF_2 We are *privileged* to have the opportunity to review applications from highly qualified individuals such as yourself. (overstating)
2. PF_3 This made the task of the Selection Committee in choosing successful candidates an extremely difficult one. (giving association clues)

2.2.2 Macro-structure of Rejection Letters

The next phase of analysis was to give an estimation of the textual organization of the rejection letters. For this section, the performative functions were referred to as moves that dictate the next turn or event in letters. Baresova's (2008) Refusal Sequence Model states that there are three moves underlying the structure of rejection letters. These moves include a preparation stage, which is often composed of an opening and transition, a rejection stage, and a remedy phase. Again, using Figure 3, the moves identified in the sample rejection letter are as follows:

Preparation stage:

1. PF_1 Thank you for applying to the XXXXXXXXXX. (opening)
2. PF_2 We are privileged to have the opportunity to review applications from highly qualified individuals such as yourself. ($transition_1$)
3. PF_3 This made the task of the Selection Committee in choosing successful candidates an extremely difficult one. ($transition_2$)

Rejection stage:

1. PF_4 We deeply regret that, despite your impressive application, we are unable to offer you a slot in this program.

Remedy stage:

1. PF_5 We sincerely hope that you will continue to show interest in our future international programs. (positive politeness)
2. PF_6 We wish you success in all your future endeavors. (positive politeness)

The analysis of the data was performed by the researchers and verified by two intercoders who are knowledgeable in the field of study. The intercoders were both English college instructors with master's degrees, also in English. They independently verified the researcher's analysis through reanalyzing the same data until they all arrived at a consensus with the results and interpretation of the entire data.

3. Results and Discussion

In this section, the politeness strategies

identified in the rejection letters from youth international conferences are presented and analyzed. In addition, the politeness markers that characterize such strategies are discussed here. Lastly, a rough estimation of the textual organization of rejection letters from youth international conferences would be proposed based on the findings of the study.

First, the rejection letters were analyzed according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework on politeness strategies. A total of 26 politeness strategies was found, of which ten (10) were classified under the positive politeness strategies. The results revealed that positive politeness strategies were deployed the most after tallying a total of 113 occurrences in 30 samples, averaging four to five per rejection letter. Tables 1, 2, and 3 provide a comprehensive list of all the politeness strategies identified in the sample rejection letters.

Among all the politeness strategies observed, the strategy "be optimistic," a positive politeness strategy, accumulated the highest frequency (25 or 14.97%), which is somehow expected because it exhibits the innate opposite attitude toward rejection, which is negative in nature. In this light, the data seem to suggest that the writer/sender of the rejection letter is fully aware of the negative impact the action may cause the addressee. Being optimistic, then, minimizes this impact, and attempts for negotiation of face in the writer's part. Pilegaard (1997, as cited in Jansen & Jansen, 2010) affirms a similar finding when he found that positive politeness strategies (alone or in combination) make up 41.2% of the strategies employed in the letters in which business partners negotiate an order, the type of letter in his corpus where refusals are expected to occur most frequently. Similarly, Felix-

Table 1. Positive politeness strategies in rejection letters

Politeness Strategies		Frequency	Percentage
Positive Politeness	Notice, attend to hearer	23	13.77%
	Exaggerate	21	12.57%
	Intensify interest to hearer	2	1.20%
	Avoid disagreement	3	1.79%
	Assert common ground	1	0.60%
	Assert or presuppose speaker's knowledge of and concern for hearer's wants	5	3%
	Offer, promise	17	10.18%
	Be optimistic	25	14.97%
	Include both speaker and hearer in the activity	1	0.60%
	Give gifts to hearer	15	8.98%
Total		**113**	**67.66%**

Table 2. Negative politeness strategies in rejection letters

Politeness Strategies		Frequency	Percentage
Negative Politeness	Be conventionally indirect	2	1.20%
	Hedge	5	3%
	Impersonalize S or H	1	0.60%
	State FTA as a general rule	3	1.79%
	Apologize	2	1.20%
	Be pessimistic	1	0.60%
	Nominalize	2	1.20%
	Go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting H	1	0.60%
Total		**17**	**10.19%**

Table 3. Off-record strategies in rejection letters

Politeness Strategies		Frequency	Percentage
Off-record	Give association clues	8	4.79%
	Presuppose	1	0.60%
	Understate	3	1.79%
	Overstate	17	10.18%
	Be vague	1	0.60%
	Over-generalize	1	0.60%
	Displace H	6	3.59%
Total		**37**	**22.15%**

Bradsdefer's (2006) study concluded that there is an initiative from the writer's part to provide a resolution to save both the speaker's and the hearer's faces.

The following examples show how positive politeness strategy "be optimistic" is deployed in rejection letters:

1. …so we hope you continue following our social media platforms to stay updated.
2. …we would love to have you participate in the youth session. You can register here…
3. …we hope you will consider continuing your journey with us through the . . .
4. We would welcome your application to our . . . next year.
5. Looking forward to seeing you there!

In these listed excerpts, all attempted to foster a mutual cooperation between the writer and the receiver of the rejection letter, which is indicative of "be optimistic" strategy because they (the writers) readily presumed the addressees' willingness to cooperate, while equally expecting a positive outcome. By doing so, the speaker confirms that he is interested in the hearer and wants a good relationship with him, so that this cooperative context and situation can compensate for the damage done by the FTA (Jansen & Jansen, 2010). In a sense, this particular strategy could also be another way to implicitly request favors from the addressee. Moreover, the analysis of these excerpts may lead to a conclusion that the "be optimistic" strategy is often marked by phrases indicating hope and optimism toward cooperation between the writer and the addressee of the letter.

It is also noteworthy that negative politeness strategies, which tallied only 17 occurrences, are infrequent in these rejection letters. The findings seem to agree with Brown and Levinson's (1987) explanation that while negative politeness is the most conventionalized set of linguistic strategies for FTA redress, it is only an aspect of expressing politeness. In general, negative politeness maintains the respect for social distance, an aspect that is highly considered when enacting FTA (Cutrone, 2011). However, the outnumbering presence of positive politeness strategies suggests that writers are not only concerned about delivering the FTA but also at establishing and enhancing the relationship between them and the addressees as a way of compensation.

Next, an attempt to describe the macro-structure of rejection letters from international youth conferences was made. In this respect, Baresova's (2008) model on refusal sequence was utilized to identify the moves underlying these letters. The findings in Table 4 show that rejection letters include a preparation stage, composed of an opening and a transition part, a rejection stage, and a remedy stage.

Table 4. Frequency of moves in the refusal sequence

Moves in Refusal Sequence		Frequency	Average Move per Letter
Preparation	Opening	41	1.37
	Transistion	44	1.47
Rejection		30	1
Remedy		136	4.53
Total		**251**	**8.37**

Table 4 registers 41 and 44 occurrences of opening and transition parts in rejection letters, averaging 1.37 and 1.47 respectively, per letter. This means that writers prefer to have an opening and a transition when writing or constructing their letters. Moreover, this reveals important information with regard to the construction of rejection letters because it implies that the writers do not proceed with rejecting the applicant right away, but they provide a background or explanation behind the action. In addition, in both opening and transition parts of the rejection letters, redressive schemes or politeness strategies were already utilized. The opening part usually contained the writer's gratitude for the applicant's interest in the program or conference, while the transition part elicited several techniques or politeness strategies before proceeding with the actual rejection. Tables 5 and 6 summarize the politeness strategies deployed in the opening and transition parts of the rejection letters.

Table 5. Politeness strategies at the opening sequence

		Frequency	Percentage
Positive Politeness	Notice, attend to hearer	23	76.67%
	Exaggerate	2	6.67%
Others	Greetings, follow-up on the result of application, and etc.	5	16.66
Total		**30**	**100%**

Based on Table 5, "notice, attend to hearer" is the most frequently used strategy in the opening sequence of rejection letters from youth international conferences, with 23 or 76.67% instances. This also means that writers deploy mostly positive politeness strategies at the beginning of their letters. The analysis of data shows that the "notice, attend to hearer" strategy is often introduced by a thank-you phrase, which according to Baresova (2008) is the most common introductory statement or formulaic expression used to express appreciation.

Here are some notable instances when thank-you phrases were utilized in the "opening" sequence of the rejection letters.

6. Dear Applicant,
   Thank you for your application to the . . .
7. Dear applicant,
   On behalf of the . . . organising team, we would like to thank you again for your interest and your application for the . . .
8. Dear applicant,
   Thank you very much for applying to . . .
9. Dear applicant to the Youth event at the . . . in Bali, Indonesia.
   Thank you for your interest in the . . . in Bali and for taking the time to submit an application.
10. Dear (name of applicant),
    Thank you for your interest in . . .

Table 6. Politeness strategies at the transition sequence

Politeness Strategies		Frequency	Percentage
Positive politeness	Exaggerating	8	18.18%
	Intensify interest to hearer	3	6.82%
	Noticing, attending to hearer	1	2.27%
Negative politeness	Being pessimistic	1	2.27%
	Overstating	9	20.45%
Off-record	Giving association clues	6	13.65%
	Understating	1	2.27%
	Over-generalize	1	2.27%
	Displace H	1	2.27%
Others	Without politeness strategies	13	29.55%
Total		**44**	**100%**

In the transition sequence of the preparation stage in rejection letters, most writers prefer not to use politeness strategies. It is evidently seen in the data, which revealed 13 instances when the writers do not use politeness strategy in this particular sequence. In most cases, these transitions are short phrases as exhibited in the following examples:

11. After reviewing your application…
12. After careful consideration throughout the selection process…
13. After a careful review of your application according to our criterias [sic]…
14. The selection team considered all applications and after screening through all forms…

There are also notable instances where a transition comes in the form of a word or two such as:

15. *Unfortunately,* we are unable to accept all of them due to our limited resources.
16. *However*, upon deliberation, we regret to inform you that you did not make it through this year's . . . applications.
17. *Unfortunately*, . . . organizing committee regrets to inform you that we are unable to offer you admission to . . .
18. *Due to* limited resources, it is with regret that we inform you that your team was not chosen as this year's case challenge winner.

The italicized words signal the transition of the letter from a positive (appreciation) to a negative (rejection) tone of the writer. This transitional phrase follows shortly after the thank-you statement. While thank-you statements are generally positive in nature, it is noteworthy that Baresova (2008) believes that it is a good starting point to announce bad news. Hence, the appearance of these words (i.e., u*nfortunately, however, and due to*) in the transition sequence of the rejection letter aids the shift of the positive atmosphere, which was first established in the beginning of the letter, to a negative one. Moreover, the analysis identified that these words are examples of transitional devices, which are used to express two contrasting ideas (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985). In this case, the appearance of these transitional devices seems to imply that the addressee is about to receive a bad news or about to be rejected.

Consequently, the transition sequences that used politeness strategies showed that "overstating," an off the record strategy, is the most deployed politeness strategy, followed by "exaggerating," which is a positive politeness strategy. These two strategies are closely related because they both overtly accentuate facts and qualities. However, they differ in their subject foci. On the one hand, exaggerating directly enhances the value of the addressee's face, or anything that is directly related to him or her (i.e., qualities, stature, and the like); on the other, overstating is a strategy that enigmatically increases situations or a state of anything that has no relation at all with the addressee.

These are examples of "overstating" used in the transition sequence of rejection letters:

19. We received an *enormous* amount of interest in the session, with *over* 770 applications for our 12 youth facilitator and pitcher spots.

In this example, the italicized words 'enormous' and 'over' indicate the off the record strategy "overstating" because they exaggerate the facts in order to divert the reader's focus from the actual scenario, which is rejection. It introduces a separate case, which aims to justify the decision of the panel. Note, too, this example:

20. A *large* number of scholarship applications were submitted from all over the region for this important congress.

In example 20, 'large' was used as an overstatement to the number of applications the committee received for the congress. Like the previous example, it provides an explanation or justification for the decision before actually disclosing the result, that is, to help minimize the impending threat of refusal or rejection. Baresova (2008) purports that this particular strategy (i.e., mentioning of the number of applicants) signals or hints a rejection and, therefore, minimizes an impending threat.

Meanwhile, these are examples of exaggerating, a positive politeness strategy, used in the transition sequence of rejection letters:

21. We have received more than 2,400 applications from *promising* students across all 51 . . . member countries and the Selection Committee has

considered and carefully reviewed each application.

In this example, the italicized word 'promising' indicates exaggeration as a politeness strategy. The word suggests exaggeration of the qualities of the students or applicants. It was placed in order to minimize the FTA of rejection by juxtaposing a praise or approval of the student's qualification. Examine, too, this example:

22. The mentor recruiting process was by no means highly competitive due to the participation of various *outstanding* applicants.

The word 'outstanding' is an exaggeration trying to divert the reader's attention from the actual rejection. It minimizes the FTA imposition by approving the traits or qualifications of the applicants. The writer went as far as calling these applicants 'outstanding' to emphasize their approval. Such words (i.e., promising, outstanding) are examples of emphatic expressions, which according to Brown and Levinson (1987) do not only redress FTA but also draw the speaker and the hearer closer and enhance their relationship.

The next stage in the refusal sequence purported by Baresova (2008) is the actual rejection. This part contains the FTA, which are either directly stated or imbedded through the statement. In some cases, politeness schemes are employed side-by-side the rejection in order to reduce its damaging effect. Table 7 summarizes the rejection patterns found at the rejection stage of the letter.

The data seem to imply that writers of rejection letters from youth international conferences prefer to be direct or bold (i.e., stating rejection without redressive or politeness schemes) when rejecting an applicant. Note these two examples:

23. Unfortunately, . . . organizing committee regrets to inform you that we are unable to offer you admission to . . .
24. We have finished scouring through over six hundred applications, and we would like to inform you that you have been put on the waitlist.

Table 7. Rejection pattern at the rejection stage

Rejection Pattern		Frequency	Percentage
With politeness strategies		12	40%
Others	Without politeness strategies	17	56.67%
	Indirect rejection	1	3.33%
Total		**30**	**100%**

Both extracts 23 and 24 demonstrate rejection of the applicant. However, notice that the first example made use of "unable to offer admission," which directly referred to the slot or place the applicant is trying to apply for, as compared to the second example that used "put on the waitlist," which could elicit several meanings. This type of rejection is indirect as it did not specify the exact result of the applicant's request.

Meanwhile, this employment of direct refusals may be attributed to the relationship of the writer and the addressee, in which power relation plays an important role in delivering FTA (Felix-Bradsdefer, 2006; Morkus, 2014). Aliakbari and Changizi (2012) stressed that direct refusals are most frequent in cases where the one being rejected is of lower status than the person who will do the rejection. In this study, the writers of the rejection letters are found to be of higher ranks (e.g., director, head of commission), while the applicants are mere students. Correspondingly, direct refusals were mostly employed, too. In addition, the results revealed that regret phrases mark the actual rejection in letters. These phrases observed in the samples are as follows:

23. We deeply regret that, despite your impressive application, we are unable to offer you a slot in this program.
24. … we are regretfully unable to offer you a place at our conference.
25. We regret to inform you today that we are not able to provide you a place in this year's . . .
26. …we regret to inform you that you have NOT been selected for the scholarship award.

27. We regret to inform you that the selection did not fall on you this time.

Regret phrases, in a sense, function as formal and polite means of refusing or rejecting an applicant. They are considered formulaic expressions embedded in the rejection sequence, functioning as supporting moves to the FTA. They do not exactly minimize imposition but help soften the impact of FTAs, for such phrases may convey the writer's sympathy with the addressee.

The last stage in the refusal sequence is the remedy which, according to Baresova (2008), serves as a supporting move in rejection letters (aside from the opening and transition parts). In the 30 samples gathered, all were identified to have the remedy sequence in their rejection letters, tallying about 136 instances and averaging 4.53 per letter. This part comes right after the rejection, and it contains the most number of politeness strategies compared to the preparation and rejection sequences since it redresses the damage the actual rejection created. (See Table 1 for reference.)

In summary, the proposed macrostructure of the rejection letters from youth international conferences includes a preparation stage that is composed of a thank-you statement and a transitional device, which would signal the shift to the rejection stage. The rejection follows a pattern of a direct refusal, without employing politeness strategies, followed by the remedy stage, which takes different kinds of politeness strategies. Figure 4 summarizes the proposed macrostructure of the rejection letter based on the findings of the study.
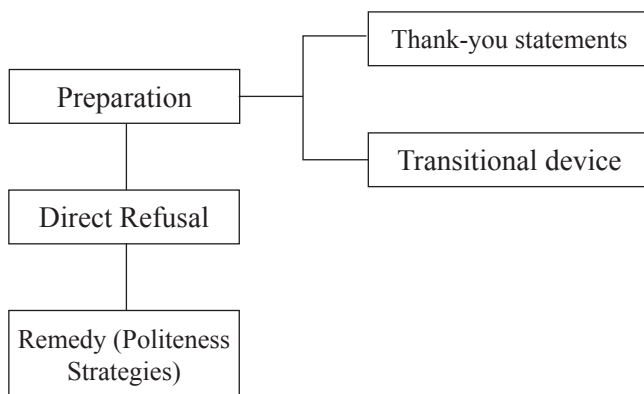
Figure 4. Macro-structure of rejection letters from youth international conferences

Also, one predominant observation in the analysis of the data is the use of the pronoun 'we' to identify the party who will do the rejection. Some of these writers who employ the pronoun 'we' in writing the body of the rejection letters sign at the end with their respective names and positions. Therefore, there is a mismatch with the referencing present in these letters. However, instead of looking at it as an error, the researcher looked into further factors contributing to such behavior. It was discovered that for writers utilizing 'we' in letter writing, cultural background contributes as an important element in constructing statements. Since the data collected were written by organizers who present themselves as a team, which are mostly considered collectivistic in culture (Felix-Brasdefer, 2006; Morkus, 2014), this type of writing mostly transpired. Meanwhile, Hyland (2002), in a similar endeavor, believes that the use of 'we' in his study are attempts to avoid the personal responsibility that subjectivity entails, therefore, avoiding conflicts and instead saving face value.

4.   Conclusion

This work explored the politeness strategies and macro-structure organization of rejection letters from youth international conferences. The analysis revealed several mechanisms underlying the rejection, requiring employment of different politeness strategies. Despite a myriad of politeness strategies available, the writers of the rejection letters seem to favor positive politeness among others (i.e, negative politeness and off-record), primarily to accommodate and enhance the relationship between them (the writers) and the receivers as a way to compensate for the damage done by the rejection.

The utilization of these strategies can be explained in light of the values and perceptions underlying the data's writing culture. The corpora used for this study were written by organizers of international conferences, who have varying cultural orientations. What seems to be common among these writers is their use of English as a standard medium to communicate. Baresova (2008) in her cross-cultural study of rejection letters written by Americans and Japanese, claimed that positive politeness are mostly employed in American's standard letter writing. This finding may possibly account for the predominant use of

positive politeness strategy in this study, for the writers of rejection letters in youth international conferences may have structured their correspondence using this pattern: (1) a preparation stage, which includes a thank-you statement and a transitional device that prompts the shift to the rejection stage; (2) a rejection stage that follows a pattern of a direct refusal, without employing politeness strategies; and (3) a remedy stage. Likewise, the prevalent use of the collective pronoun 'we' may indicate avoidance in personal responsibility (Hyland, 2002), for it could also emphasize the idea that the application underwent scrutiny from credible people, in which the writer is actually a part of. In this manner, the writer implicitly assures the applicant that his application was given enough attention, which may be an indication of a positive politeness strategy.

Since the data focused on a corpus with diverse cultural influences (letters written by organizers of youth international conferences) with just limited samples (i.e., 30 letters), the study may be further explored to affirm the conclusion stated earlier. Interestingly, this paper also touches on the aspect of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), particularly on Business English writing. The study, in a way, proves that when it comes to international relations, distinct cultures do not matter as much as how a specific macrostructure is followed in writing rejection letters in youth international conferences. The findings show that these writers of rejection letters express a 'unified' or 'unifying' global use of English through the use of positive politeness strategies. In other words, these letter writers, who come from different cultural backgrounds but have shared practices in using positive politeness strategies, employ a fairly standardized and recognizable English. This means that such written English is a product of the totality of regulated writing across several speech communities in the world.

Since all rejection letters from the corpus follow a specific macrostructure, further studies may be conducted to examine how language variation may or may not exist across users (i.e., the writers of rejection letters from different countries and cultures) if they are all functioning within a similar social context. In addition, other researchers may also take interest in conducting a comparative analysis, similar to Baresova's (2008) cross-cultural study.

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Appendix A.
Sample Rejection Letters Written by Organizers of Youth International Conferences

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Dear Applicant,

Thank you for your application to the . . .

Due to the exceptionally high standard of applications, we regret to inform you that your application has not been successful on this occasion. The . . . is highly competitive and there are many good candidates to whom it is unfortunately not possible to offer a slot. We are unable to provide individual feedback due to the large number of applications we received.

However, we would like to take this opportunity to thank you for applying to the . . . and to wish you the best of luck in your future endeavors.

If you wish to apply for other . . ., please sign up for alerts by liking and following our Facebook and Twitter Pages.

Best Wishes,

XXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXX

Regrets message to nonselected participants and potential alternates

Dear applicant to the . . . in Bali, Indonesia.

Thank you for your interest in the . . . in Bali and for taking the time to submit an application.

During the past weeks, the Selection Committee composed of youth, . . . and Indonesian representatives reviewed nearly 3,000 applications received for the . . . in Bali. They did so while focusing on the criteria outlined in the call for applications. Earlier today, members of this committee made a final decision on the 100 youth to be invited to Bali for this event. The final decision took into consideration the scores for each application as well as regional and gender balance.

Unfortunately, your application was not retained. This result is not a reflection of your profile but rather of how high the number of application was compared to the number of places available.

However, please note that should the selected participants withdraw from the event, the Selection Committee will go back to the pool of applicants and select alternative candidates.

Once again, we thank you for your interest in the . . . in Bali and for taking the time to apply.

Best regards,
XXXXXXXXX

Dear Applicant,

We highly appreciate your interest in . . . taking place in Istanbul, Turkey.

After a careful review of your application according to our criterias, we are sorry to inform you that your application will not be going forward to the next round of evaluation.

Please note that the selection process was very competitive and only a limited number of participants were chosen. As we received over 3400 applications, we regret that we are unable to provide individual feedback and further communication with candidates.

However, we welcome you to join our first day sessions are going to be held in Istanbul Congress Center on the 24th of October, which is open to all.

We hope you understand the delay in delivering our reply, as we took time to thoroughly review each application. We appreciate your patience and understanding and wish you success in your future endeavors.

We would like to invite you to access further information on our current and upcoming activities, some of which might be of interest to you. Future events are posted on our website, which can be accessed at:

XXXXXXXXX

It would be a pleasure to welcome you in any of our future programmes.

Again, you are welcome to join our first day's session which is going to be held in Istanbul Congress Center on the 24th of October.

Looking forward to seeing you there!

Sincerely,
XXXXXXXXX