# Refusals strategies in the role-play of Lithuanian children

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## Introduction

Refusals are speech acts that respond to requests, offers, invitations or suggestions. They indicate a lack of willingness or agreement to comply, and disapproval of the other person's idea, potentially threatening their self-esteem; thus, they belong to Brown's and Levinson's (1987) indicated notion of the face-threatening speech acts. In contrast to acceptance or agreement, which are typically conveyed directly and without much elaboration, refusals are often expressed with politeness markers (e.g., indirectly, softened with mitigation) or delayed across turns in order to maintain good social relationships and to save interlocutors "face". In addition, explanations or justifications are often provided to rationalize the necessity of the refusal. Thus, the acquisition of different refusals strategies is an integral part of communicative competence and an essential part of the language socialization process. So far, most scholars have investigated adults' refusals, mainly focusing on the communicative competence of ESL learners and cross-cultural comparisons. In this study, refusals, as one of the indicators of communicative competence, are analysed in children's speech, which has received only a few researchers' attention (e.g., Yang and Chang 2008; Chang and Ren 2020) on this matter.

## The classification of refusals

The classification by Beebe et al. (1990) and Katinaitė, Hilbig (2021) were adopted to analyze refusal strategies that were spotted in the data (see Table 1 and 2).

*Table 1. The classification of refusals strategies*

| | | Example |
|---|---|---|
| **Direct** | No | Playing café:<br>*G (4;9): gal norite dar vieno patiekalo?* (Would you like another dish?)<br>*G (4;4):* ***ne.*** **(No.)** |
| | Negative willingness/ability (e.g., I do not want/need to… I can not…) | Playing shop:<br>*B (6;5): gal pasiimk čipsų*. (Maybe, take some chips.)<br>*G (6;1):* ***nenoriu.*** **(I don't want**.) |
| | Negation of the request's propositional content | Playing home:<br>*G (4;6): imk, skaityk.* (Take it, read it.)<br>*G (4;8):* ***neskaitysiu aš.*** **(I won't read it**.) |
| **Indirect** | Alternative request/statement that something must be done differently | Playing shop:<br>*B (4;1): dabar kažko kito nusipirk, gerai?* (Now buy something else, okay?)<br>*G (4;4):* ***nu aš dabar noriu būt.*** (Well, I want to be now (a vendor).) |
| | Compromise | Playing hospital:<br>*B (3;1): aš noriu dabar.* (I want now (to be a doctor).)<br>*B (3;7): aš dabar noriu dar.* (I still want it.)<br>*B (3;1): aš noriu dabar.* (I want now.)<br>*B (3;7):* ***mes būsim abudu daktarai, gerai?*** **(Both of us will be doctors, okay?)** |
| | Statement of regret | Playing shop:<br>*B (5;2): duokit septynis.* (Give me seven (euros).)<br>*B (5;7):* ***apgailestauju****, bet neturiu septynių*. **(I am sorry**, but I don't have seven.) |
| | Excuse, reason, explanation | Playing café:<br>*G (6;2): duok man. Jau gal aš galiu būti padavėja?* (Give me. Can I be a waitress?)<br>*G (6;1):* ***nu aš dar darau taigi.*** **(Well, I am still doing it.**) |
| | Statement of principle | Playing café:<br>*G (5;7): o gėrimo nenorit?* (Don't you want a drink?)<br>*B (6;5):* ***pieno nemėgstu.*** **(I do not like milk**.) |

*Table 2. Adjuncts to directly expressed refusals*

| | |
|---|---|
| **Gratitude** | Playing café:<br>*B (5;3): prašom.* (Here you are.)<br>*G (5;10):* ***ačiū****, daugiau nebenoriu.* (**Thank you**, I don't want any more.) |
| **Mitigation with modal particle** | Playing home:<br>*B (5;5): jūs turit valgyti.* (You have to eat.)<br>*G (5;7): tėti, ne, aš nu nenoriu* ***gal****.* (Dad, no. **Maybe** I do not want to eat.) |
| **Combination of strategies (direct + direct)** | Playing home:<br>*G (5;11): eik lėliukui paskaityt pasaką.* (Go read a fairy tale to the baby.)<br>*B (5;7): dabar ne,* ***dar neisiu****.* (No, not now. **I won't go yet**.)<br>No + Negation of the request's propositional content |
| **Combination of strategies (direct + indirect)** | Playing shop:<br>*G (5;5): pasikeičiam.* (Let's change (the roles).)<br>*G (5;6): ne,* ***tu du kartus jau pardavėja buvai****.* (No, **you have already been a seller twice.**)<br>No + reason/explanation |

## Methodology and participants

Refusal strategies were analyzed in the corpus (for quantitative data, see Table 3), which was specially compiled to investigate the usage of politeness markers. The corpus consisted of peer conversations between children aged 3–4 and 5–6 (for quantitative data, see Table 4). In the conversations, children were imitating formal and informal social situations by playing the following role-plays:

1) a conversation with a doctor in a medical institution;
2) a conversation in a shop;
3) a conversation in a café;
4) a conversation with family members at home;
5) a conversation with mates while celebrating a birthday.

Formal and informal role-play situations were used to investigate the possible differences in the children's ability to vary refusal strategies when refusing interlocutors with different social statuses or social distances.

The research material has been collected in three public kindergartens in Kaunas, Lithuania. Children's conversations have been recorded, then transcribed using the CHILDES (MacWhinney 2000) transcription format CHAT and coded for refusals strategies.

*Table 3. Quantitative corpus data used in the study*

| | Conversations of 3 – 4-year-olds | Conversations of 5 – 6-year-olds | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Number of transcribed conversations | 44 | 41 | **85** |
| Duration of transcribed records | 7 hours 19 min. | 6 hours 24 min. | **13 hours 43 min.** |
| Number of words | 17 402 | 17 630 | **35 032** |

*Table 4. The distribution of role-play participants by gender in the studied age groups and the average children age in the analysed conversations*

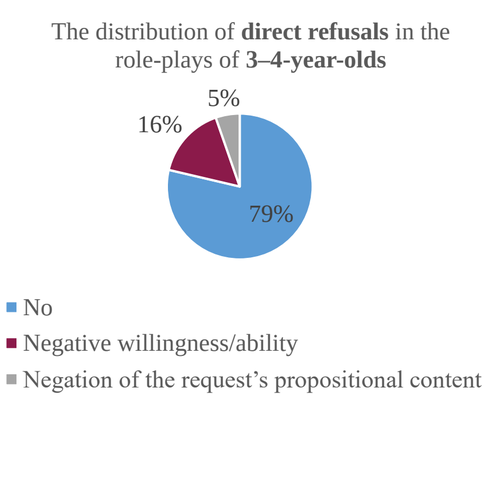
| | 3–4-year-olds | | | 5–6-year-olds | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Girls | Boys | **Total** | Girls | Boys | **Total** |
| The number of research participants | 18 | 15 | **33** | 27 | 23 | **50** |
| The average age in researched conversations | 4;3 | 4;3 | **4;3** | 6;0 | 6;0 | **6;0** |

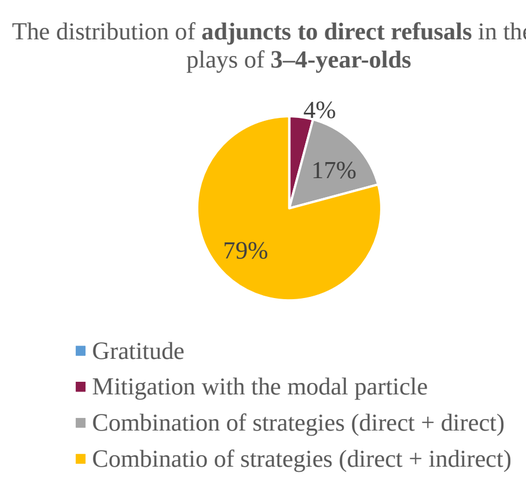
## Utterances produced than acting in the role vs. utterances produced in the metacommunication

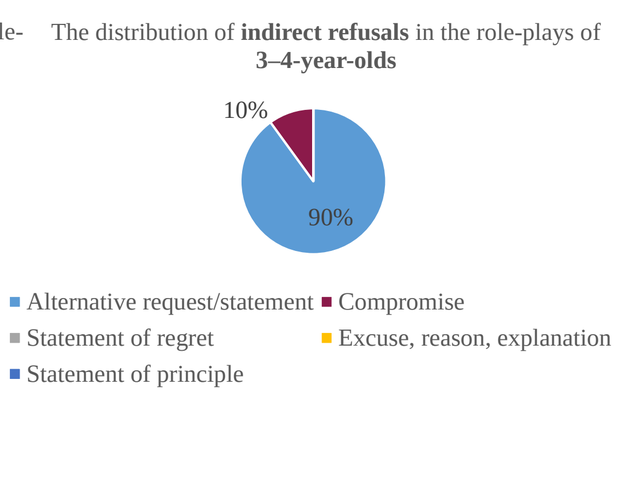
When involved in role-plays, children imitate a variety of social roles and situations, but it is equally important to indicate to the interlocutor when the behavior is playful and when not, so as to avoid misunderstandings, associated with the relationship between simulated fiction and reality. Due to this reason, the boundary between playful and *real* behavior is usually marked by a linguistic phenomenon called **metacommunication** (see Andresen 2005). In role-playing games, metacommunication helps children dispose of meanings, the situation in the game, comment on things related to the game, plan how it will be played later on as well as exchange simulated social roles. While playing the role, the child has the opportunity to transform from the current situation to the social roles typical of the adult world, imitate impossible relationships in reality (to be a doctor, salesperson, mother, father, etc.), and return to reality, to be oneself again by saying a metacommunicative utterance. Naturally, politeness markers and expressions of refusals may differ in these two types of utterances because the linguistic situation itself changes. Due to this reason, when encoding the data, every utterance was coded and analyzed accordingly as used in a role or metacommunication.

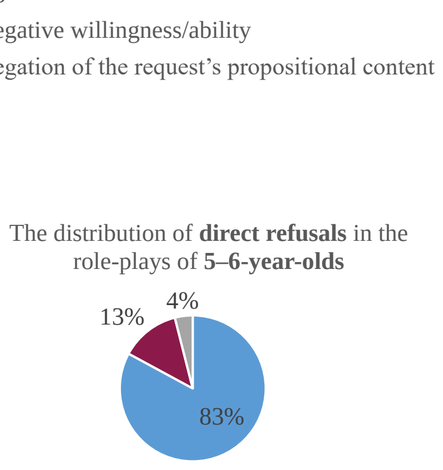
## Results

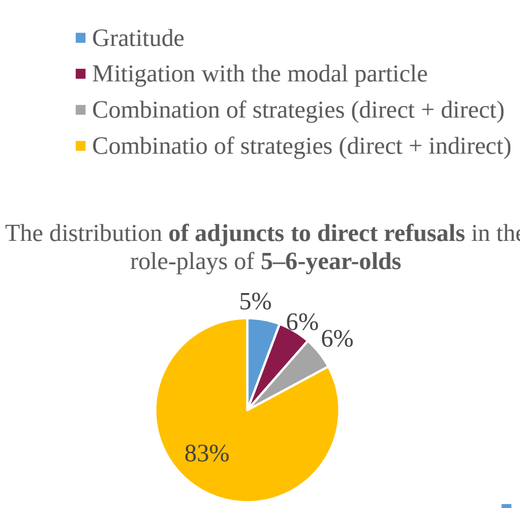
| | No. of refusals in **formal role-plays** | | No. of refusals in **informal role-plays** | | **Total** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | In the role | In the metacommunication | In the role | In the metacommunication | |
| Conversations of **3–4-year-olds** | 9 | 51 | 15 | 10 | 85 |
| Conversations of **5–6-year-olds** | 18 | 43 | 14 | 8 | 83 |
| **Total** | 27 | 94 | 29 | 18 | **168** |

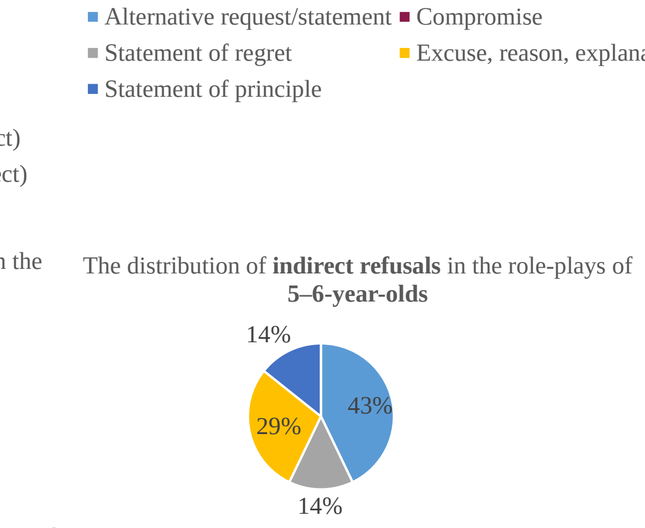


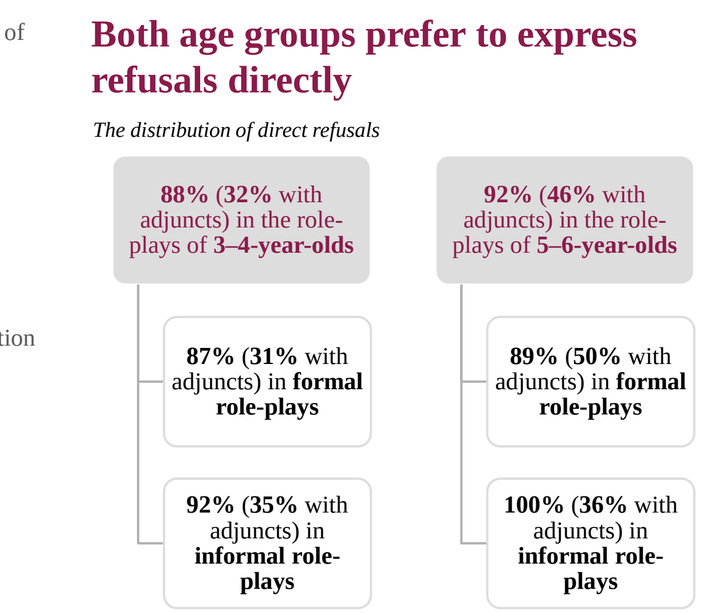

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