# REFUSING AND CANCELING AN APPOINTMENT VIA VOICE MESSAGE IN ITALIAN. WHICH MODELS FOR ASSESSING LEARNERS' PERFORMANCE?

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this study, we aim to explore the ways in which two speech acts that share several common features are realized: refusal and cancellation. While the former has been extensively studied in various languages (see, among others, Gass, Houck, 1999; Félix-Brasdefer, 2006; Verzella, Tommaso, 2020), the latter has so far received little attention in applied pragmatics research.

More specifically, the objective of this study is to identify some general trends in the realization of refusals and cancellations by Italian speakers, with the aim of providing useful reference points for those involved in teaching Italian as a foreign language and assessing learners' competence, including in language certification contexts. As is well known, when dealing with pragmatic phenomena, referring to the norm of the target language is a particularly delicate issue. In fact, due to the very nature of pragmatics, there are no, nor could there be, fixed sets of rules defining how–for example–a specific speech act should be realized. Furthermore, assuming uniform norms among native speakers when evaluating L2 learners' performance is problematic, as native speakers differ in their views on politeness and appropriateness (Taguchi, Li, 2020). It is therefore important for teachers and assessors to have access to research data that illustrate the various possible realizations of different speech acts considered appropriate within a given linguistic and cultural context. This allows them to provide learners with guidance or evaluate their linguistic productions not solely based on their own perceptions as native (or proficient) speakers (Ishihara, Cohen, 2010). Moreover, it helps them avoid focusing only on more "secure" aspects, such as morphosyntactic and lexical accuracy (Glaser, 2020).

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Our focus on native speakers' data does not stem from the belief that nativeness equates to linguistic superiority. Rather, we consider these speakers as members of a community who have internalized pragmatic norms, enabling effective and contextually appropriate communication. What makes their performances valuable is not their birthright, but their pragmatic expertise–a form of competence shaped by sustained participation in real-life language use.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides background information, including an overview of empirical research inspired by speech act theory (2.1.), the role of baseline data in language assessment (2.2.), and previous studies on the two speech acts under investigation (2.3. and 2.4.). Section 3 outlines the research questions and methodological framework, detailing the data collection instruments (3.1.), participant information (3.2.), and annotation schemes and procedures (3.3.). The results are presented in Section 4 and discussed in Section 5, which also offers concluding remarks.

## **2.** BACKGROUND

### 2.1. *The study of speech acts*

A very productive line of research in the field of pragmatics and linguistic politeness is the one that analyzes how specific speech acts are produced and the linguistic variations determined by different configurations of social variables, such as the level of familiarity between interlocutors. This line of research has a well-established tradition, especially from a cross-cultural perspective. Cross-cultural studies aim to reveal similarities and differences between languages/cultures in the way speakers consider it appropriate to do things with words, in accordance with the norms of linguistic politeness shared within the relevant cultural context (Trosborg, 2010). While the speech acts most studied are undoubtedly requests, there are also many examples of studies involving compliments and compliment responses, refusals, apologies, greetings, complaints, and so on.

Cross-cultural pragmatics research on speech act performance has revealed how some languages/cultures tend to favor linguistic strategies that protect an individual's freedom of action (negative face, in the terms of the well-known linguistic politeness model proposed by Brown, Levinson, 1987), while others seem to prioritize language uses that emphasize the recognition of belonging to a community (positive face in Brown, Levinson, 1987). Thus, it is possible to identify languages/cultures that are more oriented toward negative politeness and others that are more inclined toward positive politeness.

These two orientations reflect two opposite forces coexisting in humans as social beings. On one side, the tendency to identify oneself as part of the cultural and linguistic group to which one belongs (Leonardelli *et al.*, 2020); on the other, the tendency to identify oneself as an individual with unique traits which distinguish her or him from other members of the group. For example, Anglo-American culture appears more inclined toward the protection of negative face, prioritizing the respect of the interlocutor's individuality and right to autonomy. Latin-American and Peninsular Spanish cultures, on the contrary, are more inclined toward the use of maneuvers to enhance positive face, showing concern for solidarity and belongingness (e.g., Briz, 2006; Félix-Brasdefer, 2008; Fitch, 1994, 2007; Goddard, 2012; Pinto, 2011).

The prevalence of the contrastive approach in applied research on speech acts can be explained by the fact that – as just seen with politeness orientation – comparison is a way to highlight distinctive features. However, it is striking how few studies take an intralinguistic approach, that is, focus on analyzing the realization of specific speech acts within the same language/culture. As we will see in the next paragraph, having corpus-

based descriptions of the prevailing trends in the realization of specific speech acts within a language would provide a valuable reference point for those involved in teaching and assessment with non-native speakers of that language.

### 2.2. *The need for reference points in the assessment of learner speech*

Since language assessment is by nature an inferential activity, it is essential that both the constructs under examination and the elicited data closely reflect real-life language use. This is especially important when evaluating pragmatically complex speech acts, such as refusals and cancellations, where appropriateness hinges on context, speaker intention, and social norms rather than linguistic form alone. Pragmatic meaning extends beyond syntax and literal interpretation, requiring consideration of interactional, contextual, and sociocultural factors (Carroll, 1968; Oller, 1979; Spolsky, 1973). As Crystal (1997: 301) defines it, pragmatics is «the study of language from the point of view of users, especially the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on other participants». This perspective underlines why pragmatic competence is difficult to assess: it involves not just grammatical accuracy but also social appropriateness, communicative effectiveness, and sensitivity to context (Yule, 1996; Grabowski, 2017).

A central challenge in this type of assessment is the lack of shared reference standards to guide teachers and evaluators. Traditional rubrics often emphasize grammatical correctness as the primary indicator of proficiency, overlooking the importance of functional adequacy, discourse coherence, and the ability to adapt language to different contexts (Kuiken, Vedder, 2017; Pallotti, 2009). Corpus linguistics has emerged as a valuable resource for addressing this gap. Corpora of native or proficient speakers allow researchers to identify recurring patterns of language use in authentic communicative contexts, providing empirical benchmarks that move beyond subjective intuition (Biber *et al.*, 1998).

Incorporating corpus data into the assessment process helps realign evaluation with the communicative realities faced by second language users. It supports a shift from accuracy-centered models toward more comprehensive frameworks that include pragmatic effectiveness. For instance, corpus-based evidence can inform rater training and the development of rating scales by illustrating how expert speakers strategically use simplification, negotiation, and adaptation in real-life interactions. This usage-based approach foregrounds how language is used to achieve communicative goals rather than conform to idealized norms of grammaticality.

It is important to clarify that the use of corpora in this study is not intended to reinforce a native-speaker norm. Rather, following Davies (1996) and Rampton (1990), we adopt a performance-based view of proficiency that recognizes "expertise" as independent of native status. The so-called "ideal native speaker" remains a pervasive but problematic construct in contemporary applied linguistics (Schmenk, 2022). Accordingly, the corpus used here is valued not for its native authenticity but for representing expert use of Italian in sociolinguistically embedded contexts. Speakers included in the corpus are treated as proficient users whose language serves as a meaningful reference for assessing pragmatic competence.

### 2.3. *Refusals: Characteristics and prior research*

Refusals belong to the category of commissive speech acts because they commit the refuser to (not) performing an action (Searle, 1977). They are a type of speech act in which

a speaker «fails to engage in an action proposed by the interlocutor» (Chen *et al.*, 1995: 121). Refusals often function as the second part of adjacent pairs in verbal interactions, typically following an elicitation act such as an offer, invitation, or request. As Eslami (2010: 217) explains, in response to requests or invitations, «acceptance is usually preferred, and a refusal is dispreferred». Since refusals are a dispreferred second action, they are considered particularly face-threatening acts (Brown, Levinson, 1987). Therefore, refusals are often accompanied by prefaces, hesitations, or delay strategies (such as pauses and fillers), as well as justifications, expressions of doubt, and apologies (Pomerantz, 1984). These cues help mitigate the illocutionary force of the refusal, thereby reducing the risk of damaging the hearer's positive face, as it fails to satisfy their desire for their ideas to be shared and acknowledged by others. Additionally, the act of refusing can impact the speaker's own positive face needs, as it may signal a lack of agreement and solidarity (Siebold, Busch, 2015). To successfully deliver a refusal while minimizing the risk of face loss, speakers must carefully balance clarity and politeness (Hashemian, 2021). From a sociolinguistic perspective, refusals are particularly sensitive to social variables such as gender, age, level of education, power, and social distance (Brown, Levinson, 1987). They require not only extended sequences of negotiation and cooperative strategies but also face-saving maneuvers to mitigate the noncompliant nature of the act (Gass, Houck, 1999: 2).

The study of refusals has been widely explored within pragmatic analysis. Such studies have predominantly focused on English (e.g., Johnson *et al.*, 2004), while some others have examined other languages, such as Mexican Spanish (e.g., Félix-Brasdefer, 2006) or Chinese (e.g., Li, Wongwaropakorn, 2024). A very common way to approach the act of refusal is a cross-cultural perspective. Félix-Brasdefer (2003), for example, used open role-play to compare refusal strategies among Latin American Spanish speakers speaking Spanish and North Americans speaking English. He found that North Americans preferred using positive opinions to soften refusals and were more direct, even in situations involving unequal status. In a later study, Félix-Brasdefer (2008) compared refusals to an invitation elicited with role plays in Mexico and the Dominican Republic, finding that Mexicans employed a wider range of strategies, whereas Dominicans relied on fewer and shorter turns. His research supports the idea that refusal strategies vary across cultures even within the same language, particularly in terms of repair work.

Although refusals have been intensively investigated, research on refusals in Italian remains limited. Frescura (1997) conducted an ethnographic study on refusals to food offers, revealing that Italian speakers rarely reject food directly. Instead, they use indirect strategies, often accompanied by apologies or compliments on the food's quality. Adopting a cross-cultural perspective, Verzella and Tommaso (2020) analyzed refusals in American English and Italian using a guided conversation protocol to elicit refusals to a request. Their results show significant differences between the two groups: (i) speakers of American English tended to rely on positive face strategies (e.g., praise, encouragement) to mitigate their refusals; (ii) speakers of Italian, in contrast, tended to use negative face strategies, such as lengthy explanations combined with apologies; (iii) both groups used avoidance strategies, but American English speakers were less likely to offer detailed explanations requiring the disclosure of personal information.

Further insights into Italian refusals come from the *Disdir* Project, an ongoing research initiative (Cortés Velásquez, Nuzzo, 2022) aimed at collecting and comparing both refusals to invitations and last-minute cancellations in Italian and other languages. The project relies on multiple choice Written Discourse Completion Tasks (WDCTs) as its data collection method for refusals. The data show that Italian speakers tend to postpone their responses, often choosing demurral expressions such as *non lo so se ce la faccio* ('I don't know if I can make it'), *grazie*, *ci penso* ('thanks, I'll think about it'), or *non sono sicuro* ('I'm

not sure'). Colombians, by contrast, show a stronger preference for Mitigated Refusals, offering polite and softened rejections. Additionally, Italians are more likely to invent an excuse when declining an invitation. These findings suggest that Italians tend to favor negative politeness strategies – such as providing lengthy explanations and offering apologies – while Colombians lean more toward positive politeness strategies, emphasizing friendliness and solidarity.

These cross-cultural differences in how the speech act of refusal is performed confirm the importance of modeling pragmatic behavior in Italian for informing language assessment tools that better reflect culturally appropriate communicative competence.

### 2.4. *Backing out: Characteristics, and prior research*

Backing out of an accepted invitation shares several characteristics with declining an invitation. Like refusals, cancellations belong to the category of commissives (Searle, 1977). However, while refusals are reactive speech acts that occur in response to an invitation, cancellations are proactive speech acts initiated by the invitee, though they still presuppose a prior invitation. Despite their similarities, refusals and cancellations differ in terms of face-threatening potential. A cancellation by the invitee, particularly a last-minute cancellation (henceforth, LMC), poses a significant threat to the addressee's negative face, as it disrupts their plans. Additionally, LMCs may also threaten the addressee's positive face by signaling a lack of participation in the anticipated social event. However, as Brocca *et al.* (2023) observed, cancellations can sometimes mitigate face threat compared to immediate refusals. This is because cancellations, especially those attributed to unforeseen and unavoidable circumstances, frame the invitee's absence as external rather than a matter of personal choice, thus potentially preserving the addressee's positive face.

Despite their interesting and delicate position in the politeness framework, cancellations have rarely been investigated. An important exception is the aforementioned *Disdir* project. Cortés Velásquez and Nuzzo (2017), based on WDCT data, examined how Italian speakers cancel invitations, revealing a tendency to soften refusals through explanations paired with expressions of regret. In some cases, explanations entirely replace direct cancellations. Less frequently, Italian speakers attempt to make amends by expressing their intention to attend at a later time. Unlike Spanish speakers from Colombia, Italian speakers perceive backing out of an invitation as a highly face-threatening act, to be performed only in cases of true necessity. Following the *Disdir* framework, Brocca *et al.* (2023) compared cancellations produced by Italian and Austrian students. Their findings revealed more similarities than differences between the two groups, suggesting that both populations share the same politeness orientation regarding the speech act of cancellation. However, minor differences were observed in the use of modifiers: e.g., Italian speakers consistently employed more terms of address at the beginning of their cancellations.

## 3. AIMS AND METHOD

This study seeks to describe how native Italian speakers realize two closely related speech acts: the refusal of a request and the cancellation of a previously agreed-upon appointment. The research question guiding the investigation is:

RQ: What are the patterns in the oral realization of acts of refusal and cancellation among native speakers of Italian?

The decision to focus on oral performances is motivated by the need to explore a domain of language use that is particularly relevant for learners, who, unlike in written communication, must rely solely on their own linguistic and pragmatic resources when speaking. Moreover, this focus on orality contributes to expanding our understanding of these speech acts, which have not yet been extensively investigated in terms of their oral realization in Italian.

### 3.1. *Data collection instrument and data description*

Given that these speech acts may be carried out in a single conversational turn and they may occur in non-face-to-face interactions, to address our RQ, a corpus of authentic voice messages was compiled, specifically targeting instances in which speakers had to refuse a request or cancel a commitment. Data were collected using Oral Discourse Completion Tasks (ODCTs). The ODCT required participants to provide a free-text, monologic response. The selected tasks were adapted from previous research: to elicit refusals, we used a task previously employed in the construction of the *Ladder* corpus (Brocca, 2021; 2024), while for cancellations, we used a task extracted from the WDCT utilized in the creation of the *Disdir* corpus (Cortés Velásquez, Nuzzo, 2024).

The task used to elicit refusals was as follows:

Original (Italian):

*Il/la tuo/a supervisore al lavoro ti chiede di fare delle ore supplementari alla fine della giornata lavorativa per portare a termine un lavoro. Tu non riesci a soddisfare questa richiesta e devi rifiutare. Cosa dici?*

English translation:
Your supervisor asks you to work overtime to complete a job. You are unable to fulfill this request and must decline. What do you say?

The task used to elicit cancellations was as follows:

Original (Italian):

*Cinque giorni fa hai promesso ad un/a amico/a che questa sera sareste andati/e al cinema assieme. Però hai cambiato idea. Cosa dici?*

English translation:
Five days ago, you promised a friend that you would go to the movies together tonight. However, you changed your mind. What do you say?

Participants were required to read the task prompts and respond orally in the most natural manner possible, without adopting any role or persona. The full DCT administered included additional speech acts, but we focus exclusively on refusals and cancellations for the purposes of this study. The DCT was administered by two students as part of their research experience for their final thesis in 2024. All participants provided informed consent for the use of their data in compliance with the European Union General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2016/679). Audio recordings of responses were collected and subsequently transcribed. The initial transcription was generated using the automatic transcription feature in Microsoft 365 Word (2024). These transcriptions were then manually reviewed and corrected by the two student researchers. A simplified version of the Jefferson transcription system (Jefferson, 2004) was adopted, which is widely used in Conversation Analysis.

The final dataset consisted of 67 refusal responses and 71 cancellation responses. The length of each refusal response ranged between 20 and 52 words, while cancellation responses varied between 19 and 156 words.

### 3.2. *Participants*

The study involved two groups of native Italian speakers from the urban area of Rome, one focusing on cancellations and the other on refusals.

The refusal group consists of 67 native Italian speakers, aged between 19 and 66 years (M = 30.39; SD = 11.03). The median age is 25, and the interquartile range (IQR) is 22–25, indicating a predominantly young adult population. In terms of gender, 44 participants are female and 23 are male, showing a female majority within the sample.

The cancellation group consists of 71 native Italian speakers from the urban area of Rome. Participants range in age from 19 to 70 years, with a mean age of 32.06 years (SD = 13.28). The median age is 27, and the interquartile range (IQR) is 23–36, indicating a relatively young sample with some variability. In terms of gender distribution, 42 participants are female and 29 are male.

Both datasets include participants with varied professional backgrounds and educational levels. See Table 1 for an overview.

Table 1. *Participant characteristics*

| Category | Number of Participants | Average Age | Female | Male |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Refusals | 67 | 31.01 (SD 11.72) | 49 | 18 |
| Cancellations | 71 | 32.06 (SD 13.28) | 48 | 23 |

### 3.3. *Annotation of data*

The transcribed data were manually annotated by a group of trained non-expert under the supervision of three expert annotators (the authors of the study). The expert annotators subsequently reviewed the annotations to ensure consistency and accuracy. Cases of uncertainty were resolved through consensus meetings among the expert annotators.

The coding schemes used for the two speech acts were developed within the tradition of cross-cultural pragmatics, drawing on the well-known work of Blum-Kulka *et al.* (1989).

#### 3.3.1. *The coding scheme for refusals*

In a seminal study, Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Welz (1990) classified the speech act of refusal into direct and indirect refusals. Direct refusals involved explicit statements of inability to comply, often using negative expressions like "no" or "I can't." In contrast, indirect refusals employed various linguistic strategies to subtly decline invitations, requests, or suggestions. These strategies included softened refusals, providing reasons or explanations, giving vague responses, making promises to comply, expressing regret, and more. Additionally, refusal adjuncts were identified as four strategies that demonstrated

engagement with the interlocutor: Offering a Positive Opinion, Showing Willingness, Expressing Gratitude, Agreeing, and Pause Filling. This classification system has been extensively applied and adapted in studies examining refusals among both native and non-native speakers across different languages (Bardovi-Harlig, Hartford, 1991; Gass, Houck, 1999; Nelson *et al.*, 2002).

More recently, Félix-Brasdefer (2006) adopted a slightly modified version of Beebe *et al.*'s (1990) taxonomy, but investigated more deeply the sequential organization of refusals, that is, how refusals are embedded within the flow of conversation. This was possible because Félix-Brasdefer (2006) elicited refusals through role plays rather than through monologic DCTs. Later, Félix-Brasdefer (2013) further developed the taxonomy: under indirect strategies, he included Reason, Indefinite Reply, Apology/Regret, and Alternative. The adjuncts identified were Willingness, Gratitude, Positive Remark, Well-Wishing, and Empathy.

We initially adopted Félix-Brasdefer's (2013) taxonomy; however, we found that it did not adequately capture the features of our data. First, certain categories, such as Indefinite Reply and Positive Remark, were absent. In addition, the hierarchical distinction between strategies and adjuncts often led to inconsistent, and at times arbitrary, classification choices. Notably, some refusals were realized through adjuncts that functioned implicitly as indirect refusal strategies. This divergence may stem from differences in the data: unlike Félix-Brasdefer's dialogic interactions, our dataset is monologic and exclusively comprises refusals to requests. As a result, we reorganized the categorization scheme, drawing on analytical frameworks previously employed in studies of last-minute cancellations (Brocca *et al.*, 2023; Cortés Velásquez, Nuzzo, 2017). We treated the entire utterance as a speech act of refusal, assuming it to be composed of sub-acts, each occupying the same hierarchical level. A sub-act called Non-acceptance was understood as fulfilling the explicit function of refusal and could be realized through various strategies, such as Performative, Non-performative, and Impossibility strategies. Other sub-acts were identified as Apology, Appeal to Empathy, and Willingness, among others. In other words, both the strategies and adjuncts described by Félix-Brasdefer (2013) were reinterpreted as sub-acts. By adopting this perspective, we eliminated the strict distinction between direct and indirect refusals, as well as between the strategies of indirect refusals and adjuncts. We also added a second level of analysis in some sub-acts; for example, we divided Explanation into two realization strategies: detailed and generic explanation. Furthermore, we found that previous taxonomies did not devote sufficient attention to lexical modifiers. We therefore introduced a new category called Modifier, consisting of five types of lexical devices that can either intensify or mitigate the illocutionary force of each sub-act. The complete taxonomy of refusal can be found in the attachments.

### 3.3.2. *The coding scheme for cancellations*

Following the taxonomy developed by Cortés Velásquez and Nuzzo (2017), and further refined in Nuzzo and Cortés Velásquez (2020), the coding scheme used to annotate our data comprises 12 types of sub-acts, that are the minimum illocutionary units constituting the speech act (see Attachments, Taxonomy of Cancellations, first column). Some sub-acts – typically, the more frequent ones – may have different realization strategies (see Attachments, Taxonomy of Cancellations, second column). Four types of modifiers were also found (see Attachments). Emoticons and emojis were annotated too, and their function was determined depending on the context, mostly as modifiers.

Compared to the abovementioned studies, we found it appropriate to revise the naming of two categories. The sub-act Cancellation has been renamed Withdrawal to

avoid possible confusion between the whole speech act and the specific sub-act. Additionally, the modifier Term of Endearment has been renamed Term of Address in order to encompass a broader range of lexical items within the category.

## 4. RESULTS

This section presents the results of the quantitative analysis conducted on the refusal messages (4.1.) and cancellation messages (4.2.) in our corpus, based on the application of the coding scheme categories previously described.

### 4.1. *Refusals*

Overall, the informants produced fairly long and elaborate refusal messages, with an average of about 43 words and 5 sub-acts each. The analysis of the annotated data yielded the distribution of sub-acts and strategies shown in Table 2. The third column indicates the percentage frequency of each category in relation to the total number of analyzed voice messages containing refusals (N = 67). The fourth column reports the total number of occurrences for each category. In some cases, this number exceeds the number of refusal acts in which the category appears, as the same sub-act can be produced more than once within a single message, either with the same or with a different realization strategy. This phenomenon is exemplified in (3), where the Non-acceptance/Impossibility is repeated twice (*non posso proprio* 'I really can't', *proprio non non non posso aiutarti* 'I really, really can't help you').

Table 2. *Distribution of sub-acts and strategies in refusals*

| **Sub-act** | **Realization strategy (when applicable)** | **% (and N) of messages in which the category occurs** | **Total occurrences of the category** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Alerter | Call for Attention<br>Greeting | 39% (26)<br>61% (41) | 28<br>44 |
| Empathy | | 10% (7) | 8 |
| Confirmation Check | | 6% (4) | 5 |
| Explanation | Detailed<br>Generic | 46% (31)<br>55% (37) | 33<br>39 |
| Farewell | | 18% (12) | 12 |
| Gratitude | | 15% (10) | 11 |
| Non-acceptance | Performative statement | 6% (4) | 4 |
| | Non-performative statement | 3% (2) | 3 |
| | Impossibility | 84% (56) | 70 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Offer of Repair | Alternative | 30% (20) | 23 |
| | Unclear alternative | 9% (6) | 6 |
| | Set conditions for future acceptance | 10% (7) | 7 |
| Preparator | | 6% (4) | 4 |
| Remedial Move | Apology<br>Statement of Regret | 18% (12)<br>52% (35) | 15<br>41 |
| Willingness | | 15% (10) | 10 |

The sub-acts most frequently used by the informants to form the core of the refusal are Nonacceptance – mostly realized through the strategy of Impossibility – Explanation, and Remedial Move, as exemplified in (1[a] - 3[a])[2]. Remedial Move is preferably realized as a Statement of Regret, like in (2[b]) and (3[b]), and Explanation is preferably presented as Generic (cf. examples 1[c], 3[c], and 4[c]), although detailed explanations are quite common (ex. 2[c]). Offer of Repair is present in half of the messages, and the most commonly used realization strategy is that of Alternative, like in (4[d]). In 76% of the cases, the message opens with a sub-act that draws the recipient's attention. This element, categorized as an Alerter, can be represented by a discourse marker functioning as a turn-taking signal (Call for Attention, e.g., *guarda* 'look'; *senti* 'listen', cf. example 4[e]), by a greeting expression (e.g., *salve* 'hi'; *buonasera* 'good evening'), or by both, as in examples (1[e] - 3[e]).

(1) sì salve guardi[e] sarei rimasta senza problemi ma domani ho già un impegno: che non posso rimandare[c] quindi non penso di riuscire a rimanere in ufficio oltre l'orario[a] # mi scusi ancora e buona giornata

*Ya*, *hello*, *look*[e] *I would've stayed without any problem*, *but I already have an appointment tomorrow that I can't postpone*[c], *so I don't think I'll be able to stay in the office past working hours*[a]. *Sorry again*, *and have a good day*

(2) buonasera senta[e] non le posso fare: lo straordinario[a] perché stasera ho una visita dal dentista già prenotata[c] e quindi mi mi dispiace[b] sarà per la prossima volta buona serata

*Good evening*, *listen*[e] *I can't do the overtime*[a] *because I have a dentist appointment already booked for tonight*[c], *so I'm sorry*[b], *maybe next time. Have a good evening*

(3) buonasera mhm mh: guarda[e]: mhm in realtà non non posso proprio[a] perché: mh ho: un impegno importantissimo: con: ehm eh: con la mia famiglia[c] quindi: ahm mi dispiace[b] ma oggi proprio: dovevo tornare: a casa: eh: per una: determinata ora quindi: quindi proprio non non non posso aiutarti

*Good evening*, *umm hmm... look*[e], *hmm actually I really can't*[a] *because... I have a very important commitment with... umm... with my family*[c], *so... I'm sorry*[b] *but today I really had to get back home by a certain time*, *so... so I really*, *really can't help you*

[2] In the transcriptions and translations, we have marked with a superscript letter the pragmatic element referenced in the text to make it easier for the reader to identify.

(4) guardi[e] proprio stasera: ho: un appuntamento eh un impegno famigliare prenotato[c] quindi non posso: non posso proprio mancare magari domani mattina posso cominciare prima[d]
*Look[e], actually tonight I have an appointment, a family thing that was already planned[c], so I really can't miss it. Maybe tomorrow morning I can start a bit earlier*[d]

Overall, the refusals contain a relatively high number of modifiers, with an average of about 1.5 per message. Only 13 messages, accounting for 19% of the total, do not contain any of the elements classified within the four identified categories of modifiers.

The distribution of modifiers is shown in Table 3. The most frequently used modifiers belong to the Evaluation category, appearing in nearly half of the messages.

Table 3. *Distribution of Modifiers in refusal messages*

| **Modifier** | **% (and N) of messages in which the category occurs** | **Total occurrences of the category** |
|---|---|---|
| Downtoner | 21% (14) | 18 |
| Evaluation | 49% (33) | 42 |
| Intensifier | 34% (23) | 35 |
| Term of Address | 15% (10) | 10 |

## 4.2. *Cancellations*

Similarly to what has been observed with the refusals, the informants produced overall fairly long and elaborate cancellation messages, with an average of about 46 words and 6 sub-acts each.

The analysis of the annotated data yielded the distribution of sub-acts and strategies shown in Table 4. The third column indicates the percentage frequency of each category in relation to the total number of analyzed voice messages containing refusals (N = 71). The fourth column reports the total number of occurrences for each category. In some cases, this number exceeds the number of refusal acts in which the category appears, as the same sub-act can be produced more than once within a single message. This phenomenon is exemplified in (5) with reference to Explanation/Generic (*perché ho avuto un imprevisto a casa quindi non mi posso proprio muovere* 'because something came up at home, so I really can't go out'; *non posso proprio muovermi* 'but I really can't leave the house'), and in (7) for Remedial Move/Apology (*scusami* 'sorry'; *scusami il pacco all'ultimo secondo* 'I'm really sorry for bailing last minute').

Table 4. *Distribution of sub-acts and strategies in Cancellations*

| **Sub-act** | **Realization strategy (when applicable)** | **% (and N) of messages in which the category occurs** | **Total occurrences of the category** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Alerter | Call for Attention<br>Greeting | 51% (37)<br>75% (54) | 38<br>54 |
| Appeal to Empathy | | 29% (21) | 27 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Withdrawal | Impossibility<br>Indirect Cancellation<br>Non-perform. Stat.<br>Performative | 54% (39)<br>18% (13)<br>14% (10)<br>7% (5) | 43<br>14<br>11<br>6 |
| Explanation | Detailed Explanation<br>Generic Explanation | 81% (58)<br>18% (13) | 60<br>14 |
| Farewell | | 26% (19) | 20 |
| Gratitude | | 8% (6) | 6 |
| Offer of Repair | Alternative<br>No Alternative<br>Unclear Alternative | 11% (8)<br>3% (2)<br>50% (36) | 8<br>2<br>38 |
| Preparator | | 22% (16) | 16 |
| Remedial Move | Apology<br>Statement of Regret | 42% (30)<br>32% (23) | 40<br>26 |
| Willingness | | 3% (2) | 2 |
| Wishes | | 3% (2) | 2 |

The sub-acts most frequently used by the informants to form the core of the message are Cancellation, Explanation, Remedial Move, and Offer of Repair. Cancellation is mostly realized through the strategy of Impossibility (see examples 5[a] and 6[a]), Remedial Move through the strategy of Apology (example 7[b]), and Offer of Repair through Unclear Alternative (examples 5[c] and 6[c]). The reason for canceling the appointment is mostly provided with a Detailed Explanation, as exemplified in (6[d]), where the speaker describes a change in her plans that prevents her from joining her friend, and (7[d]), where the speaker explicitly refers to her health condition.

In many cases, the message opens with a sub-act that draws the recipient's attention. This element, categorized as an Alerter, can be realized through the strategy of Call for Attention, usually represented by a discourse marker functioning as a turn-taking signal (e.g., *guarda* 'look'; *senti* 'listen'), by the strategy Greeting (e.g., *salve* 'hi'; *buonasera* 'good evening'), or by both, as in examples (5[e] and 6[e]).

(5) ciao guarda[e] mh purtroppo stasera non posso più venire al cinema[a] perché ho avuto un imprevisto a casa quindi non mi posso proprio muovere eh: possiamo organizzare per un'altra volta[c] mi dispiace che te lo faccio sapere all'ultimo ma: non posso proprio muovermi

*Hey look*[e], *unfortunately I can't make it to the movies tonight anymore*[a] *because something came up at home*, *so I really can't go out. Maybe we can plan for another time*[c]. *I'm sorry for letting you know so last minute*, *but I really can't leave the house*

(6) ciao guarda[e] ti scrivo [*sic*] già adesso così hai tutto il tempo per riorganizzarti da qui a stasera e: solo che ti dico già che non ce la farò sicuramente a venire al cinema[a] perché mi hanno fatto sapere in questo momento che ho una lezione in più a danza quindi mi devo fermare un'altra ora e mezza (.) e: esco da lì verso le nove e mezza che non sono mai le nove e mezza quindi: ora che: usciamo mi cambio riprendo un po' vita ceno e mi lavo sicuramente non- non riesco a fare in tempo per- per il film per andare al cinema e sicuramente sarò stanca morta[d] quindi se per te non è un problema facciamo (.) un'altra volta magari ci riorganizziamo in settimana[c]

*Hey look*[e], *just writing you now so you've got plenty of time to rearrange things before tonight. I already know I definitely won't make it to the movies*[a] *because I just found out I've got an extra dance class, so I have to stay an hour and a half longer. I'll be out of there around 9:30 — but it's never really 9:30 — so by the time I get out, get changed, breathe a bit, have dinner, and shower, there's just no way I'll be ready in time for the movie. And honestly, I'll be totally wiped out*[d]. *So if it's okay with you, let's do it another time — maybe we can reschedule sometime during the week*[c]

(7) oh ciao scusami[b] guarda so che ci eravamo messi d'accordo una settimana fa e scusami il pacco all'ultimo secondo[b] ma non me la sento proprio og- non sto troppo bene[d] e: bo ti andrebbe magari rimandiamo a domani o dopodomani se ci sei? un abbraccio

*Hey, hi, sorry*![b] *I know we made plans a week ago, and I'm really sorry for bailing at the last minute*[b], *but I'm just not feeling great today*[d]… *Would you be up for postponing tomorrow or the day after, if you're free? Big hug*

Overall, the cancellations contain a relatively high number of modifiers, with an average of about 1.4 per message. Only 15 messages, accounting for about 21% of the total, do not contain any of the elements classified within the four identified categories of modifiers. The distribution of modifiers is shown in Table 5. The most frequently used modifiers belong to the category of Term of Endearment, followed by Intensifier and Downtoner.

Table 5. *Distribution of Modifiers in cancellation messages*

| **Modifier** | **% (and N) of messages in which the category occurs** | **Total occurrences of the category** |
|---|---|---|
| Downtoner | 31% (22) | 31 |
| Evaluation | 24% (17) | 19 |
| Intensifier | 46% (33) | 43 |
| Term of Address | 42% (30) | 31 |

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, we aimed to identify trends in the realization of refusals and cancellations by Italian speakers, based on the analysis of voice messages elicited through two DCT prompts to which participants responded orally. Since the data were collected from speakers residing in the urban area of Rome, the corpus is not diatopically balanced. This limitation should be acknowledged and addressed in future research.

The analysis of the two datasets revealed some interesting similarities in the ways voice messages for refusals and cancellations are constructed. Both tend to be relatively long and elaborate, which is expected given the potential threat they pose to both positive face, due to a lack of compliance with the addressee, and negative face, as they interfere with the addressee's plans (Eslami, 2010; Gass, Houck, 1999; Siebold, Busch, 2015). Moreover, both almost always include a justificatory component and tend to attribute the responsibility for the non-acceptance or withdrawal to factors beyond the speaker's control, employing the Impossibility strategy. Finally, both often include a Remedial

Move. The use of modifiers is also notably similar, with both refusal and cancellation messages displaying a high frequency of such elements.

However, several differences also emerge, likely attributable not only to the fact that these are distinct speech acts, but also to the differing configurations of social distance (D), power (P), and degree of imposition (I) that characterize the two scenarios (cf. Brown, Levinson, 1987). The refusal situation reflects a relatively asymmetric relationship, involving a subordinate-superior dynamic, whereas the cancellation scenario occurs within a peer relationship between friends. Moreover, while the former presumes the speaker's right to decline an additional work-related request, the latter places full responsibility for the change of plans on the speaker. These differences are reflected in the much higher frequency of empathy expressions and terms of address in cancellation messages compared to refusals. Remedial Moves are also more frequently realized through the Apology strategy in cancellations, and through the Statement of Regret strategy in refusals. Additionally, explanations tend to be more generic in refusals and more detailed in cancellations.

In line with findings from previous studies, this study confirms the tendency of Italian speakers to provide detailed explanations to justify both refusals and cancellations, as observed by Verzella and Tommaso (2020) and by Nuzzo and Cortés Velásquez (2020). However, a more extensive use, and a greater variety, of modifiers emerges compared to what was reported in similar contexts by Cortés Velásquez and Nuzzo (2017), Nuzzo and Cortés Velásquez (2020), and Brocca *et al.* (2023), despite the use of the same coding categories adopted in the present study. This difference is likely attributable to the different types of data examined: WDCTs in the previous studies versus ODCTs in this one.

The observations drawn from the analysis make it possible to identify some general trends in the realization of refusals and cancellations by Italian speakers, which can serve as useful reference points for those involved in teaching Italian as a foreign language and in assessing learners' competence. As previously mentioned, a central challenge in pragmatic assessment is the absence of shared reference standards to guide evaluators in judging learners' performance. Even native speakers within the same linguistic community differ in their perceptions of politeness and appropriateness, making the assumption of uniform native speaker norms problematic when assessing L2 learners (Taguchi, Li, 2020). Corpus linguistics has proven to be a valuable resource in addressing this issue (Biber *et al.*, 1998). Comparing learners' use of the target language with such patterns can reveal which strategies they currently possess, which are absent, and which are overused or underused. These comparisons offer insight into learners' pragmatic competence by illustrating the breadth of their pragmalinguistic repertoire and their ability to select contextually appropriate linguistic forms (Taguchi, Li, 2020). Studies like this one can therefore serve as valuable tools in the training of both teachers and assessors, offering language-specific models of use that can complement the general guidelines provided by the *Common European Framework of Reference* (Council of Europe, 2001; 2020), while also presenting a broader and more nuanced picture than that offered by Italian textbooks for foreign learners or by reference works that are theoretically grounded in real language use, such as the *Profilo della Lingua Italiana* (Spinelli, Parizzi, 2010).

However, it is important to acknowledge that second language learners cannot be described or evaluated as if they were monolingual speakers, because they are not. Their linguistic repertoires are shaped by multiple languages and diverse communicative experiences, making monolingual benchmarks only partially adequate for capturing their actual language competence. As May (2014) argues in his discussion of the multilingual turn, there is a need to move beyond monolingual norms and embrace the complex, fluid nature of multilingual language use. In this context, learner corpora offer a promising

avenue for addressing the issue of Comparative Fallacy (Bley-Vroman, 1983), which refers to the tendency to assess learners' abilities exclusively in relation to native speaker norms, thereby implicitly positioning the latter as the ideal standard. The follow-up to the present study (Brocca *et al.*, forthcoming) will therefore consist of a comparable investigation that contrasts messages produced by Italian L1 users with similar messages produced by L2 users, not with the aim of identifying the latter's "deficiencies", but to provide language teachers and testers with observations that help them avoid assessing second language users through a monolingual lens.

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## ATTACHMENTS

### Taxonomy of Refusals

| **Sub-act** | **Realization strategy** | **Explanation and example(s) (R = the requestee)** |
|---|---|---|
| Alerter | 1. Call for attention | 1. R draws the interlocutor's attention<br>*Ei!*, *Guardi.* |
| | 2. Greeting | 2. R greets the interlocutor<br>*Buongiorno! Ciao.* |
| Appeal to/show Empathy | | R appeals to the requestor's empathy<br>*Spero possa capire.*<br>I hope you can understand.<br>R demonstrates empathy toward the requestor:<br>*Capisco la sua situazione.*<br>I understand your situation. |
| Confirmation Check | | R prompts the addressee to react to their proposal<br>*Mi faccia sapere.*<br>Let me know. |
| Explanation | 1. Generic Explanation | R provides the reason for their refusal by referring to a generic or specific obstacle<br>1. *Perchè ho un impegno.*<br>Because I have a commitment. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | 2. Detailed Explanation | 2. *Perchè ho la cena di compleanno della madre del mio ragazzo.*<br>Because I have my boyfriend's mom's birthday dinner. |
| Farewell | | R signals the end of the message with closing expressions<br>*Arrivederla.*<br>Goodbye. |
| Gratitude | | R conveys gratitude either for the request, for the understanding, or as part of a routine expression<br>*Apprezzo la sua considerazione per questo incarico.*<br>I appreciate your consideration for this assignment.<br>*Grazie per la sua comprensione.*<br>Thank you for your understanding. |
| Non-acceptance | 1. Performative statement | 1. R communicates the refusal directly<br>*Questa volta dovrò rinunciare.*<br>This time I'll have to give up. |
| | 2. Non performative statement | 2. R communicates the refusal by using other linguistic tools to implicitly convey the illocutionary force<br>*Domani non sono disponibile.*<br>I'm not available tomorrow. |
| | 3. Impossibility | 3. R communicates the refusal by presenting it as conditioned by an external force<br>*Non riesco a fermarmi oltre l'orario standard in ufficio.*<br>I just can't stay beyond standard office hours. |
| Remedial move | | R shows a willingness to make amends by expressing regret or asking for forgiveness |
| | 1. Apology | 1. *Scusa*, Sorry. |
| | 2. Statement of Regret | 2. *Mi dispiace*, I am afraid. |
| Offer of repair | 1. Alternative | 1. R proposes an actual alternative appointment<br>*Nel caso mhm potrei restare domani.*<br>In case mhm I could stay tomorrow. |
| | 2. Unclear Alternative | 2. R offers a generic promise of making up for it, suggests a possible future meeting without specifying details<br>*Sarà sicuramente per la prossima volta.*<br>It will definitely be next time. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | 3. Set condition for future acceptance | 3. R sets condition for future acceptance<br>*Magari in futuro se riaccadrà se può avvisarmi prima rimarrò, sarò disponibile.*<br>Maybe in the future, if it happens again, if you could let me know beforehand, I will stay and be available. |
| Willingness | | R declares that they would have liked to accept<br>*Veramente con tutto il cuore vorrei rimanere.*<br>Honestly, with all my heart, I would love to stay. |

**Taxonomy of Cancellations**

| **Sub-act** | **Realization strategy** | **Explanation and example(s) (INV = the invitee)** |
|---|---|---|
| Alerter | 1. Call for attention | 1. INV draws the interlocutor's attention<br>*Ei!, Guardi.*<br>Hey! Look. |
| | 2. Greeting | 2. INV greets the interlocutor<br>*Buongiorno! Ciao.*<br>Good morning! Hi. |
| Appeal to/show Empathy | | 1. INV appeals to the inviter's empathy<br>*Spero possa capire.*<br>I hope you can understand.<br>2. INV demonstrates empathy toward the inviter<br>*Capisco la sua situazione.*<br>I understand your situation. |
| Withdrawal | | INV communicates they will not attend the event they have accepted an invitation for |
| | 1. Impossibility | 1. *Non posso venire.*<br>I cannot come. |
| | 2. Indirect Cancellation | 2. *Forse è meglio rimandare.*<br>It may be better to postpone. |
| | 3. Non-performative Statement | 3. *Dobbiamo rimandare.*<br>We have to postpone. |
| | 4. Performative | 4. *Dobbiamo cancellare, devo disdire.*<br>We have to cancel, I have to cancel. |
| Explanation | | INV provides a reason for their non-participation (health, work, family, etc.) |
| | 1. Generic Explanation | 1. *Ho un impegno.*<br>I have a commitment. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | 2. Detailed Explanation | 2. *Sono malato.*<br>I am sick. |
| Farewell | | INV signals the end of the message with closing expressions<br>*Ci vediamo presto*, *un abbraccio*, *buona serata.*<br>See you soon, a hug, have a good evening. |
| Gratitude | | INV expresses gratitude for the invitation<br>*Grazie.*<br>Thank you. |
| Offer of Repair | | INV promises to make up for the cancellation, (with a new appointment, a phone call, detailed explanations, etc.) |
| | 1. Alternative | 1. *Recuperiamo domani?*<br>Do we make up for it tomorrow? |
| | 2. Unclear Alternative | 2. *Un'altra volta magari ci riorganizziamo in settimana.*<br>Another time maybe we'll reschedule later in the week. |
| | 3. No Alternative | 3. *Vabbè*, *ti spiego quando ci vediamo.*<br>Whatever, I'll explain when I see you. |
| Preparator | | INV prepares the round for the upcoming speech act<br>*Lo so che dovevamo andare al cinema assieme.*<br>I know we were supposed to go to the movies together. |
| Remedial Move | | INV says they are sorry or asks for forgiveness |
| | 1. Apology | 1. *Scusa.*<br>Sorry. |
| | 2. Statement of Regret | 2. *Mi dispiace.*<br>I am afraid. |
| Willingness | | INV states their willingness to participate<br>*Mi sarebbe piaciuto molto venire al cinema con te stasera.* |
| Wishes | | INV expresses well-wishes for the event they will not attend<br>*Ti auguro di poterci andare con un'altra buona compagnia.* |

**Taxonomy of Modifiers (for both refusals and cancellations)**

| **Modifier** | **Function** |
|---|---|
| Downtoner | Mitigates the strength of the illocutionary force of the sub-act in which it appears<br>*Forse*, *un po'*, *un attimo*, *magari.*<br>Maybe, a little bit, a moment, maybe. |

| | |
|---|---|
| Evaluation | Expresses the speaker's standpoint on the state of affairs described in the sub-act in which it appears<br>*Purtroppo*, *mi dispiace comunicarti che*…<br>Unfortunately, I am sorry to report that… |
| Intensifier | Increases the strength of the illocutionary force of the sub-act in which it appears<br>*Molto*, *proprio*, *tanto*, *veramente*, *stanchissimo*, *stanca morta*<br>very, really, much, really, very tired, exhausted |
| Term of Address | Qualifies the relationship between speaker and addressee<br>*Ciccino*, *carissimo*, *Marta*, *direttore*, *capo*, *Dott.ssa Bianchi*<br>Sweety, dearest, Marta, director, chief, Dr. Bianchi |