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**Responding to bargaining moves in a digital era:
Refusals of offers on Mercado Libre Ecuador**

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Abstract

This chapter investigates the different ways in which sellers on Mercado Libre-Ecuador, a virtual market place, refuse bargaining offers. Drawing on work on offers, refusals, bargaining, and CMDA, among other areas, and on the basis of a corpus of refusals taken from 227 buyer-vendor exchanges, it examines how refusals are realized, and the extent to which sellers pay attention to interpersonal concerns in their formulation of refusals. Despite the interactions being anonymous, most sellers were found to use one or more verbal strategies with a mitigating function (e.g. affiliative address, greetings, apologies, justifications, expressions of thanks). Possible factors exerting influence on this behaviour are considered. They include, for example, the medium of interaction, features of the genre and Mercado Libre norms and conventions.

Key words: offers, refusals, bargaining, e-service encounters, computer-mediated discourse analysis, Mercado Libre, Ecuadorian Spanish

1. Introduction

This chapter examines sellers' refusals of offers made by buyers as bargaining (*regateo*) or bartering (*trueque*) moves on Mercado Libre (ML)-Ecuador, an online marketplace. The study is based on a selected corpus of exchanges between buyers and sellers in a virtual space provided by the site. Refusals are complex acts that can be regarded in many contexts as potentially face-threatening, given that "the risk of offending one's interlocutor" is very much a part of this particular speech act (Beebe, Takahashi, & Uliss-Weltz, 1990, p. 56). Their

complexity is illustrated in descriptions of refusals as dispreferred responses: unlike acceptances, which, as preferred responses, tend to be simpler and shorter and to occur without delays, refusals tend to be longer and delayed (cf. Levinson, 1983, p. 333). This would be an indication, to use Rendle-Short's (2015, p. 656) words, of the "social difficulty" associated with "providing a dispreferred response".

Refusals have been studied relatively extensively in face-to-face interaction in relation to different actions such as requests, invitations and (hospitable) offers, and with respect to different languages and contexts (cf. Beebe et al., 1990; Chen, Ye & Zhang, 1995; Mulo Farenkia, 2015), including Spanish (cf. Félix-Brasdefer, 2008a; García, 1992, 1999, 2007). However, as far as we know, there are no studies available on refusals in digital environments, including refusals of bargaining or *trueque* 'bartering' offers (Placencia 2016).

However, as far as we know, there are no studies available on refusals of bargaining or *trueque* 'bartering' offers (Placencia, 2016), in either face-to-face or online contexts.

The present study seeks to identify the linguistic resources and strategies that sellers use to produce refusals in the ML context, including the kind of 'relational work' (Locher, 2006; Locher & Watts, 2005) that they engage in. By relational work we mean "the 'work' individuals invest in negotiating relationships with others" (Locher, 2006, p. 4). It is a notion akin to that of 'rapport management': the use of language in the "management of social relations" (Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p. 12). In commercial (and other types of) service encounters, participants may focus on the transaction alone or may choose to pay more or less attention to the relationship with their interlocutor. One of the features of interest in e-service encounters is precisely the relational aspect of the interaction: the extent to which, and the ways in which, participants invest in the service relationship within the constraints of the site and of the online medium.

Bargaining, like bartering, seems to be a relatively frequent activity on ML (cf. Placencia, 2016; Placencia & García, forthcoming), even though, in theory, it is not a constitutive practice of the site. As a matter of fact, at the time of data collection, ML's website stated that products were sold on the site at a fixed price or by auction, the latter being a modality not examined in the present study (see Section 3). Also, the majority of sellers in the corpus examined specifically stated, when announcing their products, that prices were fixed. Regarding bartering it was not contemplated by ML at the time of data collection, although it is at present listed under activities that are 'allowed'.¹ As such, bargaining and bartering in this context appeared not to form part of most sellers' expectations. Evidence of this can be found in the fact that only around 10% of the offers in our corpus were accepted (see Section 4). So, if bargaining offers can be considered inappropriate in the context examined, then little or no relational work could be expected when refusals are produced. This expectation is even stronger if we take into account the fact that interactions among buyers and sellers where these refusals occur are carried out anonymously, with participants operating with virtual identities. In other words, at first sight, one may expect less attention to be paid to interpersonal concerns in anonymous, virtual interactions than in face-to-face transactions; therefore, it would not be unreasonable to expect even some harsh responses as a reaction to some particularly bold offers. However, this is not the case. Sellers, as we shall see, tend to make use of a range of strategies to soften or smooth over refusals, making them more interactionally acceptable to prospective buyers.

The study adopts a computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) perspective as proposed by Herring (2004, 2013). In line with the CMDA approach described by this author

¹ The site at currently states that sellers can "accept the exchange of products for the advertised product" (my translation). (see https://www.mercadolibre.com.ec/ayuda/Politicadepublicacion_s1011#1012) (accessed 20-05-18).

(cf. Herring, 2004, p. 339), the present study offers an analysis of online behaviour “that is grounded in empirical, textual observations”, “informed by a linguistics perspective”. The linguistics perspective adopted here is a pragmatics perspective, with a focus on speech act realization, looking at the realization of both the head acts that realize refusals as well as the supportive moves that accompany them. For this, we draw principally on work on offers and refusals, particularly refusals of offers, as well as work on the discourse of bargaining in service encounters which is the macro activity within which refusals of offers occur in the present study (see Section 2). Additionally, we draw on works on computer-mediated communication (e.g. Walther and Jang 2012), including those focussing on features of language use online (see Androutsopoulos 2000; Locher 2006; Yus 2010), as well as politeness theory, more specifically, Locher and Watts’s (2005) relational work perspective referred to above. As such, the present study aims to make a contribution to various areas, including the study of refusals (of offers), bargaining, e-service encounters, and e-commerce (see Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2015) more broadly. In Section 2 below, some background to the study is provided, focussing on the main areas / topics underpinning it: bargaining and bartering, offers and refusals of offers. Section 3, describes some features of ML as a marketplace and the space it offers for interaction between prospective buyers and sellers, as well as the corpus employed. The results and a discussion are presented in Section 4, followed by some conclusions in Section 5.

2. Background

2.1 Bargaining and bartering

Definitions of bargaining centre on price negotiation, as in Prego Vázquez (1999) where bargaining is defined as “interactions within commercial transactions in which buyer and seller negotiate the price of a product” (p. 775) (my translation). Example (1) below

illustrates this kind of negotiation, albeit a rather truncated one. It is initiated by a reduced-price offer on the part of the buyer: *DISCULPE QMIGO LE OFREZCO 250 DOLARES SALUDOS* ‘EXCUSE ME [F]RIEND I OFFER YOU 250 DOLLARS GREETINGS’, swiftly clipped by the seller with a negative reply: *NO amigo el precio que está* ‘NO friend the price is as stated’.

(1) English bulldog, US\$400

Buyer: *DISCULPE QMIGO LE OFRESCO 250 DOLARES SALUDOS*

‘EXCUSE ME FRIEND I OFFER YOU 250 DOLLARS GREETINGS’

Seller: *NO amigo el precio que está*

‘NO friend the price is as stated’

Bartering, on the other hand, is typically defined as a non-monetary exchange, a basic form of product exchange, carried out without resorting to conventional money (Vásquez, 2008, p. 59). An attempt at bartering from our corpus that fits this definition is illustrated by example (2) where the bartering offer is also turned down:

(2) German Shepherd puppy, priced at US\$420

Buyer: *le cambio por un iphone 4g de 32gigas [...]*

‘I’ll exchange it for an iphone 4g 32 giga bytes [...]

Seller: *no*

‘no’

However, bartering, as highlighted by Ferraro (2011) in relation to her study on *trueque* ‘barter’ practices in a village in the Ecuadorian Andes, does not necessarily stand in binary

opposition to money, but can co-exist with it (p. 170). Indeed, Ferraro describes *trueque* in her study as a practice involving simultaneously goods and money. In our ML corpus we also find some examples of bartering offers that are supported by an offer of a cash payment, as in (3):

(3) Bullmastif puppy US\$600

Buyer: *Tal vez te interesa una tablet con memoria ram de 1 gb y memoria expandible 32gb y \$100.00dinero a tu favor por una embrita.*

‘Maybe you are interested in a tablet with 1gb ram memory expandable to 32gb and \$100.00cash in your favour for a female puppy.’

Seller: *No, muchas gracias.*

‘No, thank you very much.’

In the present study, we use the notion of bargaining in broad terms to include both reduced-price and bartering offers. The latter, like the former, are also subject to negotiation. Indeed, the negotiation aspect of the exchange is made explicit in some interactions in our corpus, as in the following example where the buyer puts two ‘products’ on the negotiating table:

(4) English bulldog US\$600

Buyer: *hola disculpa tienes el cachorro? te puedo ofrecer un cambio? tengo una cachorra pug carlino mas una laptop hp core 2duo para negociar que dices saludos espero tu respuesta*

‘hello excuse me do you still have the puppy? can I offer you an exchange? I have a pug carlino female puppy plus a hp core 2duo laptop for negotiation what do you think greetings I look forward to hearing from you’

Seller: *No me interesa otro perro, muchas gracias...*

‘I’m not interested in another dog, thank you very much...’

Bargaining or haggling and bartering are activities typically associated with physical settings in local contexts. In the literature on the discourse of bargaining, descriptions of this practice are given in relation to a range of public markets around the world such as fish (Sherzer, 1993; Canagarajah, 1995) and meat markets (Ayoola, 2009), street clothes markets (Pinzón García & Montalvo Castro, 2005) or even livestock fairs (Prego Vázquez, 1999). By contrast, the settings for bartering do not appear to be necessarily circumscribed to particular spaces. With reference to bartering practices in Colombia, for example, Vázquez (2008, p. 59) observes that *trueque* ‘barter’ can take place in a wide range of settings such as parks, parking lots, schools, universities, companies, and even private houses. In Ferraro’s (2011) study in the Ecuadorian Andes, on the other hand, the main setting for *trueque* appears to be the main village square. ML is an online marketplace that has unwittingly opened up a virtual space for bargaining / bartering through their *preguntas-respuestas* ‘questions-answers’ public message board that is open for prospective sellers to ask questions of buyers before deciding on a purchase (see Section 3 below).

One noteworthy feature is that while bargaining is a practice traditionally associated with public marketplaces, bartering appears to be considered an antiquated form of exchange that has re-surfaced within the past two or three decades in response to economic crises, and in reaction to what Vázquez (2008, p. 59) refers to as ‘capitalist exclusion’ (my translation). In other words, while bartering may persist as an ancestral cultural practice in remote villages, as in Ferraro’s (2011) study relating to the Ecuadorian Andes, it appears to be a more recent phenomenon in urban spaces. An example of this is Vázquez’s (2008) *trueque* events in Colombia, initiated through programmes like *Truequeando por Antioquia* ‘Bartering around Antioquia’. The latter is a programme dating back to 2003 which involves the exchange of school books and food products. Another example is the *trueque* ‘barter’

clubs in Argentina, described by Gatti (2009) as having developed in the mid-1990s. This author notes that these clubs were started by middle-class Argentines in the 1990s as a response to the Argentinean socioeconomic crisis of the latter part of the 20th Century, but extended to all social classes when the crisis deepened. Some of the same economic driving forces may be operating in the Ecuadorian urban context, giving rise to a 21st-century version of *trueque*, mediated by technology, that the ML *trueque* examples from our corpus illustrate and that can be seen in other ML domains (Placencia & García, forthcoming) and other environments such as Facebook (Placencia, in preparation).

Questions arise about how bargaining/bartering practices translate from the physical into the virtual world, and the extent to which technology influences what goes on in the exchanges. For instance, bargaining in face-to-face interactions has been described by some authors as an activity of prolonged negotiation consisting of a number of phases (cf. Canagarajah, 1995), involving a *tira y afloja* ‘a tug of war’ (Prego Vázquez, 1999, p. 775). However, Placencia (2016) when looking at bargaining offers on ML-Ecuador found that prolonged bargaining sequences were uncommon; instead, the common pattern that she identified consisted of two-turn sequences made up of an offer by a buyer, followed by a response by the seller (most commonly a rejection), as in the above examples (see also Placencia & García, forthcoming). And yet, Placencia (2016) found that each turn of the adjacency pair can be packed with a number of elements, including greetings and farewells, as in the offer in example (1) above. These are elements which in face-to-face interaction normally occur over various turns. Placencia suggests that the common adjacency pair sequence that she identified is influenced by technology in that the ML platform provides a space for two turns – for questions and for answers – (see below) where offers and their corresponding responses can be easily accommodated.

From an interpersonal perspective, authors like Prego Vázquez (1999) have highlighted the rather aggressive nature of bargaining in face-to-face encounters where buyers use strategies to discredit the product and/or the seller (see also Kharraki, 2001). However, Prego Vázquez (1999) also notes that some buyers and sellers use the last stages of the interaction to restore the interpersonal balance, with participants ending the interaction on friendly terms. In her study of bargaining offers on ML-Ecuador, Placencia (2016) observes not only that the bargaining activity as a whole tends to be briefer than what has been described for face-to-face interaction, but also possibly friendlier, with most buyers employing affiliative rather than face-threatening strategies. With the expansion of communication on line and through social media, in particular, and immediacy constituting one of its notable characteristics, there does not seem to be much appetite on the part of buyers (or sellers) to engage in lengthy bargaining negotiations, i.e., there is no time to be spent modulating a bargaining interaction for participants to go from aggressive to restorative moves over a sequence of turns. As such, and on the whole, buyers on ML keep their offers relatively brief, but tend to address interpersonal concerns by means of different strategies such as providing explanations, using affiliative address forms, etc. (Placencia, 2016). How sellers respond to bargaining offers is the object of analysis in this chapter, and, more precisely, as we have indicated, how they perform refusals.

2.2 Offers and refusals of offers

Different characterizations of offers have been proposed, reflecting their complexity. Bach and Harnish (1979), for example, building on Austin (1962), classify them as commissive acts and define them as “proposals to obligate oneself”, in contrast to promises which would be “acts of obligating oneself” to do something specified in the propositional content (p. 50). For Hancher (1979), on the other hand, offers constitute commissive-directives in that they

contain a directive element, i.e., offerers do not only commit themselves to a future action, but also want to direct the offeree's behaviour. Along the same lines, for Pérez Hernández (2001), offers, together with invitations and threats, can be placed on a continuum with directives at one extreme, and commissives at the other. According to Pérez Hernández, offers would be closer to the commissive end of the continuum, and threats closer to the directive end; invitations would be in the middle.

Also, different types of offers have been identified. They include, among others, gift offers (Hua, Li & Yuan, 1998), 'hospitable' offers (Schneider, 2003) (see also Barros García, 2012; Hernández Flores, 2002; Koutlaki, 2002; Placencia, 2008), 'concrete' offers (Kärkkäinen, 2012), offers of assistance (Curl, 2006; Schneider, 2003) and commercial offers (Chodorowska-Pilch, 2002); within the latter, the sub-category of bargaining offers (Placencia, 2016) can be distinguished. The commissive or directive element of these different types of offers is likely to be more or less prominent according to the type of offer and the context. For example, in bargaining offers on ML, the directive element is probably more prominent than in many hospitable offers as offerers in bargaining events are attempting to secure a good deal for themselves and it is therefore important for them to persuade the offeree to agree to their proposal. On the other hand, persuading one's interlocutor may also be important in certain (hospitable) ritual offers, as the ones described by Koutlaki (2002) for Iranian society. This author points out that it is a social convention in Iran to refuse a hospitable offer among family and friends at least once (p. 1741). In this context, the insistence that appears to follow through reoffers (see below), motivated by politeness reasons, would have a strong directive element.

Offers have also been classified according to whether they are solicited or unsolicited (Chodorowska-Pilch, 2002) and whether they occur as initiative acts (i.e., initiative offers) or as reoffers (Barron, 2005) or offer renewals (Schneider, 2003). The latter normally occur as a

response to actual or potential refusals (cf. Davidson, 1984; 1990). The reduced-price and bartering offers in our corpus (Section 3) can be described as initiative, unsolicited offers. This is not to say that all offers on ML are unsolicited. It partly depends on how sellers announce their products (see below) and on whether the product is new or second hand. Some sellers, for example, when advertising their product explicitly indicate that they do not want any exchanges, and yet they are still presented with bartering offers. The posting of second-hand goods (cf. Placencia & García, forthcoming), however, appears to implicitly carry the expectation that bargaining will occur. Refusals of hospitality and gift offers, on the other hand, may form part of a ritual that gives rise to extended sequences involving offers, refusals and re-offers (cf. Koutlaki, 2002). The possibility of even second and third refusals and reoffers before acceptance is reached is discussed by Hua et al. (1998, p. 89) in relation to gift offers in China.

With respect to responses to offers, both acceptance and refusals have been examined; we focus on the latter as our principal concern here. As with offers, some authors have proposed some basic distinctions. For example, Barron (2003, p. 129) distinguishes between ‘initial’ or first refusals and ‘subsequent’ refusals, a distinction that seems to be parallel to that of initiative offers and reoffers (Barron, 2005) (see above). In relation to this distinction, the refusals in our ML corpus constitute first refusals. Building on Chen et al. (1995), Barron also considers two types of initial refusals: ritual and substantive. The former occur in some situational and sociocultural contexts and are motivated by politeness considerations; also, they may occur more than once before acceptance is reached. Substantive refusals, which Schneider (2000) (cited in Barron, 2003, p. 129), refers to as ‘genuine’ refusals, are intended to reflect the offeree’s actual wishes. With regard to this distinction, refusals by sellers in our corpus seem to fall under the category of substantive or genuine refusals rather than ritual refusals.

Concerning the categorization of refusal strategies, a seminal work in this area is Beebe et al. (1990) study of pragmatic transfer in the realisation of refusals of offers, requests, invitations and suggestions by Japanese speakers of English. Based on discourse completion tests, Beebe et al. (1990) compare the performance of refusals of Japanese learners of English with that of native speakers of American English and Japanese. They identify pragmatic transfer with respect to the order, frequency, and content of semantic formulas employed by the Japanese learners of English. The refusal categories that these authors identified and which were the basis for the scheme employed in the present study (see Section 4) have also served as the basis for multiple studies on refusals, including, among others, refusals of offers (Barron, 2003), invitations (Félix-Brasdefer, 2008b; García, 1999; 2007) and suggestions and requests (Félix-Brasdefer, 2008a; 2008b).

Barron (2003) analyses refusals of offers in her study of the influence of the year abroad in the development of L2 pragmatic competence among a group of Irish learners of English. Based on production questionnaires, complemented with metapragmatic instruments, she looks at refusals (among other pragmatic aspects) across three groups: Irish English learners of German L2, speakers of Irish English L1 and of German German L2. She bases her categorization of refusals broadly on Beebe et al. (1990), but also draws on other works such as Chen et al. (1995), House and Kasper's (1981) work on pragmatic routines, and Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) coding scheme for requests with notions such as that of 'downgraders' which are relevant in the study of mitigation. More recently Wei (2013) also looks at the effect of the year abroad on refusals among Chinese learners of English L2, but with a focus on internal modification of the head act.

In relation to refusals of offers in Spanish, Ferrer and Sánchez Lanza (2002), who examined a range of speech acts in Argentinean Spanish, consider verbal refusals of offers (*ofrecimientos*) as dispreferred responses. Nonetheless, Hernández Flores (2002) in her

analysis of (hospitable) offers (*ofrecimientos*) among family and friends in the context of visits (*visitas*) to family members or friends in Spain illustrates that categorical refusals can constitute a polite response by the guests aimed at avoiding imposing additional work on their host (p. 174). In other words, in some contexts, refusals may be expected and even welcomed. Hernández Flores also provides examples of what she refers to as a *tira y afloja* ‘tug of war’ ritual (p. 173) (see Prego Vázquez, 1999, above) that may develop between guests and hosts when it comes to (hospitable) offers that are initially turned down by their guests. As part of this ritual, hosts show politeness by insisting, but sometimes they have to desist and accept refusals also for politeness reasons (p. 174).

Along the same lines, Barros García (2012) looks at (hospitable) offers among family and friends, also in Peninsular Spanish. She observes that insistence from hosts is expected by guests (p. 128). In this context, the refusals that occur are accompanied by mitigating or intensification devices which serve to mitigate or justify the refusal. Among mitigating devices, she describes, for example, the use of vocatives displaying familiarity that have the effect of bringing about affective closeness, thus ameliorating the effect of the confrontation embedded in a refusal (p. 129). Intensification devices, on the other hand, are employed in an attempt to convince the offerer of the authenticity of the offeree’s reason for refusal (p. 131). The use of a range of mitigating devices in the performance of refusals, as we shall see, stands out in our results (Section 4).

3. Some features of ML and the corpus employed

ML is one of the largest online marketplaces in Latin America, with subsidiaries in 19 countries. We focus here on ML-Ecuador. Figures provided by Statista (2017) for January 2016 show that ML was the most visited online retailer in Latin America, ahead of other companies such as Amazon and Walmart. ML offers multiple domains selling both goods and

services. As far as goods are concerned, communication between buyers and sellers before the purchase is through a public message board, and it is carried out anonymously up to the point of purchase. More specifically, ML offers a question-answer format for prospective buyers to ask questions, and for sellers to provide a response. This format allows prospective buyers to publicly ask for additional information or make an offer before proceeding with the purchase (see examples above). In turn, sellers can also publicly provide the information requested, respond to offers and may invite shoppers to proceed with the transaction and arrange face-to-face contacts (also see examples above).

Another feature of ML is its sets of norms and conditions for use of the site that stipulate, among other things, that buyers and sellers should not post any personal information. Their questions / answers are deleted if, for example, they list a telephone number. Finally, on ML, both buyers and sellers can rate each other and their ratings are publicly available. Under a box labelled *Reputación como vendedor* ‘reputation as seller’, buyers can see the ratings and comments that a given seller has received; likewise, under *perfil del comprador* ‘buyer’s profile’, sellers can see how other sellers have rated the person as buyer, that is, if the person has made any purchases. Given its commenting facility, in particular, ML can be classified as a participatory website (see e.g. Walther and Jang 2012).

With respect to the corpus employed, there are multiple domains of products within the marketplace examined. The one chosen for the present study is that of pets and other animals, as illustrated by example (1) above. The same corpus was employed by Placencia (2016) for the analysis of offers (see also Placencia, 2015). Twenty-two ‘items’ within the domain were selected at random. They generated 234 ‘questions’ and 227 ‘answers’. A few questions were left unanswered; others had been deleted for not adhering to the site’s norms. Hence the disparity between the number of questions and answers in our corpus.

Among the 227 question-answer pairs that form the corpus of the present study, 74 bargaining offers were identified. The rest of the questions correspond mainly to different types of requests, particularly requests for information about the product or delivery matters. From the 74 offers, 60 or 81% were turned down, and 8, or about 10% were accepted. The rest (n=6) correspond to irrelevant offers such as a buyer making an offer for a non-existent pet, like a female kitten when only males were advertised, as in the following example:

(5) White Persian cats US\$ 200

Buyer: *le interesa un cambio por una perrita schnauzer blanca si le interesa espero su respuesta por la hembra*

‘are you interested in an exchange for a white schnauzer female puppy if you are interested I look forward to your answer about the female kitten’

Seller: *solo tengo dos machos amigo!*

‘I only have two males friend!’

In relation to ethical matters, our use of ML conforms to the recommendations of AoIR (*Association of Internet Researchers*) in that the exchanges examined for the present study appear in a site of public access. Also, buyers and sellers conceal their identity by using pseudonyms or nicknames. Therefore, informed consent from participants is not required. However, in the examples provided, pseudonyms were modified because even if they are not the true names, they still constitute identity markers (Danet, 1998).

4. Results

For the classification of refusals, we draw on Beebe et al.’s (1990) categorization of overall refusal strategies which we adapted, for clarity, and to suit the context of the interactions in the present study. We also propose a few new strategies (see below). Additionally, we draw

on Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) useful distinction between head acts, that is, the main act realizing the refusal, and supportive moves ('adjuncts' in Beebe et al.'s 1990 scheme). For instance, in (6) below one can see that the head act of the refusal is the explicit negative *no* 'no' which is nonetheless accompanied by five supportive moves: an initial greeting, an address form, two expressions of appreciation or gratitude, and one explanation:²

(6) German Shepherd puppies US\$ 650

Buyer: *estimado*³ *quizás no le interesaria cambiar con un macho bulldog ingles*

'esteemed you wouldn't perhaps be interested in exchanging it with a male English bulldog'

Seller: *Buenas noches FEIJOS no muchas gracias me dedico solo al OVEJERO*

ALEMAN Gracias por su pregunta

'Good evening FEIJOS no thank you very much I only deal with GERMAN SHEPHERDS Thank you for your question'

Buenas noches 'good evening'

FEIJOS

No 'No'

muchas gracias 'thank you very much'

me dedico solo al OVEJERO ALEMAN

'I only deal with GERMAN SHEPHERDS'

Gracias por su pregunta 'thank you for your question'

Greeting

Address form

REFUSAL

Exp. of gratitude

Explanation

Exp. of gratitude

4.1 Head act realization of refusals

² In other approaches like CA, similar components of refusals such as apologies and explanations that we classify here under the notion of supportive moves are considered, albeit not under any umbrella term in particular (cf. Rendle-Short, 2015).

³ This term is an address form that appears to have been abbreviated from the full form *Estimado señor* 'Dear Sir' found in formal correspondence (see Placencia, 2015).

We distinguish two overall categories: explicit and implicit. We classified under explicit those refusals that contain an overt negative (e.g. *No* ‘no’) as in examples (1) to (3) above. Implicit refusals, on the other hand, mostly correspond to those realized by means of another speech act as in the following example, where a negative evaluation of the offer constitutes the refusal.

(7) Himalayan Persian kittens US\$ 150

Buyer: *Soy de pasaje te doy 60 hoy mismo*

‘I’m from pasaje [a town] I’ll give you 60 today without delay’

Seller: *muy baja su oferta amigo saludos*

‘your offer is too low friend greetings’

Explicit refusals were found to occur more frequently (35/60 or 58.33%) than implicit ones (25/60 or 41.66%). However, some variation was observed in relation to the type of offer. With reduced-price offers, implicit formulations are employed more frequently (21 or 55.26% vs. 17 or 44.73%) whereas there is clear predominance of explicit formulations with bartering offers (18 or 81.81% vs. 4 or 18.18%). These differences were found to be statistically significant: $\chi^2(1, N = 60) = 7.88, p = .005$.⁴ While explicit refusals are overall more common and occur with little internal modification (see below), as we will see, they tend to occur with supportive moves that soften the bluntness of the negative (see also below).

As for sub-strategies of explicit refusals, four main categories were identified:

⁴ To determine the size of the effect, we employed a probabilities proportion test (odds ration, or PP) of the response type (‘explicit’ or ‘implicit’) according to offer type (‘reduced-price’ or ‘bartering’) (PP=.18). This suggests that receiving explicit refusals is 5.56 times more likely with bartering as opposed to reduced-price offers.

a. Negative with *no* ‘no’ or *negativo* ‘negative’ (‘non-performative statement – “No”’ in Beebe et al.’s (1990, p. 73) scheme) (e.g. *No muchas gracias* ‘No thank you very much’) as in example (6) above.⁵

b. Non-acceptance of the offer as in (8) below (*no aceptamos el cambio* ‘we don’t accept the exchange’).

(8) English bulldog US\$ 400

Seller: *Hola amigo no aceptamos el cambio gracias*

‘Hello friend we don’t accept the exchange thank you’

c. Inability to accept the offer as in (9) (see Beebe et al.’s (1990, p. 73) ‘negative ability’) (*no puedo aceptar su oferta* ‘I cannot accept your offer’).

(9) German Shepherd puppies US\$ 500

Seller: [...] *le ofrezco 250 por un machito [...]*

‘[...] I offer you 250 for a male puppy [...]

Buyer: [...] *los cachorros salen con pedigree y tienen muy buena línea [...] no puedo aceptar su oferta*

‘[...] the puppies have pedigree and have very good lineage [...] I cannot accept your offer’

d. Lack of interest in the offer, as in (4) above or (10):

(10) Jack Russell female puppies US\$ 280

Buyer: *pana te doy 200 que dice confirma saludos*

‘mate I’ll give you 200 what do you think confirm greetings?’

Seller: *Buenos días gracias por su propuesta pero no estoy interesada [...]*⁶

⁵ It should be pointed out that there was only one instance of *negativo* ‘negative’. The rest of negatives were realized by *no* ‘no’.

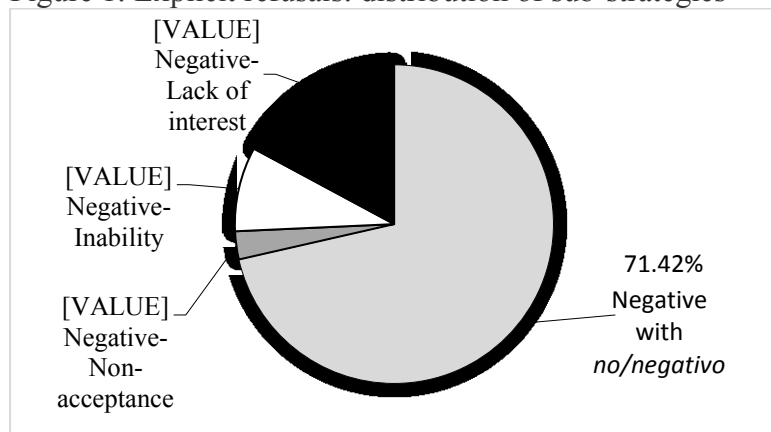
⁶ Square brackets ‘[...]’ are employed to indicate that there is text that has been omitted for the purposes of the presentation of some examples from the corpus.

‘thank you for your offer but I’m not interested [...]

Categories b. and d. do not appear in Beebe et al.’s (1990) scheme.

From these subtypes, as can be seen in Figure 1, the negative with *no* is the most frequent, followed by the expression of lack of interest in the offer. A noteworthy point is that strategy c) (‘inability to accept’) carries embedded in its construction a mitigating element with the modal verb *poder* ‘can’: when using this strategy, the seller is highlighting that for some reason that seems to be beyond his/her control, he/she is unable to accept the offer. On the other hand, example (8) above corresponding to strategy b. displays the use of a *downgrading* device (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989): the use of the first person plural (*no aceptamos [...]* ‘we don’t accept [...]) that masks who is responsible for the action. However, this was the only instance of verbal downgrading through internal modification found in our corpus.

Figure 1: Explicit refusals: distribution of sub-strategies



With respect to implicit refusals, four subcategories were also identified:

- a. Negative evaluation of the offer as in (7) above (*muy baja su oferta amigo saludos* ‘your offer is too low friend greetings’).⁷

⁷ The closest equivalent category within Beebe et al.’s (1990, p. 73) scheme is ‘attempt to dissuade interlocutor

- b. Alternative or counter-offer as in (11) below. The buyer in this example offers a reduced price for a female puppy, and the seller makes a counter offer which is a male puppy (*‘por un machito le acepto los \$550 ‘I’ll accept \$550 for a male one’*). By offering an alternative, the seller shows his/her willingness to make a deal, thus compensating for his/her implicit refusal.⁸

(11) English bulldog US\$ 800

Buyer: *amigo 500 por una hembra*

‘... 500 for a female puppy’

Seller: *cordiales saludos amigo, por un machito le acepto los \$550. un feliz año.*

‘warm greetings friend, I’ll accept \$550 for a male one. happy new year.’

- c. Statement of norm as in (12) below (see Beebe et al.’s ‘statement of principle’⁹). The response in this case (*los precios son fijos ‘prices are fixed’*) alludes to a transactional norm. By means of this strategy, the seller attempts to reduce his/her responsibility for the refusal.

(12) Bullmastiff puppies US\$ 600

Buyer: *400 dolares americanos compra inmediata por una hembra [...] saludos*

‘400 American dollars immediate purchase for a female puppy [...] greetings’

Seller: *Muchas gracias pero los precios son fijos*

‘Thank you very much but prices are fixed’

criticize the request/requester’.

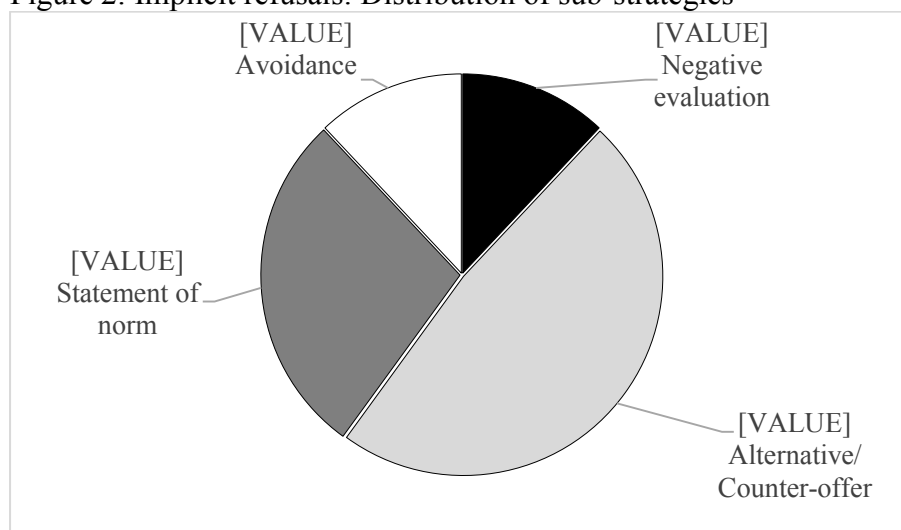
⁸ While ‘alternative’ appears in Beebe et al. (1990, p. 73) as ‘statement of alternative’, the category of counter-offer is naturally not present in their scheme as these authors do not deal with commercial contexts.

⁹We chose the term ‘norm’ to convey the fact that the action corresponds to a standard course of action rather than the idea that there is a guiding principle behind the action; however, the choice of term can be brought into question.

- d. Avoidance: we use this category for those cases where no reply was provided. The absence of a reply can be taken to imply a non-explicit refusal of the offer.¹⁰

In terms of the frequency of use of these different strategies, we found that two categories - alternative and statement of norm - are the ones most frequently employed, as can be seen in Figure 2. It can be maintained that the use of these two strategies implies an attempt by the seller to mitigate the refusal by claiming reduced responsibility for the action (statement of norm) or by showing goodwill (alternative / counter-offer).

Figure 2: Implicit refusals: Distribution of sub-strategies



4.2 *Accompanying supportive moves*

Supportive moves can be employed to mitigate or aggravate a given speech act (cf. Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). In our corpus, only instances of verbal supportive moves with a mitigating effect were found. The categories identified are presented in Chart 1.

¹⁰The category of 'avoidance' comes from Beebe et al. (1990). However, it should be noted that these authors consider several subtypes whereas our instances correspond roughly to one of their subcategories: 'avoidance – non-verbal - silence' (p. 73).

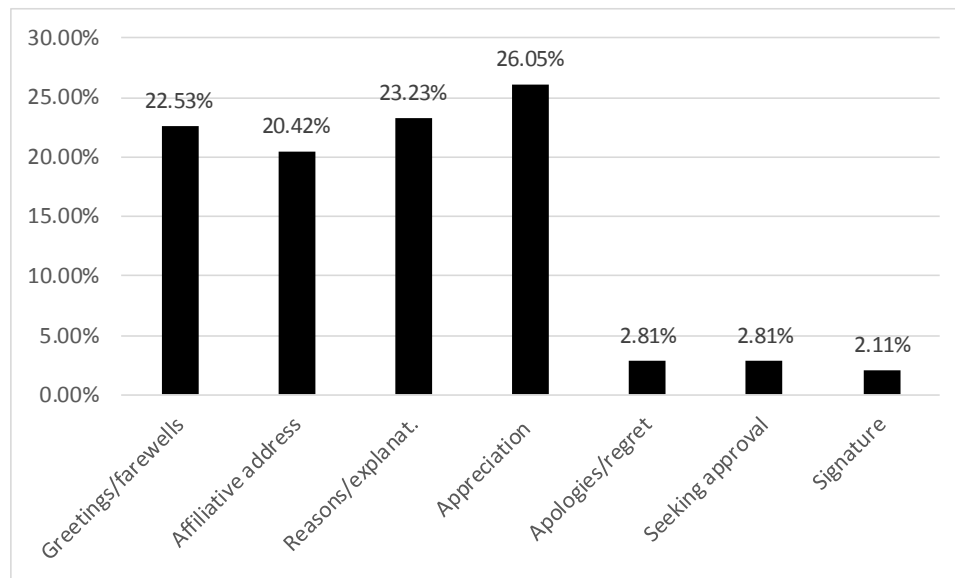
Chart 1: Categories of verbal supportive moves in the realization of refusals

| Categories | Examples |
|--|--|
| Greetings, farewells and good wishes | <i>Hola</i> ‘hello’/ <i>saludos</i> ‘greetings’ / <i>feliz año</i> ‘happy New Year’ |
| Affiliative address terms | <i>Amigo</i> ‘friend’/ <i>pana</i> ‘mate’ / <i>bro</i> / buyer’s username |
| Reasons / explanations | <i>lo siento, los cachorros salen con pedigree y tienen muy buena línea, el padre es importado de alemania</i> [...] ‘our puppies are sold with pedigree and are of a very good lineage, the father was imported from Germany [...]’ |
| Appreciation/thanks | <i>muchas gracias</i> ‘thank you very much’ |
| Apologies / regret | <i>de corazón me disculpa pero no puedo bajarme de ese precio</i> ‘I feel truly sorry but I cannot lower the price’ |
| Seeking approval / agreement | <i>Le puedo ofrecer una perrita por ese precio le parece bien?</i> ‘I can offer you a female puppy for that price is that okay?’ |
| Signature (Personalizing the message by providing a signature) | <i>Hola, No gracias, Saludos Jessica</i> ‘Hello, No thank you, Greetings, Jessica’ |

There were only 8 cases (13.33%) of refusals without any supportive move. It should be noted that these 8 cases included 3 (5%) instances of avoidance, that is, of cases where the offers were left unanswered. Sellers were found to use an average of 2.36 supportive moves per refusal. They employed more moves per refusal when rejecting reduced-price offers than bartering offers: 2.47 vs. 2.18 moves per refusal. Bartering offers represent a shot in the dark for buyers as they cannot know what the seller might be interested in. As such, expectations of compliance must be quite low. Therefore, rejections may need less interpersonal work. By contrast, getting a price discount appears to be a more realistic goal for buyers to pursue, rejections thus requiring more interpersonal work on the part of sellers. This is reflected in sellers’ higher use of implicit strategies with reduced-price compared with bartering offers (see above); this is a difference that was found to be statistically significant, as pointed out above. However, the differences across groups regarding the number of moves employed per refusal were not found to be statistically significant.

With respect to the overall distribution of the supportive moves listed in Chart 1, four categories, namely greetings and farewells, affiliative address, reasons and explanations and expressions of appreciation, were employed with similar relatively high frequencies, as can be seen in Figure 3. The rest had a very low incidence:

Figure 3: Overall distribution of supportive moves



In relation to the type of offer, the two supportive moves most frequently used with reduced-price as opposed to bartering offers were affiliative address forms (22.34% vs. 16.66%) and reasons and explanations (31.91% vs. 6.25%), and with bartering offers (as opposed to reduced-price offers), greetings and farewells (and good wishes) (25% vs. 21.27%) and expressions of appreciation/gratitude (47.91% vs. 14.89%). However, the supportive move with a significantly higher frequency in the reduced-price offers compared with the bartering offers was that of reasons/explanations (31.91% vs. 6.25%, $RA = +/-3.6$, $p < .001$), and, in the bartering offers, in contrast with the reduced-price offers, that of the expression of appreciation/gratitude (47.91% vs. 14.89%, $RA = +/-4.1$, $p < .001$).¹¹ The rest of supportive moves were not significantly different.

¹¹ Given that over 20% of the cells contained expected values under 5, a Chi Square test could not be applied. Instead, we used the Fisher's Exact test which calculates the exact distribution of the sample and therefore

It should be noted that in addition to verbal supportive moves, there were a few instances of what can be regarded as non-verbal strategies. For example, there was one instance of a smiley (example (13) below), that can be classified as a supportive move that strengthens the friendly tone the seller adopts to formulate his/her refusal.

(13) White Persian cats US\$ 200

Buyer: *le doy los 160 compra inmediata*

‘I’ll give you 160 immediate purchase’

Seller: *no gracias amigo ese es el precio! :)*

‘no thank you friend that’s the price! :)’

Additionally, there were 5 cases where prosodic spellings (Androutsopoulos, 2000),¹² such as the use of repeated exclamation marks and capital letters were employed. The former could be classified as a type of supportive move that is normally added at the end of an utterance; whereas the latter may be regarded as instances of internal modification. In some of these cases, however, it is not clear whether these spellings are being used with a mitigating or an aggravating effect. For instance, in (14) below, are the exclamation marks that follow the thank you emphasising the expression of gratitude or the refusal as a whole? Likewise, is the use of capitals conveying a stronger refusal? Or is it strengthening the positive relational work conveyed through *amigo* ‘friend’ and *gracias* ‘thank you’. The analysis of a larger corpus and in a wider range of domains can throw light on the use and function of these non-verbal strategies on ML.

tolerates values under 5. Using this test we found that there were some significant relations in the variables examined (Fisher's Exact statistic = 23.51, 2-sided $p=0.000$). In order to identify these variables, we employed Adjusted Residuals; this allowed us to determine which differences were significant. Also, given that apologies occurred only with reduced-price offers, and with a low incidence (4 or 2.81%), they were not included in the statistical analysis.

¹² Prosodic spellings are defined as “representations of prosodic patterns, e.g. the simulation of word stress by the use of capitals and hyphens or the representation of vowel lengthening...” (Androutsopoulos, 2000, p 521).

(14) Screwtailed English bulldog US\$400

Buyer: *saludos , te lo cambio por un bicicleta shimano 3000 , montañera de ruta.*
 ‘greetings, I’ll exchange it for a shimano 3000, mountain bike’

Seller: *nO AMIGO GRACIAS¡¡¡¡¡¡¡¡¡¡*

‘nO FRIEND THANK YOU¡¡¡¡¡¡¡¡¡¡’

Summing up, on the whole, our results show that in the majority of refusals, sellers used at least one and sometimes even various verbal supportive moves with a mitigating effect, but took more time providing explanations when refusing reduced-price offers. With bartering offers, the use of a ritualistic expression of appreciation prevailed over other supportive moves. The use of nonverbal strategies identified is negligible, but is a topic worthwhile exploring in future studies.

4.3 Discussion

At the beginning of this study, I wondered, as indicated in the introduction, to what extent sellers would pay attention to interpersonal concerns in the formulation of refusals on ML. Taking into account the fact that the refusals in question occur in response to bargaining and bartering offers which are practices that may be deemed inappropriate in the ML context, and that they occur in virtual interactions among strangers, we expected sellers to engage in very little or no relational work with buyers. However, as the results in Section 4 showed, interpersonal concerns appear to be important for the majority of sellers, as reflected particularly through the use of supportive moves: most sellers employed at least one supportive move with a mitigating effect with their refusal. More elaborate refusals that include explanations, however, were significantly more frequently employed with reduced-price offers. With respect to the head act, the results showed that more attention to

interpersonal concerns was manifested in refusals to reduced-price offers (vis-à-vis bartering offers) where the use of implicit strategies with a mitigating effect predominated. These results suggest that reduced-price offers are perhaps taken more seriously.

In relation to the use of supportive moves, interestingly, the results of this study largely mirror our results concerning the formulation of bargaining/bartering offers as described in Placencia (2016). Essentially the same categories of supportive moves are employed by both buyers and sellers, with only one or two exceptions. For instance, while some buyers produce apologies that acknowledge the possible offence caused by their offers or simply their inappropriateness, they do not, unlike sellers, express regret. The expression of regret would not be relevant in offers put forward by buyers. Also, there are no instances of 'signature' among buyers. By contrast, numerous affiliative devices such as greetings and farewells (e.g. *saludos* 'greetings'), friendly forms of address (e.g. *amigo* 'friend') are used by both buyers and sellers. As such, both buyers and sellers appear to seek to present themselves in a good light as friendly and/or respectful people according to their choice of greeting formula, for example, thus compensating for the possible offence or threat that their offer or rejection may cause. It is possible to talk in terms of a certain norm of reciprocity (Uehara, 1995) operating that leads sellers to respond overall in a similar manner to that in which they are addressed, but there also seem to be other factors at play.

Both buyers and sellers also appear to use supportive moves instrumentally: buyers seek to ingratiate themselves with sellers possibly in an attempt to gain compliance, whereas sellers probably see all buyers as potential future customers and aim at maintaining good rapport with them. Kong's (1998) factor of expectation of continuity of the relationship appears to play a role here. Kong examines service encounter interactions in Hong Kong and refers to sellers' anticipation of future encounters with the same customers as a factor influencing the manner of the service encounter exchanges. This factor would also apply

here. However, a perhaps more pressing motivation for both buyers and sellers on ML is that when the bargaining process starts, the outcome is unknown and there is the possibility that the transaction may go ahead, in which case the interaction will cease being anonymous. As such, it is in the interest of both participants to engage in smooth and civil, if not also friendly, interactions.

Finally, other practical considerations that are likely to play a role are the constraints imposed by the site. As mentioned earlier (Section 2), there are norms set by the site that militate against inappropriate questions or answers, so buyers and sellers run the risk of being reported and even removed from the site. Also, the rating system in place for both buyers and sellers is likely to act as a deterrent against engaging in inappropriate behaviour, and indeed, even as inducement for the use of affiliative strategies in order that participants receive favourable comments. In a different online marketplace context, that of the free-standing Facebook marketplace where there are no controls or no rating system for buyers or sellers, less mitigation and more aggravation seem to be commonplace (Placencia in preparation). This is so even though participants are not interacting anonymously, since they use their standard Facebook profiles which, at the click of a button, give access to their personal lives. In brief, the results from the present study would suggest that the existence of a set of norms, together with a monitoring system as well as a system of rewards and sanctions, facilitates and encourages civility and good relations in marketplaces like ML. This is, however, a matter requiring further exploration with data input from other domains and other ML sites.

5. Conclusions

On the basis of a selected corpus, the present study examined the realization of refusals of bargaining and bartering offers by sellers on ML-Ecuador from a speech acts pragmatics perspective, within the broader framework of computer-mediated discourse analysis. Explicit

realizations were found to be overall more common than implicit ones, but some variation according to type of offer was identified. The majority of sellers were found to engage in relational work oriented towards mitigating the refusal whether they produced explicit or implicit refusals. As such, refusals of offers in this context in general appear to constitute socially difficult actions requiring more than a simple negative, just like refusals of requests or invitations (see Section 2). This is the case even though bargaining or bartering offers are not constitutive practices of ML. However, as we have pointed out (Section 4.3), there appear to be a number of practical motivations behind the use of supportive moves with a mitigating effect.

Relational work was apparent in both the choice of strategy employed (e.g., among implicit strategies, the two that carry a mitigating effect were the most frequently employed) and the use of verbal supportive moves with a mitigating effect. It was observed that these moves seem to mirror similar moves found in the formulation of offers (Placencia, 2016), and it was suggested that these kinds of moves have a dual function: on the one hand they serve to mitigate the refusal (or the offer), and, at the same time, they serve self-presentation ends. Sellers possibly more than buyers need to present a good image of themselves and avoid behaviour that could discourage potential buyers in the future. However, as we have noted, sellers' (and buyers') behaviour is also constrained by the rating system offered by the site and its norms of interaction. The use of verbal supportive moves helps sellers achieve both their transactional and presentational goals: producing a refusal that is socially appropriate. Non-verbal moves were also mentioned, but their use was found to be minimal.

The study also shows how sellers (like buyers) have adapted to the medium of interaction: they use the response slot that ML provides in order to carry out refusals, in most cases with accompanying verbal moves that in face-to-face interaction may have occurred over a number of turns. By compacting various moves into one turn, sellers are able to

efficiently achieve their transactional goal and minimize possible effects of the refusal that may impact negatively on the buyer-seller relationship.

For future studies, there are various lines of research that could be explored: for example, the impact of the domain of purchase on the way that refusals of bargaining offers and other actions are carried out on ML (see Powell and Placencia, forthcoming, with respect to requests for information). It would also be useful to look at possible regional variation in the use of verbal supportive moves of both the mitigating and the aggravating type, as well as other aspects of the realization of refusals (see Placencia & García, forthcoming). While some studies on regional pragmatic variation across varieties of Spanish have highlighted differences in the use of mitigating and other devices in similar contexts (see García & Placencia, 2011, for an overview), a question for exploration is whether with globalization and the influence of social media on interaction online, communication on spaces like those provided by ML are becoming more homogeneous (cf. Sifianou, 2013). Also, it would be helpful to look at the use of nonverbal strategies such as emoticons and prosodic spellings in a larger corpus, and in different domains. Finally, from a CA perspective, and in relation to preference organization (cf. Rendle-Short, 2015), it would be interesting to examine the shape of refusals on ML vis-à-vis acceptances.

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