

INDIRECT REFUSAL ACTS IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE: A STUDY OF “GONE WITH THE WIND” AND ITS VIETNAMESE TRANSLATION “CUỐN THEO CHIỀU GIÓ”

Thai Van Anh¹

Email: tvan1091@gmail.com, ORCID: 0009-0006-9469-4497

Received: 08/08/2025. Revised: 06/02/2026. Accepted: 23/02/2026

DOI: 10.59266/houjs.2026.1143

Abstract: *By contrasting indirect refusal strategies across English and Vietnamese, this paper draws empirical data from Margaret Mitchell’s classic novel alongside its translated text. Utilizing speech act theory, it analyzes 83 instances of both typical and atypical indirect refusals to discern their linguistic patterns and commonalities. The results indicate that both languages predominantly utilize declarative structures, succeeded by interrogative and request forms, exhibiting broadly analogous distributions. The distinctions that were noticed mostly come from structural language elements, not from pragmatic variance. The Vietnamese translation effectively maintains the indirectness and communicative aim of the original text, offering significant contributions to contrastive pragmatics and translation studies.*

Keywords: *speech acts, refusal, indirect refusal, Gone with the Wind, Cuốn theo chiều gió.*

I. Introduction

English is essential for worldwide communication; nevertheless, numerous Vietnamese learners encounter difficulties in real-life interactions due to pragmatic deficiencies rather than grammatical issues. Refusal is a nuanced speech act that necessitates a delicate balance of social norms and power dynamics to preserve interpersonal harmony. While speech acts have been extensively examined in general linguistics, the specific dynamics of English-Vietnamese indirect refusals, particularly within the

context of classical literary translation, remain under-researched. Most existing studies focus on daily conversations or pedagogical settings, leaving a gap in understanding how complex pragmatic nuances are transferred in monumental works of fiction.

This study aims to fill this gap by conducting a contrastive analysis of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* and its Vietnamese translation, *Cuốn theo chiều gió*. To clarify the focus and direction of the research, this study addresses the following research questions:

¹ Hanoi Open University, Hanoi, Vietnam

(1) What are the common linguistic strategies used for indirect refusals in ‘Gone with the Wind’ and its Vietnamese translation?

(2) To what extent does the Vietnamese translation maintain the pragmatic force and indirectness of the original refusal acts?

By discerning cross-linguistic patterns and translational choices in these texts, the research provides significant insights for language teaching, translation studies, and intercultural communication.

II. Literature review

2.1. Overview of speech acts

Fundamentally, speech act theory argues that human interaction involves more than just sharing data; it emphasizes that uttering words is equivalent to performing specific actions. Austin (1962) characterizes speech acts as actions executed by utterances, with their roles contingent upon context. This perspective is echoed by Searle (1969), who regards them as the fundamental units of communication. Austin delineates five sorts of speech acts, which Searle then reorganizes into five distinct types: representatives, directions, commissives, expressives, and declarations. This reorganization provides a more systematic framework for pragmatic analysis.

2.2. Refusal speech act

Refusal is a “dispreferred” speech act that reacts to pleas or invitations by going against what the listener expects (Gass & Houck, 1999). Pragmatically, it constitutes a commissive act wherein the speaker pledges non-compliance (Searle, 1977; Félix-Brasdefer, 2008), necessitating meticulous tactics to maintain social peace (Beebe et al., 1990).

From a lexicographical perspective, refusal is defined as the expression of unwillingness to accept or grant something (Oxford, 2005).

From a semantic perspective, Wierzbicka places refusal within the broader FORBID domain, associating it with verbs that encode the act of rejecting or preventing an action. In Vietnamese, *Đại Từ Điển Tiếng Việt* similarly records a cluster of lexical items expressing different degrees of rejection, ranging from mild denial to strong repudiation.

These lexical nuances underscore that refusal is a multifaceted speech act, intricately shaped by situational context, speaker intention, and cultural norms.

2.3. Classification of refusal strategies

This research utilizes the framework by Beebe et al. (1990), which categorizes refusals into direct and indirect types. Direct refusals are explicit, whereas indirect strategies (comprising eleven categories like regret, excuses, and avoidance) serve to preserve politeness. This taxonomy is selected for its comprehensive coverage of refusal realizations.

2.4. Indirect refusal act in English and Vietnamese

Indirect speech acts, as defined by Searle (1975), occur when one illocutionary act is performed indirectly through another. In the context of refusals, this indirectness often serves as a politeness strategy to mitigate face-threatening acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In other words, the structural form of an utterance does not directly correspond to its communicative function.

For example:

A: Can you come to the meeting tomorrow?

B: I'd love to, but I have an exam tomorrow. (Beebe et al., 1990)

The refusal is expressed indirectly through an explanation rather than an explicit refusal such as *No, I can't*.

2.4.1. Conventional indirect refusal act

2.4.1.1. Indirect refusal acts expressed by the structures of requests

Refusals can be realized through authoritative assertions or advice. The latter uses modal verbs (e.g., should, ought to) and hedges (e.g., I think) to mitigate the refusal and minimize face-threatening effects.

For example: "Maybe you can ask someone else." (Beebe et al., 1990).

2.4.1.2. Indirect refusal acts expressed by interrogative structures

Interrogative refusals avoid direct negation by utilizing Wh-questions to question validity, request-like forms to suggest alternatives, Yes/No inquiries to show doubt, and exclamatory structures to show rejection through surprise.

For example: "Why don't you ask someone else?" (Beebe et al., 1990).

2.4.1.3. Indirect refusal act is expressed by statements

Rejections frequently occur because a request is inappropriate for the context or the recipient, rather than being inherently incorrect. For example: "I have an exam." (Beebe et al., 1990).

2.4.2. Unconventional indirect refusal act

2.4.2.1. UIRA is expressed by threats

Threats function as indirect refusals by highlighting potentially negative or dangerous outcomes, thereby discouraging the hearer from pursuing their request. Instead of explicitly rejecting, the speaker invokes possible consequences to implicitly convey refusal.

For example: "You'll get into trouble." (Beebe et al., 1990).

2.4.2.2. UIRA is expressed by criticism or reproach

Criticism and reproach convey refusal by expressing the speaker's disapproval or negative evaluation of the request, rather than directly rejecting it. In such cases, the speaker implies refusal by pointing out that the request is unreasonable, inappropriate, or inconvenient.

For example: "That's too much to ask." (Beebe et al., 1990).

2.4.2.3. UIRA is expressed by giving conditions

UIRA in English can be expressed through conditional structures, in which the speaker sets conditions that are unlikely or impossible to fulfill, thereby indirectly refusing the request. Instead of directly rejecting, the speaker shifts the focus to hypothetical or uncertain situations, implying non-compliance while maintaining politeness.

For example: "If you had asked me earlier, I would have..." (CARLA, n.d.).

2.4.2.4. UIRA is expressed by giving a promise

Promissory refusals defer compliance to a future time, using persuasive language to mitigate immediate rejection. Instead of directly refusing, the speaker postpones acceptance by expressing a willingness to comply later. For example: "I'll see." (Beebe et al., 1990).

2.4.2.5. UIRA is expressed by evasion

UIRA evasion utilizes humor, topic shifts, or repetition to bypass direct refusal. This implicit approach preserves politeness and minimizes misunderstanding or offense. For example:

A: "I wish you would go to Parliament."

B: “My dear father, only people who look dull ever get into the house of Commons, and only people who are dull ever succeed there.” (Wilde, 1890/2003).

III. Methodology

3.1. *The setting of the study*

Gone with the Wind is a romantic historical novel and the sole literary work composed by Margaret Mitchell. Taking place in Jonesboro and Atlanta, Georgia, amid the American Civil War (1861-1865) and the Reconstruction era, the narrative follows the journey of Scarlett O’Hara as she transitions from privilege and prosperity to struggle and loss, and from youthful naivety to a more profound awareness of life and human endurance.

3.2. *Methods of the study*

This study employs a descriptive-comparative framework, integrated with both qualitative and quantitative analyses. The descriptive method is utilized to examine the linguistic realization and structural features of refusal acts in both English and Vietnamese, using bilingual data from Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* and its translation by Vũ Kim Thu.

The comparative method is subsequently applied to investigate cross-linguistic variations and pragmatic equivalence between the source text (ST) and the target text (TT). Specifically, the study focuses on how indirectness is maintained or adapted across the two languages. The research design ensures that each refusal act is analyzed not only as a grammatical unit but also as a pragmatic unit within its situational context.

3.3. *Data collection and data analysis*

The data for this study were systematically collected and analyzed

through a rigorous four-stage procedure to ensure academic validity:

- **Stage 1: Identification of Refusal Instances.** The researcher performed a comprehensive scan of the novel to identify 171 refusal acts, from which 83 pairs of indirect refusal instances were purposively sampled. An utterance was identified as an indirect refusal based on the criteria that the speaker does not use an explicit «No» but instead employs strategies to decline an invitation, request, offer, or suggestion.

- **Stage 2: Classification and Coding.** The collected instances were categorized based on the taxonomy of Beebe et al. (1990). They were coded into two main groups: Conventional Indirect Refusal Acts and Unconventional Indirect Refusal Acts. This stage ensures that the identification of “indirectness” follows an established academic framework.

- **Stage 3: Contrastive Mapping.** Each English refusal was mapped against its Vietnamese equivalent to observe structural changes, lexical choices, and the preservation of illocutionary force.

- **Stage 4: Quantitative Synthesis.** The data were tabulated to calculate the frequency and percentage of each refusal strategy. This allowed for a clear presentation of findings through summarized statistics, addressing the need for empirical evidence in the study’s conclusions.

IV. Research results

4.1. *Means of Conventional Indirect Refusal Acts (CIRA) in English compared with Vietnamese*

Scholars distinguish direct speech acts with literal meaning from indirect ones requiring implicature (Grice, 1975),

which are classified as conventional or unconventional (Searle, 1975; Blum-Kulka, 1987). Based on this framework, this study analyzes conventional indirect refusals in *Gone with the Wind*, accounting for 50 of 171 cases (29.2%).

The distribution and frequency of Conventional Indirect Refusal Acts (CIRA) identified in both English and Vietnamese versions are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Findings of CIRA in English compared with Vietnamese

Means of CIRA		English		Vietnamese equivalents	
		F	P	F	P
Indirect refusal acts expressed by the structures of requests	Indirect refusal acts can be conducted in the form of order	9	18%	11	21.6%
	Indirect refusal acts can be conducted in the form of advice	3	6%	2	3.9%
Indirect refusal acts expressed by interrogative structures	Indirect refusal act is expressed in the form of interrogative structures to deny or reject offers or requests	3	6%	4	7.8%
	Indirect refusal act is expressed by interrogative structures having requesting feature of meaning	2	4%	2	3.9%
	Indirect refusal act is expressed by interrogative structures showing doubt.	7	14%	8	15.7%
	Indirect refusal act is expressed by interrogative structures having exclamatory shade of meaning	1	2%	0	0%
Indirect refusal act is expressed by statements		25	50%	24	47.1%
TOTAL		50	100%	51	100%

Below are instances of typical conventional indirect refusal acts found in the novel.

(1): In this episode, Gerald advises his daughter to consider marrying one of the Tarleton twins so that the two plantations can be combined for economic advantage. He presents the proposal as a rational and beneficial arrangement. Scarlett, however, reacts negatively to this suggestion and displays strong emotional resistance.

When responding to her father's proposal, Scarlett does not produce a direct refusal such as "I refuse" or "I will not marry them." Instead, she interrupts him and exclaims, "*stop treating me like a child*" (Mitchell, 1936/1988, p. 34). Through this imperative structure, she

shifts the focus from the marriage proposal to her dissatisfaction with being patronized.

In the Vietnamese translation, this utterance is rendered as "*Đừng coi con như con nít nữa!*" (Mitchell, 1936/2012, p. 33, as translated by Vũ Kim Thư), which likewise employs a negative imperative marker "Đừng" to convey directive force.

From a pragmatic perspective, the initiating act is a suggestion concerning marriage. The refusal is indirect because it is not expressed through a conventional refusal formula. Instead, Scarlett uses an imperative to terminate the discussion and assert autonomy. Both the source and target texts preserve the directive form, thereby maintaining the illocutionary force of rejection.

(2): In this exchange, Rhett teasingly asks whether he may assume that Scarlett is jealous. His question implicitly invites confirmation and can be interpreted as a provocative attempt to elicit an emotional response.

Instead of accepting the implication, Scarlett immediately rejects it with the negative imperative “*don't presume*” (Mitchell, 1936/1988, p. 210).

In the Vietnamese translation, this utterance is rendered as “*Đừng tưởng bở!*” (Mitchell, 1936/2012, p. 213).

The initiating act takes the form of a provocative question implying jealousy. The refusal is realized indirectly through a negative imperative. Rather than explicitly denying jealousy with a declarative statement, Scarlett employs an order to block Rhett's assumption. The Vietnamese version preserves both the imperative structure and the pragmatic force of rejection.

(3): In this scene, Scarlett suggests that Melanie is free to leave, implying that she should return to Atlanta if she wishes. The utterance functions as a suggestion that opens the possibility of departure.

Melanie, however, refuses to accept this option. Instead of directly stating that she will not leave, she expresses emotional dependence by saying that she would be “*frightened to death without Scarlett*” (Mitchell, 1936/1988, p. 455).

In the Vietnamese translation, this is rendered as “*Không có em chắc chắn là chị sẽ sợ và chết mất*” (Mitchell, 1936/2012, p. 439).

The initiating act is a suggestion of departure. The refusal is realized indirectly through a plea. Rather than explicitly rejecting the suggestion, Melanie emphasizes her fear and emotional

vulnerability to discourage the action. The Vietnamese version similarly conveys the pleading tone and preserves the pragmatic function of refusal.

(4): In this scene, Miss Ellen requests that Gerald dismiss Jonas Wilkerson from his position. The utterance functions as a directive urging immediate action.

Gerald reacts strongly and refuses the request. Instead of directly saying that he will not dismiss the overseer, he responds with a rhetorical question, asking “*where*” he could find another trustworthy overseer (Mitchell, 1936/1988, p. 69).

In the Vietnamese translation, this interrogative is rendered with the equivalent marker “*đâu*” (Mitchell, 1936/2012, p. 71).

The initiating act is a request. The refusal is realized indirectly through an interrogative form. Gerald's question does not genuinely seek information; rather, it functions rhetorically to reject the proposal and highlight its impracticality. The Vietnamese version preserves both the interrogative structure and the pragmatic force of refusal.

4.2. Means of Unconventional Indirect Refusal Acts (UIRA) in English compared with Vietnamese

An indirect nonconventional act involves implicit action through contextual reference. Based on previous theories, this study examines unconventional indirect refusal strategies in English and their Vietnamese equivalents using data from *Gone with the Wind*. Among 171 sentences, 33 (19.3%) contain such refusals.

Regarding Unconventional Indirect Refusal Acts (UIRA), the strategies employed across the two languages are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Findings of UIRA in English compared with Vietnamese

Means of UIRA		English		Vietnamese equivalents	
		F	P	F	P
UIRA is expressed by threats		2	6.1%	2	6.1%
UIRA is expressed by criticism or reproach		5	15.1%	5	15.1%
UIRA is expressed by giving conditions		3	9.1%	2	9.1%
UIRA is expressed by giving promise		7	21.2%	6	21.2%
UIRA is expressed by evasion	Evasion of refusal is conducted by jokes or humor	1	3%	1	3%
	Evasion of refusal is expressed by changing the topic	12	36.4%	12	36.4%
	Evasion of refusal is conducted by repeating part of a request	3	9.1%	3	9.1%
TOTAL		33	100%	33	100%

Typical unconventional indirect refusal acts from the novel are illustrated below.

(5): In this scene, Jonas attempts to re-establish contact by describing his visit as a “friendly call” and suggesting a business discussion. The utterance functions as an offer of renewed friendship and cooperation.

Scarlett rejects this offer through a combination of indirect refusal strategies.

First, she expresses disbelief by echoing the key term “*friends?*” (Mitchell, 1936/1988, p. 509). This repetition serves as an evasive device (UIRA), signaling surprise and distancing herself from the proposed relationship.

Second, she employs an interrogative form, asking “when were we ever friends...?” (Mitchell, 1936/1988, p. 509). This rhetorical question (CIRA) denies the presupposition embedded in Jonas’s offer and rejects the existence of any prior friendship.

Finally, she escalates the refusal through an imperative threat, ordering him to leave the property before she calls for assistance (Mitchell, 1936/1988, p.

509). This directive functions as a forceful preventive act that terminates both the visit and the proposed business interaction.

In the Vietnamese translation (Mitchell, 1936/2012, p. 487), the same sequence is preserved through the repetition “*Bạn?*”, the interrogative denying friendship, and the imperative command to leave. The target text maintains both the structural patterns and the pragmatic force of Scarlett’s escalating refusal.

(6): In this scene, Gerald advises Scarlett that love is not essential before marriage and emphasizes traditional Southern values in choosing a husband. His utterance functions as a suggestion regarding her future marital decision.

Scarlett rejects this viewpoint not by directly refusing, but by criticizing it as “*an Old Country notion*” (Mitchell, 1936/1988, p. 40).

In the Vietnamese translation, this expression is rendered as “*quan niệm cổ hủ bên xứ của bà*” (Mitchell, 1936/2012, p. 42).

The initiating act is a suggestion concerning marriage. The refusal is

realized indirectly through criticism, which constitutes an unconventional indirect refusal strategy. By labeling her father's idea as outdated, Scarlett implicitly rejects both the proposed value system and the marital advice embedded in it. The Vietnamese version maintains the evaluative tone and the pragmatic force of rejection.

(7): In this scene, Melanie asks to keep the child with her and insists on taking care of him despite her fragile health. The utterance functions as a request for permission and assistance.

Scarlett rejects this request indirectly. Instead of explicitly refusing with a clear "no," she responds with the critical expression "*Don't be a goose*" (Mitchell, 1936/1988, p. 408), followed by a warning about Melanie's physical condition.

In the Vietnamese translation, this reaction appears as "*Bộ chị điên hả?*" (Mitchell, 1936/2012, p. 396).

The initiating act is a request. The refusal is realized through criticism and blame, which constitute an unconventional indirect refusal strategy. By questioning Melanie's judgment and implying irrationality, Scarlett dismisses the request without directly rejecting it in explicit terms. Although the English and Vietnamese expressions differ lexically, both convey reproach and function pragmatically as impolite rejections of the request.

(8): In this scene, Scarlett urgently asks Dr. Meade to come and assist with Melanie's childbirth. Her utterance functions as a request for immediate medical help.

Dr. Meade refuses the request. Instead of directly saying that he will not go, he reacts emotionally and responds with the critical question "*Are you crazy?*" (Mitchell, 1936/1988, p. 342), followed by an explanation that he cannot abandon the wounded soldiers under his care.

In the Vietnamese translation, this expression appears as "*Cháu điên hả?*" (Mitchell, 1936/2012, p. 333).

The initiating act is a request. The refusal is realized through criticism, an unconventional, indirect refusal strategy. By questioning Scarlett's judgment, Dr. Meade conveys impatience and moral urgency, thereby denying the request without performing a direct refusal formula. Although shaped by the tense wartime context, both the English and Vietnamese versions preserve the critical tone and pragmatic force of rejection.

To provide a comprehensive overview of the comparative analysis between the English source text (ST) and the Vietnamese target text (TT), the following table summarizes the key pragmatic and structural features identified in the study:

Table 3. Summary of Comparative Features in Indirect Refusals

Feature	English (ST)	Vietnamese (TT)	Pragmatic Force
Predominant Strategy	Statements (CIRA)	Statements (CIRA)	Equivalent
Primary Structural Form	Declarative structures	Declarative structures	Equivalent
Key Difference	Rely on grammatical markers	Rely on lexical particles	Similar
Translation Approach	Original	Pragmatic-based	Preserved

The examples extracted from *Gone with the Wind* illustrate the diverse strategies used to realize indirect refusal acts in both English and Vietnamese. The findings suggest a high degree of pragmatic equivalence between the two languages, as similar communicative functions are achieved through comparable linguistic strategies. While both languages employ analogous structural frameworks, the observed distinctions arise primarily from language-specific grammatical elements, such as the use of modal verbs in English versus pragmatic particles in Vietnamese, rather than from a divergence in pragmatic intent.

V. Conclusion

This study conducts a contrastive analysis of 83 indirect refusal acts extracted from *Gone with the Wind* and its Vietnamese rendition. By employing both quantitative and qualitative methods, the research explores how initiating acts, such as requests, offers, and invitations, influence the selection of refusal strategies. The findings demonstrate that both English and Vietnamese speakers favor indirectness, particularly through the use of statements, as a means to maintain interpersonal harmony and avoid confrontation. While structural variations exist between the two languages, the underlying pragmatic functions remain largely consistent. However, as this research is limited to a single literary source and verbal data, future studies should broaden the corpus and investigate non-verbal strategies to provide a more comprehensive cultural perspective.

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HÀNH VI TỪ CHỐI GIÁN TIẾP TRONG TIẾNG ANH VÀ TIẾNG VIỆT: NGHIÊN CỨU TIỂU THUYẾT “GONE WITH THE WIND” VÀ BẢN DỊCH “CUỐN THEO CHIỀU GIÓ”

Thái Vân Anh¹

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này tiến hành phân tích so sánh các hành vi từ chối gián tiếp trong tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt, dựa trên tác phẩm *Gone with the Wind* và bản dịch tiếng Việt *Cuốn theo chiều gió*. Vận dụng lý thuyết hành động ngôn từ, nghiên cứu khảo sát 83 trường hợp từ chối gián tiếp, bao gồm cả dạng điển hình và không điển hình, nhằm nhận diện các đặc điểm ngôn ngữ và những nét tương đồng giữa hai ngôn ngữ. Kết quả cho thấy cả tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt chủ yếu sử dụng cấu trúc trần thuật, tiếp theo là cấu trúc nghi vấn và cấu trúc cầu khiến, với sự phân bố nhìn chung khá tương đồng. Những khác biệt được ghi nhận chủ yếu xuất phát từ yếu tố cấu trúc của ngôn ngữ hơn là từ sự khác biệt về mặt ngữ dụng. Bản dịch tiếng Việt đã bảo toàn hiệu quả tính gián tiếp và mục đích giao tiếp của văn bản gốc, qua đó đóng góp đáng kể cho lĩnh vực ngữ dụng học đối chiếu và nghiên cứu dịch thuật.

Từ khóa: hành vi ngôn ngữ, từ chối, từ chối gián tiếp, *Gone with the wind*, *Cuốn theo chiều gió*.

¹ Trường Đại học Mở Hà Nội, Hà Nội, Việt Nam