THE SPEECH ACT OF APOLOGIZING IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE[6]

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Abstract

The speech act of apologies has attracted the attention of numerous scholars who have investigated different aspects of apologies in numerous languages. The paper at hand offers a review of some of the key findings regarding expressing apologies and it brings forth the specificities of the speech act of apologies in the English language in particular. For the purposes of this study, the insights and findings obtained and presented in a number of studies were analysed and compared. Thus, in addition to inspecting the speech act of apologizing more closely from the prism of the linguistic strategies people employ to express an apology (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Trosborg, 1995, and Ajmer, 1996), the paper also sheds some light on the influence of different social variables such as gender, social power, social distance and age on the use of apologies in the English language (Holmes, 1989; Ogiermann, 2007; Lynch, 2013, and Deutschmann, 2003).
Keywords: apologies, strategies, gender, age, social power, social distance

Introduction

Since its inception in the 1950s to this very day Austin's Speech Act Theory (1969) has been at the core of pragmatics. Hence, not surprisingly, the speech acts, which Austin's disciple, Searle (1976) neatly classified as representatives, declarations, commissives, directives and expressives (expletives) are still among the most researched topics in the realm of pragmatics. The expletives, which indicate the speaker's attitude or feelings towards something/somebody in a given context and which include a wide range of speech acts such as complimenting, expressing gratitude, surprise, condolences, apologies, etc., are the focus of interest in this study. More precisely, the study at hand deals with one expressive speech act in particular – the speech act of expressing apologies. This speech act has attracted the attention of many scholars and, as a result, it has been widely investigated in numerous world languages.

The aim of this paper is to look into the findings regarding the speech act of apologies in the English language, primarily, from the perspective of the linguistic strategies people use when they express apologies (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Trosborg, 1995, and Ajmer, 1996), as well as the influence of various social factors such as gender, age, social distance and social power on the use of apologies (Holmes, 1989; Ogiermann, 2007; Lynch, 2013, and Deutschmann, 2003). The research questions that we attempt to answer by reviewing the findings and insights gained in previous studies on the speech act of apologies in English are as follows: "*Do men apologize more than women?*"; "*Which apologizing strategies are preferred by men and which are preferred by women?*"; "*Do men or women apologize more to those with equal or unequal power?*"; "*Do man or women apologize more to intimates or to strangers?*", and "*Do younger or older speakers apologize more often?*".

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[6] Specialized paper

The speech act of apologizing

Apologies as an expressive speech act express the speaker's attitude or emotion towards a proposition. In Leech's terms (1983: 104), the act of apologizing is a convivial speech act, the goal of which coincides with the social goal of maintaining harmony between the speaker and the hearer. Apologies are frequently used in daily conversations. Since apologies have the effect of paying off a debt and compensating the victim for the harm done by the offence (Searle, 1969), people resort to apologizing whenever they violate a social norm by doing or not doing certain action that causes offence to the hearer (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983: 20). In other words, when a person has performed an act (action or utterance), or failed to do so, which has offended another person, and for which he/she can be held responsible, the offender needs to apologize. The act of apologizing requires an action or an utterance which is intended to "set things right". More specifically, people apologize for two major categories of reasons – either due to feelings of empathy, shame and guilt, or to avoid abandonment, punishment or retribution. Moreover, people in general expect apologies to heal grievances committed against them, including physical harm, or threat of harm, such as loss, damage or threat to material goods, or psychological harm like violations of rights or freedom.

Goffman (1971: 90), too, discusses apologies in the light of the distinction he makes between positive and negative rituals or interchanges. Positive, or "supportive" interchanges arise out of a need for mutual support, while negative dialogues occur when infractions have been made. In the case of the former, an offer should be received with a show of gratitude, whereas in the case of the latter, the offender has to provide remedial accounts and assurances, and a "remedial interchange occurs". Thus, apologies are distinguished from other convivial acts, such as thanking and congratulating, by their remedial function. Furthermore, Goffman (1971) distinguishes between two types of apologies – those playing a disarming function, and those playing a remedial one. Apologies produced for their disarming (softening the face threat) function are used when a speaker realises that the speech act which follows could be inconvenient and potentially "a violation of the hearer's right" (Goffman, 1971: 114). The remedial apologies, on the other hand, are produced when a transgression has been made and a restoration of balance is needed – they are retrospective, self-demeaning for the speaker, and supportive towards the hearer (Goffman, 1971).

Apologies and politeness

According to the Politeness Theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) apologies are acts that express negative politeness, intended to have a positive effect on the hearer by signalling to him/her that their independence and free will are respected by the speaker. In fact, while it is a face saving act (FSA) for the hearer (H), apologizing is at the same time a face-threatening act (FTA) for the speaker (S), i.e. for the one who apologizes (Brown and Levinson 1987). That apologizing is considered as an attempt to maintain H's face and therefore it is an inherent face-saving act for H has been confirmed by other researchers as well (Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper, 1989, etc.).

Holmes (1995), too, defines remedial apologies as negative politeness based on the fact that their purpose is redressive. However, she extended the question of face benefit to the speaker as well; she claims that apologies are face-supporting acts for both the hearer and the speaker since they mutually benefit from such an action. Thus, Holmes (1995) points out that despite the fact that apologies are utilised when the hearer's face is damaged, and thereby they are considered as negative politeness strategies (Brown and Levinson, 1987), some of the elements which are included within the realisation of the speech act of apologies might focus somehow on speaker's positive face needs as well.

Apologizing strategies

Apologizing is a complex speech act as a number of apologizing strategies are at play in the realization of this speech act (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Trosborg, 1995; and Ajmer, 1996). Thus, according to Cohen & Olshtain (1981: 119-125) there are five strategies for making an apology:

1. **An expression of an apology**. The speaker uses a word, expression, or sentence containing a verb such as *sorry*, *excuse*, *forgive*, or *apologize*. An expression of an apology can be intensified whenever the apologizer feels the need to do so by using degree words or degree modifiers which serve to show the degree or the exact value of the quality of the item they modify (Mendez-Naya, 2008) (e.g., "*I'm really/ very sorry*").

2. **Acknowledgement of responsibility**. The offender recognizes his/her fault in causing the infraction. The degree of such recognition on the part of the apologizer can be placed on a scale. The highest level of intensity is an acceptance of the blame: "*It's my fault*". At a somewhat lower level would be an expression of self-deficiency: "*I was confused/I didn't see/ You are right*". At a still lower level would be the expression of lack of intent: "*I didn't mean to*", and an implicit expression of responsibility: "*I was sure I had given you the right directions*". Finally, the apologizer may not accept the blame at all, in which case there may be a denial of responsibility: "*It wasn't my fault*" or even blaming of the hearer: "*It's your own fault*".

3. **An explanation or account**. The speaker describes the situation which caused him/her to commit the offense and which is used by this speaker as an indirect way of apologizing. The explanation is intended to set things right.

4. **An offer of repair.** The apologizer makes a bid to carry out an action or provide payment for some kind of damage resulting from his/her infraction. For example: If someone is late for an appointment with a friend s/he might say something like, "*How can I make it up to you -- why don't I buy you lunch on Friday*?*" Or someone who fails to make it to an appointment might say "*Would you be willing to reschedule the meeting*?".

5. **A promise of non-recurrence**. The apologizer commits him/herself to not having the offense happen again, which is again situation-specific and less frequent than the other strategies.

Trosborg (1995) also explores the strategies for apologizing and offers a classification which is slightly more elaborate than the one proposed by Cohen & Olshtain (1981). Trosborg (1995) suggests that there are seven strategies with which one can apologize: 1) minimizing the degree of offence; 2) acknowledgment of responsibility; 3) explanation or account; 4) expression of apology; 5) expressing concern for hearer; 6) promise of forbearance, and 7) offer of repair. In addition to these strategies, Trosborg (1995) also mentions another strategy in which the speaker refuses to take responsibility – *0 strategy* or *opting out*. More specifically, according to Trosborg (1995) a denial of responsibility can take on five different forms:

1. **Explicit denial of responsibility** – the complainee explicitly denies that an offence has occurred or that he/she is in any way responsible for it.

2. **Implicit denial of responsibility** – the complainee evades responsibility, for example by ignoring a complaint, by talking about something else.

3. **Justification** – the complainee provides arguments in which he/she seeks to persuade the complainer that no blame can be attached to him/her. Either the complainable has not occurred at all, or it can be fully justified.

4. **Blaming someone else** – the complainee seeks to evade responsibility by blaming someone else. He/she may blame a third party or even the complainer him/herself.

5. **Attacking the complainer** – if the complainer lacks an adequate defence for his/her own behaviour, he/she may choose to attack the complainer instead.

The most elaborate classification of the apologizing strategies is offered by Ajmer (1996). In fact, Ajmer (1996) outlines thirteen apologizing strategies: (1) explicit apologizing, (2) offering an apology, (3) acknowledging a debt of apology, (4) expressing regret, (5) demanding forgiveness, (6) explicitly requesting for the hearer's forgiveness, (7) giving an explanation or account, (8) self-denigration or self-reproach, (9) minimizing responsibility, (10) expressing emotion, (11) acknowledging responsibility, (12) promising forbearance from a similar offending act, and (13) offering redress. In comparison with the two previously mentioned classifications, this classification is clearly more detailed and offers strategies not mentioned before, such as for instance, self-denigration or self-reproach, expressing regret, expressing emotion, acknowledging a debt of apology, etc.

The influence of gender on the use of apologies in the English language

Given the fact that people display distinct linguistic behaviour in different contexts and under the influence of a variety of distinct social factors, the second part of this research was directed towards an analysis of the findings and insights of studies which have tackled the impact of gender, social power, social distance and age on the use of apologies.

In order to address the first two research questions: "*Do men or women use more apologies?*" and "*Which apologizing strategies are preferred by men and which are preferred by women?*" we sought answers in two studies: Janet Holmes's "*Sex Differences in Apologies: One Aspect of Communicative Competence*" (1989) and Eva Ogiermann's "*Gender-based differences in English apology realisations*" (2007).

Taking as a starting point the stereotype that apologies are more frequently connected with feminine behaviour and that excessive apologizing, particularly the use of the word "sorry," and self-deprecation are typical of women's behaviour, Holmes (1989) conducted a corpus-based research focusing on sex differences in expressing the speech act of apology. Her corpus consisted of 183 remedial interchanges, i.e. apologies and apology responses collected over a wide range of contexts with the assistance of New Zealand students. What Holmes (1989) found were significant sex differences in the distribution of apologies. More specifically, the results showed that women gave 74.5% of all the apologies recorded and received 73.3% of them. Thus, this research suggests that New Zealand women apologize more than New Zealand men do, and they are apologized to more frequently than men are. Furthermore, the results indicate that apologies were most frequent among women, while apologies between males were relatively rare (only 8.5%). It is surprising that apologies to males were so much less frequent than apologies to females (26.7% versus 73.3%). What is also really interesting is the fact that males apologized twice more to females than to males (17% versus 8.5%).

In this research Holmes (1989) also compared the strategies that the participants used in the 183 remedial exchanges in the corpus. For this purpose four broad basic categories of apology strategies were used, with a number of subcategories where required. In many cases the apologist used more than one strategy as part of the overall apology. The results showed that there is little difference in the number of *explicit apology strategies* used by women and men, though men appear to use formal sub-strategies more often than women. The overall proportion of *explanations* included in the apologies was also almost identical for the two sexes. There was little difference in the likelihood that women rather than men will *acknowledge responsibility* for the offence, though it is perhaps worth noting that only

women used the sub-strategies of *expressing lack of intent* and *recognizing the other's right to an apology*. With such a small number of apologies involved this may be due to pure chance, but again it is suggestive. Finally, *promises of forbearance* are used by both sexes with numbers too small to indicate anything more.

To verify the finding that women do apologize more than men further, Ogiermann's (2007) research was also taken into consideration, which offers a contrastive analysis of apologies formulated by British women and men. The data used in the study were collected by means of a written questionnaire featuring 12 scenarios, all of which were intended to elicit apologies. 40 male respondents and 40 female ones were included in the study, and the corpus of apologies gathered amounted to a total of 960 responses. The results here as well show that women are more willing to apologise and do so more effusively than men.

Ogiermann (2007) also compared the apology strategies that male and female participants used. The results showed that female subjects applied all strategies more frequently than male subjects, with *explanation* showing the smallest difference. The most significant differences are found in the distributions of *taking on responsibility* and *promise of forbearance*, both of which are about 60% more common in female data. *Promise of forbearance* is linked to *taking on responsibility* since it is a manner of accepting responsibility for one's future actions. Furthermore, males used *adverbial intensifiers* much less frequently to intensify the force of their apologies than females. Female responses with a high frequency of intensifying devices can be viewed as an attempt to make their apologies appear more genuine.

To sum up, even though both studies are based on a completely different research methods and have been conducted in completely different English speaking countries, they both show that women apologize more than men, and as far as the apologizing strategies are concerned only small differences were spotted. Thus, for instance, in Holmes's (1989) study men were more likely to *take on responsibility,* but in Ogiermann's study (2007) women were generally more willing *to assume responsibility* than men.

The influence of age on the use of the speech act of apologies in English

In order to inspect how the social factor age influences the use of apologies in English and to provide an answer to the following question: "*Do younger or older speakers apologize more often?*", we drew on the findings obtained from the following two studies: "*A corpus-based analysis of Presence of Sorry in Irish English Discourse*" by Sara Lynch (2013) and "*Apologizing in British English*" by Mats Deutschmann (2003).

The former study is based on two corpora: The International Corpus of English (ICE) and SPICE corpus. Lynch (2013) divides the participants according to their age in five categories: 18-25; 26-33; 34-41; 42-49; 50+. The analysis of the findings suggests that younger people apologize more than older people since the highest frequency of apologies occurred within the age category 18-25 years old, which was twice as much as in the age category 50+.

Deutschmann's (2003) study is based on The British National Corpus (BNC) which employs relatively fine scales when describing the social characteristics of the speakers. Thus, there are six age groups in BNC (0-14, 14-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-59 and 60+), but Deutschmann (2003), for the purposes of his study, lumped them up into three age groups: 0-24-year-olds, 25-44-year-olds and 45+- year-olds. The results of this study also pointed to differences between the different age groups with a clear tendency on the part of younger speakers to apologize more often than older speakers. The explanation that Deutschmann (2003) provides is that younger speakers were acting in a different social setting than the older speakers, since many of the apologies uttered by these younger speakers (about 20%) were made during parent/child interactions and evidence from the corpus suggests that this type of dyadic interchange encourages the adherence to formal politeness norms. Parents expect their

children to say *sorry, please,* and *thank you* and 'encourage' them to do so. Deutschmann (2003) further adds that the prevalence of parent/child interactions in the corpus may partly explain why 25-44-year-olds produced relatively high apology rates. Also, parents of minors were found in this age category, and 10% of the apologies uttered by this speaker group were made by individuals acting in the parental role. This is in line with the findings presented in Gleason's study (1980) on parents' teaching of politeness formulae such as *please* and *thank you,* which showed that parents, especially mothers, were aware that they were role models and adapted their speech accordingly.

Irrespective of the possible reasons behind these findings, both studies reviewed for the purposes of this paper confirm the contention that younger English speaking individuals apologize more frequently than their older counterparts.

The influence of social power and social distance on the speech act of apologies in English

Finally, in order to inspect how social power and social distance influence the speech act of apology and to address the following questions: "*Do men or women apologize more to those with equal or unequal power?*" and "*Do man or women apologize more to intimates or to strangers?*", we relied again on the findings presented in Holmes's study "*Sex Differences in Apologies: One Aspect of Communicative Competence*" (1989), and Ogiermann's study "*Gender-based differences in English apology realisations*" (2007).

As it was noted earlier Holmes (1989) and Ogiermann's (2007) studies are different in terms of the methods of compiling the corpus and the countries were the research was conducted. Still both studies target native English speakers and investigate the speech act of apologies.

In Holmes's (1989) research, when it comes to social power, most of the apologies occurred between equals and both sexes directed more apologies upwards than downwards. However, women apologized more to those with equal power than men, and men apologize more to those with unequal power than women. As to the other social variable – social distance, the results were very surprising as both men and women tend to apologize mostly to strangers. As in Holmes's research, in apologies involving strangers, Ogiermann's (2007) research also shows that, men and women were equally inclined to apologize. Women, however, formulated more elaborate apologies in low distance scenarios, whereas men attached more importance to apologies in high distance situations. The social power variable, on the other hand, in Ogiermann's (2007) research has not influenced the examined apology behaviour as much as the variable of social distance.

Conclusion

Although it cannot be claimed that the insights discussed in this paper regarding the use of the speech act of apologies in the English language are the only reliable and valid ones, still they are quite indicative and bring forth some salient features of this specific speech act.

On the basis of literature review conducted for the purposes of this study it can be concluded that English language users have a wide array of apologizing strategies at their disposal which range from expressing explicit apologies, regret, self-deprecation, to offers of repair, explanations, to assuming the responsibility, etc. Also, previous studies verify the influence of key social factors such as gender, age, social power and distance on the use of apologies in English. Thus, although women seem to be more prone towards apologizing than man, no noteworthy differences are spotted in terms of the preferred choice of apologies on the part of male and female native English speakers. As far as the age of speakers is concerned, different studies show that younger English speakers tend to apologize more frequently than older

speakers. Renouf and Kehoe's (2002: 215, in Lynch, 2013) observation that "humans are socially conditioned to be polite from an early age, but gradually learn to use alternative strategies when these are associated with a higher rate of success" seems to be completely in line with these findings which suggest that younger speakers are much more prone to using apologies as a means of politeness than older speakers. Finally, as far as social distance is concerned both men and women tend to apologize more to strangers, with women formulating more elaborate apologies in low distance scenarios, whereas men attached more importance to apologies in high distance situations. As to the variable of social power, although it has been suggested that social power does not influenced the apologizing behaviour as much as the variable of social distance, still studies show that most of the apologies occur between equals and both sexes direct more apologies upwards than downwards.

As social, political and economic circumstances worldwide have been changing drastically in the recent years in general, mainly under the influence of the 'new normal' imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, new research on apologies in English, and in the other world languages for that matter, which will reveal new aspects of this expressive speech act is clearly more than welcome.

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