



Tunisian university students' choice of apology strategies in a discourse completion task

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ABSTRACT

The present study is an investigation of the use of the speech act of apology by Tunisian university students. A hundred students whose mother tongue was Tunisian Arabic were randomly selected for the study. Discourse completion test (DCT) was used to elicit apology strategies by the subjects. The findings suggested that Tunisian university students used statement of remorse most in three main situations where the offended is: (i) a close friend, (ii) old in age and (iii) having the power to affect the offender's future. A noticeable percentage of subjects denied responsibility for the offence and shifted responsibility to other sources using accounts. Other less used strategies were: self-castigation, offer of repair, blaming the victim, invoking Allah's name, intensification, minimization, and humour. This work can have implications in intercultural communication.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Statement of the problem

This study attempts to investigate the apology strategies Tunisian university students choose to use in Tunisian Arabic, which is their mother tongue. There is a wealth of literature on apology in Western languages (Bergman and Kasper, 1993; Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984; Brown and Levinson, 1987; Coulmas, 1981; Fraser, 1981; Goody, 1978; Holmes, 1989; House, 1988; Trosborg, 1987, 1995; Márquez, 2000; Lazare, 2005). However, few studies have dealt with four varieties of Arabic (El-Khalil, 1998; Hussein and Hammouri, 1998; Bataineh and Bataineh, 2008; Soliman, 2003; Nureddeen, 2008; Alfattah, 2010), namely Jordanian, Egyptian, Sudanese, and Yemeni Arabic. The researcher, however, has not come upon any studies on the Tunisian dialect. This gap has left room for further research into reported apology strategies in a Tunisian context. I should say, from the outset, that the dialect is by no means considered a force or an agent itself. Rather, the agent is the culture which is manifested through the dialect. Respondents' reactions to the apologies are beyond the scope of this paper.

1.2. Purpose and significance of the study

This study attempts to provide insights into Tunisian university students' use of the speech act of apology. This study is significant because, to the best of the author's knowledge, it is the first attempt to shed light on apology strategies used in Tunisian Arabic. The main research question to investigate is what apology strategies speakers of Tunisian Arabic would choose to use in particular situations.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Background

Before and in the early 1980s in second language acquisition (SLA), the focus was on linguistic competence (Ellis, 1985). The dominant view was that in language teaching exclusive attention had to be paid to phonology, morphology, syntax, and to a lower degree, lexis; and the theoretical basis of this view was drawn from the teachings of Contrastive Analysis and the Chomskyan notion of linguistic competence. In 1972, Hymes suggested that Chomsky's mere theoretical and idealized linguistic competence fell short of accounting for aspects most pertinent to language use, suggesting the term 'communicative competence' as it included social and referential aspects of the language.

Later on, researchers in applied linguistics (Canale and Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; Bachman, 1990; Celce-Murcia et al., 1995) took up the notion of 'communicative competence' and attempted to taxonomize it into various components. Canale and Swain (1980) listed the following four components of communicative competence:

- *Grammatical competence*: Knowledge of lexis, morphology, syntax, phonology, and semantics.
- *Sociolinguistic competence*: The ability to understand and interpret social meanings of utterances taking into consideration situational and contextual factors of language use.
- *Strategic competence*: The ability to overcome communication problems.
- *Discourse competence*: Formal cohesion and semantic coherence.

This model, however, was criticized for the absence of an explicit connection between its subcomponents (Alcon, 2000; Jorda, 2005)—a connection necessary for a deeper understanding of communicative competence. Bachman's (1990) model explicitly listed pragmatic competence as a basic component or a sub-concept of communicative competence. According to Bachman (1990), pragmatic competence needed to be acquired along with other components of communicative competence: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. More recently, seminal research has argued for the "mutual dependence between pragmatic competence and cultural competence" (Meir, 2003:185) entailing that a knowledge of culture is fundamental in a face to face interaction when meaning is at stake. The point I would like to make is that misunderstandings in intercultural communications can be triggered by communication style differences, hence the need for studies on inter- and cross-cultural pragmatics issues such as apologizing.

2.2. Apologies

Apology is defined as "a speech act addressed to V's face-needs and intended to remedy an offence for which A takes responsibility, and thus to restore equilibrium between A and V (where A is the apologist, and V is the victim or person offended)" (Holmes, 1989:196). It is intended to elicit forgiveness or pardon and to "provide support for the hearer who was actually or potentially malaffected by a violation" (Olshtain, 1989:156–7). An apology is an act that saves the hearer's face but threatens the speaker's face because as an addresser, s/he shows a willingness to humble her/himself.

Apologies are expressive illocutionary acts (Trosborg, 1995), convivial in nature (Leech, 1983) but they can be effective even when they are not sincere (Lazare, 2005) in that they are emotionally satisfying (Nobles, 2008).

2.3. Apology strategies

For apologies to be convincing, the addresser has to use apology strategies. Fraser (1981:263) listed nine strategies ranging from most direct (e.g. I hereby apologize. . .) to less direct (e.g. that was my fault). The number of these apologizing strategies, however, was reduced to 5 by Olshtain and Cohen (1983:22–23). Trosborg (1987:150–152; 1995:395–399) suggested another set of apology strategies. Table 1 below lists the apology strategies of each of these researchers. As can be

Table 1

Sets of apology strategies as listed by the researchers in question.

| Fraser (1981) | Olshtain and Cohen (1983) | Trosborg (1987–1995) | |
|---|---|---|--|
| | | Trosborg (1987) | Trosborg (1995) |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Announcing the apology – Stating one's obligation to apologize – Offering to apologize – Requesting acceptance – Expressing regret – Requesting forgiveness – Acknowledging responsibility – Promising forbearance – Offering redress | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – An expression of an apology which usually contains the verb apologize, forgive, excuse, pardon, or be sorry – An explanation or account of the situation – An acknowledgement of responsibility – An offer of repair – A promise of forbearance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Minimizing the degree of offence either by blaming someone else or by discussing its preconditions – An acknowledgement of responsibility – Implicit or explicit explanation or account of what occurred – Offer of repair – Promise of forbearance – Expressing concern | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Minimizing the degree of offence – Acknowledgement of responsibility – Explanation or account – Expression of apology |

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