

A sociopragmatic study of apology speech act realization patterns in Persian

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Abstract

This research study aimed at extracting and categorizing the range of strategies used in performing the speech act of apologizing in Persian. The first objective was to see if Persian apologies were formulaic in pragmatic structure as in English apologies are said to be [Holmes, J., 1990. Apologies in New Zealand English. *Lang. Soc.* 19, 155–200; Wolfson, N., Judd, E. (Eds.), 1983. *Sociolinguistics and Language Acquisition*. Rowley, Mass, Newbury House].

The other issue explored in this study was the investigation of the effect of the values assigned to the two context-external variables of social distance and social dominance on the frequency of the apology intensifiers. To this end, Persian apologetic utterances were collected via a Discourse Completion Test (DCT). The research findings indicated that Persian apologies are as formulaic in pragmatic structures. Also, the values assigned to the two context-external variables were found to have significant effect on the frequency of the intensifiers in different situations.

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1. Introduction

Austin (1962) and Searle (1969, 1975) claim that speech acts operate by universal pragmatic principles, whereas, Green (1975) and Wierzbicka (1985) claim for the existence of possible variations in verbalization and conceptualization across languages. Due to the great controversy existing among the linguists and philosophers in viewing language universals and the importance of such notions in the formation of a language theory in general and second language acquisition theory in particular (Blum-Kulka, 1983), a good number of empirical studies have been conducted across different languages which have sometimes confirmed the idea of universality of pragmatic principles and on other occasions have ended up in contrary findings to such claims (Wolfson et al., 1989; Hymes, 1967; Olshtain and Cohen, 1983; Manes and Wolfson, 1981; Beebe and

Cummings, 1996; Hinkel, 1997; Kasper, 2000; Yuan, 2001; Markee, 2002; Rintell and Mitchell, 1989; Duranti, 1997; Golato, 2000; Billmyer and Varghese, 2000, Stockwell, 2002; Boxer, 2002).

Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP) project initiated in 1982 (see Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) was an attempt to analyze speech acts (in this case requests and apologies) across a range of languages and cultures aiming at investigating the existence of any possible pragmatic universals and their characteristics. Concerning apologies, in the CCSARP project, little variation was found in the use of the five main apologies across languages studied. Olshtain (1989, p. 171) points out that the CCSRP data showed “surprising similarities in IFID [Illocutionary Force Indicating Device] and expression of responsibility preferences”. In other words, in most situations participants expressed an overt apology and took responsibility for the offence. However, Olshtain and Cohen (1983), comparing apology situations in English and Hebrew, pointed out that an apology in Hebrew is less

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likely to include the two strategies: “an offer of repair” and “a promise of forbearance” than in English. Clearly, substantive claims about the universality of pragmatic principles across cultures and languages should await further research applied in as many new contexts as possible. As Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) also point out, studies of speech acts need to move away from western languages and include as many non-western languages and cultures in their scope of study as possible.

The present study is a response to such a call. It intends to extract and categorize the range of strategies in the speech act of apologizing in Persian (a non-western culture) and to see if Persian apologies are as formulaic in pragmatic structures as English apologies have shown to be (Holmes, 1990; Wolfson and Judd, 1983). According to CCSARP coding scheme, an apologizer may wish to intensify his/her apology by using a number of formulas. Therefore, this study intends to extract and categorize the range of strategies as well as the apology intensifiers.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

One hundred students (50 males and 50 females) took part in this study. The participants were all native Persian-speaking university students studying in different academic fields at Isfahan University. The participants' mean age was 24.14 for the male and 21.68 for the female students. The rationale behind choosing university students was that in most of the studies carried out on speech acts, the participants had been university students; thus, for the sake of comparability of the results of this studies with the findings of the other studies carried out around the world, it was decided to collect the data from a sample of a similar population i.e., university students.

2.2. Data collection

The data in this study was collected through a controlled elicitation method called open questionnaire which is a modified version of “Discourse Completion Test” (hereafter DCT) used in CCSARP project (Blum-Kulka, 1982).

The DCT used in this study included a brief description of the situation and a one participant dialogue. In other words, the questionnaire included 10 fixed discourse situations, which a university student is likely to encounter in his/her daily language interactions. Each situation consists of a brief description of the addressee's characteristics important to this study, namely, social distance (degree of familiarity between the interlocutors), social dominance (the relative degree of the social power of the interlocutors over each other), and finally the offence being committed. The students reading each situation were then supposed to identify themselves with the persons committing the offenses in the situations and write down their normal language reaction in such situations (see Appendix A).

The two main social factors specifically included in the situations, i.e., social distance and social dominance, were selected because they have been found to play a decisive role in the speech act realization patterns within the cross cultures (Ervin-Tripp, 1976; Brown and Levinson, 1989; Goody, 1978; Blum-Kulka, 1982). Following Van-Ek's (1976) dichotomy of –distance/+distance, the social distance perceived between the interlocutors in our study was also a binary valued variable. That is to say, the interlocutors either had a close relationship (–distance) or hardly knew each other (+distance).

The social dominance or the power relationship between the participants in the study was assigned three values: **status equal** (e.g. student–student), **speaker dominance** (e.g. student-his/her younger sister or brother) and **hearer dominance** (e.g. student–professor).

Based on the above-mentioned considerations, it was decided to have two situations for each combination of the two variables: social distance and social dominance.

Unfortunately, since it is difficult to find situations in which university students clearly have social dominance over their interlocutors, it was decided to include only situations in which university students had dominance over a younger member of their family, namely, their younger sister or brother (see situation no 5 and 10 in Appendix A). Fig. 1 schematizes the distribution of item characteristics.

2.3. Coding scheme and data analysis

The collected data in this study was coded on the basis of the coding scheme developed by CCSARP with some modification (BlumKulka and House, 1989). Based on the CCSARP coding scheme, the unit of analysis is the utterance or sequences of utterances produced by the respondents to complete the test items in the DCT. Each utterance is then studied and analyzed into the following

Setting	Dominance	Distance	Sex	Frequency
University	+H.Dom	+Dis	S/D	2
University	+H.Dom	-Dis	S/D	2
University	=Dom	-Dis	S	2
University	=Dom	+Dis	S/D	2
Home	+S.Dom	-Dis	S/D	2

Key:

+H.Dom=Hearer Dominance

=Dom=Speaker Dominance

+Dist=Distance

-Dist=No Distance

S/D=Same and Different

Fig. 1. The distribution of item characteristics.

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