Apology strategies in Persian

Mohammad Shariati [a], Fariba Chamani [b,*]

[a] Azad University of Jiroft, Iran
[b] Hormozgan University, Iran

ABSTRACT

The present study is a research into the frequency, combination, and sequential position of apology strategies in Persian. The investigation is based on a corpus of 500 naturally-occurring apology exchanges, collected through an ethnographic method of observation. The results revealed that (1) *explicit expression of apology* with a *request for forgiveness* (*bebaxšid*) was the most common apology strategy in Persian. (2) The aforementioned strategy together with *acknowledgement of responsibility* formed the most frequent combination of apology strategies in this language. (3) The same set of apology strategies used in other investigated languages was common in Persian; however, preferences for using these strategies appeared to be culture-specific.

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1. Introduction

Different areas of use and interpretation of language, with regard to meaning and pragmatic functions, are studied under the general headings of semantics and pragmatics. However despite many attempts to draw a distinction between semantics and pragmatics, there seems to be no general agreement as to what the distinction really amounts to. While a sharp distinction between these two areas seems very difficult to make, most of the topics investigated in these areas are categorized under pragmatics.

Communicative acts or simply speech acts have proved to be one of the attractive areas in pragmatics and sociolinguistics. With a more inclusive view of speech as a form of communication, one may start with the analysis of speech act in terms of its components or the functions. This can, partially, make up for basic limitations of theoretical linguists of the past who considered sentence as the largest unit of analysis, and referential meaning as the only relevant sort of meaning.

However, while speech acts operate by universal pragmatic principles (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969, 1975; Leech, 1983), they vary in conceptualization and verbalization across cultures and languages (Green, 1975; Wierzbicka, 1985). Thus, to establish universal features of speech acts, it seems necessary to investigate their typical realization pattern within many languages. The rationale is confirmed in the following quotation: "If claims for the pragmatic universality are to approximate any type of validity, they should be based on the empirical investigation of many more and diverse languages" (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989:8).

The present study is, hence, an attempt to explore the realization of apology speech act, which tends to be more situation-dependent and less frequent than other speech acts (Overfield, 1995). It is also to examine the frequency, combination, and

sequential position of apology strategies in Persian to see how the universality of apologies should be treated in this language.

2. Review of literature

One of the speech acts that has long attracted the attention of scholars dealing with social and cultural patterns in language is apologizing. Speech act theory defines and classifies prototypical apology based on the felicity conditions for its realization that includes an apologetic performative verb and an expression of regret (Suszczyńska, 1999). Apology is also defined according to the functions it may serve. For instance, it is taken as a remedial work used to remedy a real or virtual offense to maintain or restore social harmony (Goffman, 1971), or as a negative politeness strategy that indicates S (speaker)'s "reluctance to impinge on H (hearer)'s negative face" to save the hearer's face needs (Brown and Levinson, 1987:187). Furthermore, it is defined as a "speech act set of maximal potential semantic formulas, any one of which can act as a minimal element to represent apology" (Olshtain and Cohen, 1983:20).

Apologies have been mostly investigated in the field of cross-cultural pragmatics (Deutschmann, 2003) to compare the use of apology speech act between native English speakers and native speakers of other languages like Hebrew (Cohen and Olshtain, 1981; Olshtain, 1989), Spanish (Garcia, 1989), Danish (Kasper, 1989; Trosborg, 1987, 1995), German (House, 1989), Austrian (Meier, 1992, 1996), Egyptian (Soliman, 2003), and Persian (Eslami-Rasekh, 2004).

Most of these cross-cultural studies have been carried out within CCSARP (Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Pattern) project "to compare across languages the realization patterns of two speech acts – requests and apologies – and to establish the similarities and differences between native and non-native speakers' realization patterns in these two acts" (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984:196). The results were to be used in communicative language teaching.

Within CCSARP project American English, Australian English, British English, Canadian French, German, Hebrew, and Russian were examined, based on the elicited data obtained through role-play, from four hundred university students for each language, and coded according to CCSARP coding manual (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984). The results of this project demonstrated "surprising similarities in IFID [Illocutionary Force Indicating Device] and expression of responsibility preferences" (Olshtain, 1989:171).

Inter-language apology studies, however, generally investigate the production and perception of apologies by non-native language learners. They have so far compared the use of apologies in English with other languages including German (Meier, 1997; Vollmer and Olshtain, 1989), Polish and Hungarian (Suszczyńska, 1999), Spanish (Uruguay, Marquez Reiter, 2000), Russian (Olshtain and Cohen, 1983), and Hebrew (Olshtain and Cohen, 1983; Olshtain, 1989).

In addition, several monocultural apology studies have been carried out that include American English (Edmondson, 1981; Fraser, 1981; Wolfson et al., 1989; Tannen, 1994; Mattson Bean and Johnstone, 1994), New Zealand English (Holmes, 1989, 1990), British English (Owen, 1983; Aijmer, 1995, 1996; Deutschmann, 2003), German (Vollmer and Olshtaion, 1989), Japanese (Ide, 1998), Akan (O'beng, 1999), Lombok, Indonesia (Wouk, 2006), Jordanian (Fahmi Bataineh and Fahmi Bataineh, 2006), and Persian (Tajvidi, 2000; Pejman Fard, 2004; Afghari, 2007).

The studies mentioned above have mostly investigated western languages. They have defined apology against the background of the western socio-cultural system, which may not be the same in other cultural contexts (Coulmas, 1981; Liebersohn et al., 2004). Furthermore, ethnographic observation has been less applied for data collection while in a majority of research, DCT or role-play has been used.

Therefore, this study intends to explore and categorize the range of strategies used to apologize in Persian (a *non-western* language). It is also an attempt to see if Persian apologies are as formulaic as English apologies have shown to be (Holmes, 1990; Wolfson and Judd, 1983). To do so, it seeks to find answers to the following questions, based on a corpus of natural data collected through an ethnographic method of observation.

1. What apology strategies do Persian speakers use more frequently to apologize?
2. What lexemes do Persian speakers use more frequently in explicit apologies?
3. In what combinations do Persian speakers use apology strategies?
4. In what positions do Persian speakers use apology strategies?

3. Methodology

Previous research into apologies is said to have been mostly based on the data elicited through role-play (Cohen and Olshtain, 1981; Olshtain, 1989; Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984; Trosborg, 1987). It has been argued that elicited data are valuable because they reveal the forms that natives and non-natives know, and show the range of strategies that the respondents think they would use in specific situations (Holmes, 1990). However, Bonikowska (1988) claimed that the respondents may be forced to perform an apology in predetermined situations while in real interaction they may decide to opt out. Moreover, as Cohen and Olshtain (1998:47) argued, "Role-play forces the subjects to take on a role they would not assume in real life, or they may not be good actors, then it elicits an unnatural behavior".

Hence, it has been suggested that the data obtained through ethnographic observation seem to be more representative of the language used in natural settings, and although it is time-consuming and difficult, it may give insights on how people