

Apologies in Akan discourse

Samuel Gyasi Obeng*

*Linguistics Department, Memorial Hall 326, Indiana University
Bloomington IN 47505, USA*

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Abstract

With knowledge of the potentially deadly repercussions of the spoken word in some communicative encounters, the Akan interlocutor employs various mitigating strategies that pay attention to the face needs of an addressee either by softening the locution of a possible face-threatening act inherent in a speaker's stretch of utterance, or by attempting to remedy an offense committed by the speaker or by someone whose actions for which the speaker accepts responsibility. An apology or a remedy (Goffman, 1971: 140) – a speech act whose primary purpose is redressive action – is one such speech strategy which pays attention to the face needs of interlocutors. It is basically aimed at maintaining or enhancing their face or restoring decorum (Goffman, 1967). Among the Akan, apology expressions may be complex – involving a combination of both explicitness and implicitness – or compound, involving a combination of two or more implicit strategies. © 1999 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Objective

The main objective of this paper is to discuss the notion of apology and to demonstrate the ways in which the Akan conceptualize apology.¹ The paper also provides evidence to show that Akan apology strategies differ from those of other cultures, in particular, that Akan apologies may involve complex reparation (involving a combination of explicitness and implicitness) or compound reparation (involving a combination of two or more implicit apology acts). Finally, the paper demonstrates that Akan apology strategies have implications for politeness theory.

* Phone: +1-812-855-3323; E-mail: sobeng@indiana.edu

¹ The Akan ethnic group is made up of Ajumako, Agona, Akyem, Akuapem, Asante, Denkyira, Fante, Gomua, Kwawu, Odoben, Wassa among other. The data for this study were collected from Akyem speakers but have validity for the other groups.

2. Review of some current studies of apology

Olshtain (1989: 156) defines an apology as “a speech act which is intended to provide support for H (hearer) who was actually or potentially malaffected by a violation X”. For Holmes (1995: 155), an apology is a speech act addressed to an interactant’s face needs with the view to remedy an offense for which the addressor – the apologizer – takes responsibility, and thus restore equilibrium between him and the addressee (the apology recipient). The above definitions point to the fact that apologizing is face-threatening for the speaker, whereas it is face-saving for the hearer. Specifically, they imply that apologies are face-supportive acts because unlike speech acts such as threats and insults – designated face attack acts – apologies have a positive effect on the recipient or addressee (Austin, 1990; Holmes, 1995: 155). If one’s utterance or behavior is either explicitly or implicitly interpreted as offensive by another, it is incumbent upon one to offer an apology to avoid tarnishing one’s image and that of one’s social group, particularly one’s close relatives. Offering the apology thus prevents or minimizes the occurrence of any social stigma or any calamity (or calamities) from befalling the offender and the society.

However, among the Akan, an apology may be face-threatening not only for both the apologizer and the recipient, but also for the entire ethnic group (Obeng, 1997a). In fact, in some cases, it may even be more face-threatening for the apology recipient than the apologizer.

When the offense committed has a social stigma attached to it (e.g., if it involves stealing),² then the apology becomes face-threatening for both the apologizer and the apology recipient and their relatives. In such a situation, it is still better to apologize than not to apologize. An incident which happened in my village (Asuom, Ghana) in 1993 is illustrative. A cousin of mine (KG) who lived in another village (Tweapease) died of injuries he sustained after falling from a cola-nut tree. Two months after KG’s death, a letter addressed to him from PK, who lived in Tweapease, was received. In the letter, PK asked KG to pay back the money he had borrowed from him (PK) and to go back to Tweapease to render a personal apology for not paying back the loan on the due date or ‘face the consequences’. The expression ‘face the consequences’ sent fear and panic in the entire extended family. All the members of the family were aware of the presence of a powerful and renowned fetish priest and a deity – Akonnedi³ – in Tweapease and the thought which came to us instantly was the possibility of PK having asked the deity to cause KG’s death – in fact, KG’s death was instantly attributed to PK. There was also the fear that other members of the family might die as a result of KG’s behavior. As far as face and politeness are concerned, KG’s behavior was seen as having brought disgrace to the entire

² I would like to emphasize here that what may be considered theft in Western societies may not be considered theft among the Akan. When I was growing up in the sixties and seventies in the village, a hungry person who took a few bunches of bananas or plantains from a neighbor’s farm and ate them (without selling them) was not considered a thief. The situation may be changing due to changing times.

³ The main Akonnedi deity is in Larteh, a township about fifty kilometers from Accra (Ghana’s capital city).

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