

Apology in Japanese gratitude situations: The negotiation of interlocutor role-relations

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Abstract

A stepwise regression analysis of the use of apology expressions elicited in 2574 gratitude situations selected degree of ‘regret’ and ‘expectedness’ as significant predictors such that as expectedness decreased, regret increased, as did the use of apology expressions. These findings suggest that degree of regret is calculated relative to the expectedness of the act and that the use of apology expressions in gratitude situations (apology–gratitude expressions) marks an act as falling outside the boundaries of interlocutor role-relations. This interpretation, which views apology–gratitude expressions as a general strategy for negotiating interlocutor role-relations, challenges a more simplistic account of such expressions as mere markers of formal or “public” discourse (e.g., Ide, 1998). A second study of 333 Japanese 1st–9th grade students indicated that awareness of the use of apology–gratitude begins as early as 1st grade and approximates that of adults between 7th and 9th grade. The findings of this second study suggest that the negotiation of role-relations via the use of apology–gratitude expressions is acquired gradually as a part of the language socialization process.

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1. Introduction

Scholars have noted that, with the exception of a limited set of situations,¹ apology expressions (e.g., *sumimasen*) can be used in place of or alongside gratitude expressions (e.g., *arigatougozaimasu*) in gratitude situations² in Japanese (e.g., Coulmas, 1981; Ide, 1998; Kindaichi, 1987; Kumatoridani, 1990, 1999). Consider the following example.

- Speaker³: (1) *kore otoshimashitayo* [you dropped this]
(picks up handkerchief and hands it to B)
(2) *hai* [Here]
- Hearer: (1a) *a, doumo arigatougozaimasu* [oh, thank you]
– or –
- Hearer: (1b) *a, doumo sumimasen* [oh, I’m sorry].

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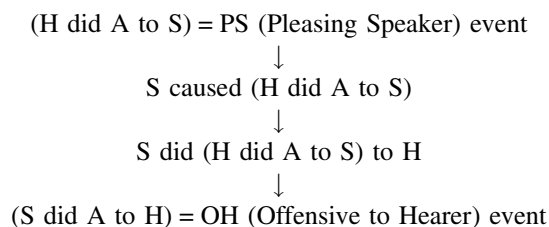
¹ For example, what Kumatoridani (1999) refers to as “affective speech acts” (e.g., congratulations and condolences) (p. 633).

² Following Coulmas (1981), Kumatoridani (1990, 1999), Searle (1969) and others, I define a gratitude situation as a situation in which the speaker responds to an object of gratitude (a verbal or physical act) on the part of the hearer.

³ Following Searle (1969) and Kumatoridani (1990, 1999) “speaker” refers to the individual who expresses thanks, “hearer” refers to the individual who performs the act which constitutes the object of gratitude and is thus the receiver of thanks.

A common explanation of this use of apology, or “apology–gratitude expressions” (shazaikansya hyougen) (Oki, 1993), is that it results from the speaker’s recognition of a burden suffered by the hearer (i.e., the person who performed the act that serves as the object of gratitude). For example, Coulmas (1981) explains that the use of such expressions derives from a “shift in interpretation” whereby the “object of gratitude” is viewed as an “object of regret.” He further claims that this focus on the other reflects the cultural value of “indebtedness,” a central aspect of politeness in Japanese (pp. 88–89).⁴

Japanese scholars provide a similar interpretation of this phenomenon (e.g., Kindaichi, 1987; Kumatoridani, 1990, 1999; Miyake, 1993, 1994; Nakata, 1989; Nishihara, 1994). Kumatoridani (1990, 1999), for example, formalizes this idea in what he calls the “empathy operation” (shown below) in which an object of gratitude (or “Pleasing Speaker event”) is transformed into an object of apology (or “Offending Hearer event”).



Nakata (1989) provides a similar yet alternative account of the use of apology–gratitude by modifying Searle’s (1969) felicity conditions of thanks to include the speaker’s recognition and expression of a burden suffered by the hearer (Nakata’s additions to Searle’s original conditions underlined).

Nakata’s (1989) Felicity Conditions for Gratitude in Japanese

- (1) Propositional: Past Act (A) done by Hearer (H).
- (2) Preparatory: A benefits Speaker (S) and S believes A benefits S (and/or) A has a negative effect on H and S believes A has a negative effect on H.
- (3) Sincerity: S feels grateful or appreciative for A (and/or) S feels regretful or sorrowful for A.
- (4) Essential: S expresses gratitude or appreciation for A (and/or) S expresses sorrow or regret for A.

Although the above accounts provide a plausible explanation of the pragmatic force behind the use of such forms, they provide little insight into their actual usage. For example, although Nakata adds the condition that a speaker recognizes and expresses a burden suffered by the hearer, she offers no analysis of the factors that determine the selection of feeling “grateful” or “regretful” and the subsequent use of gratitude or apology expressions. Kumatoridani’s (1990, 1999) explanation similarly offers little discussion of the rules determining when the ‘empathy operation’ is activated. For example, it would seem to follow from Kumatoridani’s account that situations in which the hearer exerts a direct influence over the hearer (e.g., direct requests) would result in a more frequent application of the empathy operation. Casual observation, however, does not bear out this prediction as direct requests (an act clearly originating from the hearer) often result in an expression of gratitude. Similarly, as noted by Oki (1993) in her analysis of gratitude expressions used in situational role plays, the use of apology–gratitude expressions often does not follow the predictions of Kumatoridani’s model.

One common explanation for the use of such expressions is that they serve as a form of deference politeness (e.g., Ide, 1998; Kumatoridani, 1990, 1999; Kindaichi, 1987). Evidence to support such an interpretation comes from the fact that such forms are frequently used in formal situations and when addressing superiors and non-intimates. Although such an explanation is largely accurate, it fails to account for the complex pattern of actual usage of such forms. As reported in Okamoto (1992) and Kumatoridani (1990, 1999), for example, apology–gratitude is frequently used among intimates in non-formal situations. Studies also have documented significant dialectical and generational variation in the use of apology–gratitude (e.g., Ogawa, 1993; Oki, 1993). These and other findings challenge the validity of an overly simplistic account and underscore the need to develop more a sophisticated explanation of this phenomenon.

⁴ Also see Brown & Levinson (1989, p.247) for a similar interpretation of the role of indebtedness in Japanese society.

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