

Challenges in teaching remedial apologies to learners of English as a foreign language

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***Abstract:** The paper dwells on the process of acquiring communicative competence by presenting three apology patterns which foreign language teachers should be competent to recognize and differentiate between when teaching speech acts and politeness strategies. In particular, three remedial apologetic models are discussed in brief with respect to their form, function, and use as well as the socio-cultural aspect of the communicative acts they constitute.*

***Keywords:** communicative competence, context, remedial apologies, syntactic patterns, pragmatics*

Introduction

In order to communicate effectively and efficiently in any language foreign language learners need to acquire **grammatical competence** to enhance their linguistic knowledge and be adequately familiar with the sociolinguistic strategies so that they can use the linguistic forms appropriately. Therefore, for non-native speakers, adopting and learning these strategies is of crucial importance if they want to use correct English patterns and know in what situations they can apply them.

They also have to know how a language is used by the members of the speech community in order to fulfill their communicative goals. Acquiring **communicative competence** is an extremely comprehensive and complex process that is not just a matter of language knowledge or ability to speak, but a competence that an individual has to develop through effective and appropriate interaction. It is definitely much more than this. The mere “exchange of information between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs or behaviour is not in the core of successful communication” (Wiemann 2006: 24). Information exchange is a necessary criterion, but it is not sufficient for the complete understanding of the exact process of communication. What is of crucial importance for effective communication is the issue of how people “use message to generate meanings within and across various contexts, cultures, channels, and media” (Bachman 1990: 34) through language. When we communicate we transmit information through our thoughts and emotions with the simple desire to be properly understood. Many prominent communication

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researchers (Canary, Cody 2000; Berger 2005; Wiemann 2006) share Craig's (1999) perspective on communication, that it would be pointless not to assume that communication is in some sense and to some degree intentionally directed towards certain goals (Craig 1999), which are linked to another person's thoughts and feelings. The main goal of communication is "to share meaning or in other words to generate new knowledge" which is to be manifested, according to Craig by self-presentation focusing on:

- the issue of how individuals want to be perceived;
- how they develop and maintain relationship;
- the way they manipulate others and manage interpersonal conflicts.

According to Pencheva and Shopov "the need to teach communicative competence is in the center of attention" (Pencheva, Shopov 2001: 56).

It is a rather complicated matter to express speech acts, apologies in particular, in a foreign language. That is why studying the way people apologize in different languages is essential in order to understand its peculiarities. In order to help foreign language learners of English to understand the appropriate realization of apology formulae, English teachers should be adequately competent and be able to point out to the students how the most common apology structures are related to their particular use in the contexts.

Analysis of Apology patterns

A: *I am sorry*

The teacher should first explain the different semantic meanings of 'sorry' pointing out that *sorry* constructions which express sadness or distress through sympathy or compassion with someone's misfortune should be excluded as they do not refer to apologetic behavior. For example: *I was sorry to see what happened to your brother last week.*

What the teacher should do next is to make it clear that as an apology speech act the phrase must refer to the feeling of regret, guilt, shame or penitence when there is an offence at hand. The third step is related to the grammatical aspect of the entry. It is a predicative-adjective which becomes explicit in five basic syntactic groups of constructions:

Sorry can be used in predicative structures without complements: *I am (so/very) sorry.*

Sorry can be used with a content clause [CL]: *I'm sorry that this word box office keeps occurring.*

Sorry can be used with a preposition phrase headed by "for": *I am sorry for this annoyance.*

Sorry can be used with a prepositional phrase headed by ‘about’: *I’m sorry about the confusion on the phone earlier.*

Sorry can be used with an infinitive form: *I am sorry to have disappointed you.*

Generally, three syntactic patterns are basically used by native speakers: *predicative sorry*; *sorry + about*; *sorry + CL*. In everyday conversations and typical situations (for example: bumping into someone, being late, hurting someone’s feelings, etc.) which require an apology, British speakers when feeling regret almost equally prefer to say simply *Sorry* or are willing to explain or give account for the wrongdoing they have performed (based on a percentage scale of apology patterns taken from the British National Corpus of spoken discourse (Peneva 2015).

The teacher should make it clear to the learners that there is a difference in the use of *sorry for* and *sorry about*. Most of the students consider *sorry for* and *sorry about* synonymous in meaning though *sorry about* is related to a high level of formality where the social power and rank of the participants are different (based on a cross-cultural application of Valency patternbank model (Herbst 2014) and a Discourse Completion Test experiment with Bulgarian learners of English (see Peneva 2015). It could be seen that the prepositions *about* and *for* are among the translation equivalents of the Bulgarian preposition *за* and according to Danchev (1988) its functional equivalent – *for* predominates. The dominant translation equivalent of the Bulgarian *за* preposition is *for* while *about* comes second in terms of frequency in English (Benatova 1980: 38-44).

All *sorry* constructions, apart from the *predicative-only* pattern, require “an explanation” or “account”, which makes the apology sound more sincere.

Another important task for the teacher is to highlight the fact that *sorry* does not mean ‘to apologise’. To apologise is to admit that you are at fault. *Sorry* only expresses regret.

B: I apologize

The same pedagogical model is applied to this expression. It stands as an apology only if it acknowledges faults or shortcomings or failing. Grammatically it falls into six basic syntactic structures:

Apologize can be used independently: *I apologize.*

Apologize can be used with a prepositional phrase headed by “for”: *I apologize for sending all that sir...*

Apologize can be used with a prepositional phrase headed by “to”: *I apologize to the listener of this tape ...*

Apologize can be used with a clause: *I apologize that you will have to sit through the outstanding items of discussion.*

Apologize can be used in emphatic constructions with “do”: *I do apologize if I have missed bits of paper.*

In general, *apologize* patterns are not that common in colloquial English as *sorry* patterns, but they are preferred especially in cases when the social status of the speaker and the hearer is different; in situations in which there is a strong possibility of the apology speech act failure due to lack of politeness and breaching the social norms.

Unlike *sorry*, which expresses regret and does not mean ‘to apologize’, but is considered the most common apology speech act, *apologize* is less common but connotes the idea that the speaker is at fault and bears the responsibility of his/her deeds. Learners are not able to understand this factor as they mainly focus on the level of formality.

In situations where there is a high risk that the apology might fail provided the socio-cultural rules of polite behavior and social distance are not observed, British speakers, when feeling an offence has been done by them, solely prefer to use these constructions as they sound more sincere than the others (Deutschmann 2003). These constructions, however, are followed by other apologetic patterns which further support the genuineness of the act: expression of “taking responsibility” mainly.

C: *I regret*

Semantically the verb *regret* has four main meanings, though only two of them can be used as apology speech acts. They become explicit with the meaning of ‘feeling sorry for’ or ‘feeling remorse for’. The teacher should stress the fact that the other two meanings, namely, ‘feeling sad about something’ and ‘declining formally’ do not fit the criteria for apologies in that there is no offence done.

Grammatically *regret* becomes explicit in 3 basic syntactic patterns:

Regret can be followed by a complement NP: *I regret it very much.*

Regret can be used with a complement clause: *I regret what happened.*

Regret can be used with a gerundial clause: *I regret saying it and that I was speaking metaphorically. ...*

In the case of *regret* structures, compared to *sorry* and *apologize* structures, the former, though considered one of the basic illocutionary force indicating devices (IFIDs) in apology speech acts, is not taken as a prototypical apology and sounds less sincere than *sorry* or *apologize* (Brown, Levinson 1987: 211-212). Expressions of *regret* are often related to or address the consequences of actions people have taken but wish they had not. *Regret* mostly expresses a desire on the part of the hearer that the event had not happened, but without any acceptance of wrongdoing.

The expression does not sound as convincing and sincere as the other performative devices but at least it could be considered felicitous since in all cases the regret structures in this classification end with a NP which is a syntactic pattern that asks for an apologetic strategy which provides an “explanation” or expresses “responsibility” for the offence that was done. Pragmatically the construction cannot stand isolated and in all cases it is accompanied by various apologetic endings (expressions).

Socio-cultural aspects

In the process of foreign language teaching and learning the teacher should define apologies as a kind of remedial work which “involves the splitting of the speaker’s self into two parts, the one guilty of having offended the hearer, the other taking the hearer’s side and the violated norm” (Fraser 1981: 22). Speakers try to remedy or heal the unpleasant social situation by offering an apology which might be expressed through different formulas or manifestations depending on the different situations in different socio-cultural settings.

With respect to the form and function of apologies five **factors** play a significant role in the choice of apology strategy (Fraser 1981: 223). They are:

1. *the nature of offence*. Two categories are used to classify the data with respect to severity of offence:

- *high severity*: damaging the car of a friend’s; not saving an important file; bumping into someone’s car
- *low severity*: stepping on somebody’s foot; forgetting about a meeting with a friend; not returning a book on time.

In the case of personal offence, *I am sorry* is much preferable. Minor offences elicit a brief apology whereas much more circumstantial apology is required when the offence is considered to be serious.

2. *the situation in which the offence occurred*. The situations could range from very formal to the most informal that undoubtedly affects the choice of apology strategies. In a formal situation it is more appropriate to use apology expressions such as: *Excuse me, I am sorry for...*, while in less formal situations where the relations between the interlocutors are intimate, expressions such as *Ooops* or *I am such a fool* are more appropriate.

3. *the relative familiarity between the participants*. This mainly refers to the social status of the speaker. Familiarity could vary from people who have never met before to people who have lived in the same neighbourhood:

- *high status*, when apologizing to a person with higher social power such as professors, chief managers and others;
- *equal status*, when apologizing to a person with equal social power such as colleagues, friends, classmates, and
- *low status*, when apologizing to a person with lower social power such as café or restaurant waiters; shop cashiers.

4. *gender of the participants* – male and female. The teacher should make it clear to the students that gender stereotypes could explain the linguistic behavior of both genders and reveal different ways of thinking and behaving between the members of one culture. Apology selection depends on the estimation of how humiliating men and women perceive the apology strategies to be and the extent to which they damage the apologizer's self-respect. What is more, gender differences affect politeness and social environment can influence the choice of apology strategies made by the two genders.

5. *Social distance*. The teacher should highlight the fact that learners of English interpret the notions of social distance and power differently from British speakers. S/he should stress the point that learners are more likely to relate the seriousness of offence to social distance whereas British native apologetic behavior seems to be the result of the interconnection between seriousness of offence and social power and social distance (Slavova 2004). The notions of social power and social distance are embedded in British society which refer to the degree of influence that a party has on the members within their society, whereas the notion of social distance refers to the degree of sympathy the member of a group feels for another member in his/her own society (Slavova 2004). This comes from the fact that class distinction is not that explicit in Bulgarian society. It is obvious that learners (Bulgarian in particular) may transfer their background/native cultural knowledge on the choice of apologetic strategies which, in turn, determines politeness orientation.

Conclusion

Remedial apologies as a whole are uttered after an offence has been committed and refer to the following variables: seriousness of the offence force for the participants; the particular relationship and the setting, and they come as a result of different types of offences such as: causing inconvenience (impoliteness, being late, being upset, saying the wrong thing, etc.).

By combining cross-cultural application of Valency patternbank model and

DCT the paper can be a contribution to the exploration of particular syntactic patterns and their uses in context-dependent apology situations.

In pedagogy:

- teachers can help learners to acquire not only linguistic knowledge of the way the speech act is realized, that is the syntactic structures, but also dwell on the social variables that influence the successful performance of the act.
- teachers can enable learners to perform successful speech acts in order to avoid cross-cultural miscomprehension;
- besides linguistically correct apology formulas learners need to be made aware of the significance of social power, social distance and imposition in communication.

Generally, foreign language teachers should first concentrate on the forms and functions of apologies in British English then on their social and conversational variations that is the context, which is a crucial factor when trying to evaluate the appropriateness of an apology. The contextual clues are those factors which determine what type of apology is most appropriate for a given situation.

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