

Investigating Chinese Students' Realization of Speech Act----Apology

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Abstract. This article aims to sort out the features of Chinese EFL vocational college students' realization of the speech act---- apology with method of DCT. The analysis of the discourse completion tests focus on the strategies of apology that two groups of students with different English proficiency use. The conclusion is that there is almost no difference between the two groups in realization of apology which indicates that the vocational college learners' level of English proficiency doesn't guarantee the pragmatic competence.

1. Introduction

When foreign language learners attempt to communicate with native speakers, pragmatic errors, may cause potential harm to communication because they will cause a native speaker to form mistaken perceptions about the personal character, beliefs and attitudes of the learner. In order to communicate with native speakers successfully, foreign language learners should have the following two kinds of ability.

- (1) The Ability to Perform Speech Acts
- (2) The Ability to Perform Politeness Functions

Among politeness functions, apology involves a particularly challenging and problematic type of social and linguistic interaction for the language learners. This essay, aims to sort out the features of Chinese EFL vocational college students' speech acts performance; with a particular focus on apologies with the help of discourse completion test(DCT)

2.Studies on apology speech acts

Apologies are among the most extensively examined speech acts both in terms of native speaker and non-native speaker performances(e.g., Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Fraser et al., 1980; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983; Rintell, 1981; Tamanaha, 1997; Trosborg, 1987, 1995)

In China, a culturally contrastive study was made by Jia Yuxing(1997), Huang Yonghong(2001) and other faculty members in Harbin Science and Engineering University and Hei Longjiang University. The study shows that a successful apologetic interaction depends both on linguistic proficiency and more considerably on how much the interactants know the cultural values and social norms.

Fu Xianfeng(2001) made a study on apologies in internet English chat of Chinese second language learners. He examined naturally occurring apologetic data from English chat room in internet and produced a descriptive study of Chinese second language learners' communicative competence from a pragmatic and sociolinguistic aspects.

Dong Ruhong(2004) provided a pragmatic study of apology-making speech act by Chinese learners of English with different linguistic proficiency. She analyzed the relevant variables affecting L2 learners' speech act realization so as to improve the second language learning and teaching.

3. The study

3.1. The data collection method

The data collection method is an adaptation of the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) used in the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP, Blum-Kulka et al., 1989).

Discourse Completion Test means a respondent reads a situation briefly described in writing and provides a written response.

Ever since its first systematic and extensive use in the Cross-Culture Speech Act Realizations Patterns (CCSARP) Projects in 1989, the written discourse completion tasks(or DCTs) have been used to gather data in a large number of empirical pragmatics studies(See Kasper and Dahl, 1991).

3.2 Subjects

The subjects of the study were 20 second-year Practical English majors and 20 first-year e-business students at Zhejiang Technical Institute of Economics . The two groups were rearranged according to their recent CET 4 scores: 20 subjects in the higher proficiency (Hp) group and 20 in the lower proficiency (Lp) group. They were chosen at random among the 200 students. They had studied English for an average of 9-10 years, mainly through highly controlled formal education in China. None of them had been in English speaking countries. They were carefully selected from a sample of 100 students so that the same number of students would represent two different English proficiency levels, (low proficiency and high proficiency) as determined by their total score on the College English Test. Their CET 4 scores ranged from 350 to 510 out of a possible score of 710.

3.3 Instruments

The speech act that is to be examined in this study is apology as it requires certain complexities in terms of interaction. Three DCT situations for the act were prepared. In all situations, the relative power relationship and the social distance between the interlocutors were not varied; the interlocutors were set as “friends”, therefore the power relationship is equal and the social distance is close.

The following are the brief descriptions of the 3 DCT situations used..

Apologies:

- 1) Damaged book: Speaker apologizes for his dog damaging his friend’s book.
- 2) No show: Speaker apologizes for not showing up for a movie date.
- 3) Damaged electric motor-bike: Speaker apologizes for accidentally making a dent on his friend’s electric motor-bike which s/ he had borrowed.

3.4 Procedure

The 40 subjects were divided into two groups---Higher proficiency (Hp) and Low proficiency(Lp) according to their scores of recent CET Band 4 to respond to the production questionnaires(see Appendix A) during a regular class. The participants were given ample space and time to write their responses. The written responses were carefully typed as written for the two native speakers’ evaluation in order to avoid the possible influence of the quality of handwriting.

4 Data analysis

The apology expressions were analyzed according to the model based on Cohen and Olshtain(1981:113-134) and Olshtain and Cohen(1983: 22-23), as well as on the CCSARP coding manual(Blum-Kulka et al., 1989:289).

Table 1 Model of apology expressions and comparison of moves of two groups

Moves	of subjects (%)		Total
	Lp	Hp	
1. IFID (illocutionary force indicating device)			
1.1. An expression of regret	21(35%)	11(18.3%)	32 (53.3%)
1.2. An offer of apology	5 (8.3%)	3 (5%)	8 (13.3%)
1.3. A request for forgiveness	11(18.3%)	17 (28.3%)	28 (46.6%)
2. Explanation or Account	2 (3.3%)	3 (5%)	5 (8.3%)
3. Taking on Responsibility			
3.1. Explicit self-blame	2(3.3%)	5 (8.3%)	7 (11.6%)
3.2. Lack of intent	0	0	0
3.3. Expression of self-deficiency	2(3.3%)	2(3.3%)	4 (6.6%)
3.4. Expression of embarrassment	0	0	0(0%)
3.5. Self-dispraise	0	0	0(0%)
3.6. Justify hearer	0	0	0(0%)
3.7. Refusal to acknowledge guilt			
3.7.1. Denial of responsibility	0	0	0(0%)
3.7.2. Blame the hearer	0	0	0(0%)
3.7.3. Pretend to be offended	0	0	0(0%)
4. Concern for the hearer	0	0	0 (0%)
5. Offer of repair	10(16.5%)	10(16.5%)	20 (33%)
6. Promise of forbearance	7 (11.6%)	8 (13.3%)	15 (25%)

Analysis:

In my analysis, I will first discuss the realizations of the most central strategy for apologies—the IFID formulae (illocutionary force indicating device)—using the data from the responses to all three situations.

The IFIDs are the strategies which are the most conventionalized and routinized, being in the center of the speech act category of apologizing and representing verbal routines or syntactic-semantic formulae (Owen, 1983:172) which are regularly used to fulfill a specific communication function.

In English, as has been demonstrated by many researchers (e.g. Holmes, 1990), the overwhelming expression is one of regret “I’m sorry”, with few cases left to “excuse me”, “forgive me” or “I apologize”, the latter being used more in written apologies. But as the table shows, there are few cases in which “excuse me”, “forgive me” and “I apologize” were used. It suggests that the subjects tend to use written English in their dialogues. This may have something to do with the fact that the subjects expose too much to written English materials in their learning process. The other reason may be that they are influenced by the way of expressing apology in Chinese.

Within Brown and Levison’s (1987) theory of linguistic politeness, the nature of apology would be probably explained in terms of the threat to speaker’s face. An expression of regret, appears much less face-threatening for both S (speaker) and H (hearer) than a request for forgiveness. In this study, 53.3% of the subjects used such expression as “I’m sorry”. From this point of view, the subjects tended to use avoidance-based negative politeness strategy.

Interestingly, many subjects used an expression of regret, always preceded by intensified adverbials (I’m so/terribly/really /very sorry). This shows that the subjects are familiar with such expressions which have something to do with the influence of English movies and other English programs.

As to the remaining strategies that follow IFID, one of the main differences is strategy order. According to the data, the IFID is immediately followed by an offer or repair (help), which accounts for (33%) of the responses. None of the speaker expressed any moderate self-dispraise such as (I

should be more careful).

According to the table, the subjects tended to produce an explicit apology frequently.

Overall, moves such as “An expression of regret,” “A request for forgiveness,” “offer of repair,” and “Promise of forbearance” turned out to have high percentages.

In terms of “A request for forgiveness”, all the subjects made an explanation that they had forgotten about the movie appointment. This move is considered as one of the core components of an apology. (Olshtain, 1989:157).

As to “explicit self-blame”, about 11.6% of the subjects produced this move by the most saying something like “I really feel bad,” or “It was my fault.”

The strategy “Explanation or Account” is used by 8.3 % of the subjects. In these statements, the subjects gave reasons why offensive things happened. In apology 1 and 3, the apologizee did not ask why such a thing happened, but in situation 2, the apologizee specifically asked why the apologizer had not showed up for the movie date. In answering the question “what happened”, Hp subjects tend to give a detailed account besides the expression “I completely forgot about it.”

As for the strategy of “offer of repair”, 33% of the subjects chose this strategy in apologizing by repeating an offer of compensation. The majority of the statements offered to treat the offended to a dinner or to pay for a movie for their next get-together or to have the bicycle repaired. Among them a small percentage of the subjects asked what the offended party wanted to make up for what he/she had done.

When it comes to the strategy of “Expression of self-deficiency”---one of implicit expressions of responsibility, the two groups showed similar performances in terms of the percentages, i.e 3.3%..

But there were no instances of the strategy “expression of embarrassment”, “self-dispraise”, “justify hearer”, “refusal to acknowledge guilt” in the two groups. I am not sure what caused such results. Maybe it is because they are influenced by Chinese culture in which people regard mutual concern and mutual care as being polite. They don’t want others to lose their faces. Such result seems to support Wierzbicka’s (1985b, 1991) position that speech acts are not language-independent ‘natural kinds’ but culture-specific communicative routines. Or maybe they don’t have enough language competence to express their true feeling in English.

To summarize the results of analyses for the three apology situations overall, the Lp subjects approximate the Hp ones in most of the aspects of apologies. However, in some features, the Lps were not yet exactly like the Hps. For instance, in terms of the percentage of “an expression of regret” and “a request for forgiveness”, the two groups differ a lot. But with respect to “offer of repair” and “promise of forbearance”, the two groups performed almost in the same way.

As to the varieties of the apology strategies, the two groups of the subjects only use 8 of 14 kinds of strategies in performing apologies except for what are considered to be the core apology strategies such as a “verbalization of the content of the offense” and an “explicit apology.” This shows that their use of apology strategy is very monotonous.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

The major findings of the present study are summarized as follows:

5.1 As Chinese culture is collectively oriented and people regard mutual concern and mutual care as being polite, the subjects don’t want others to lose their faces, they tend to take their responsibilities and produce an explicit apology frequently, meanwhile they use avoidance-based negative politeness strategy together with remedial strategies .

5.2 Due to the great effect of their native language and Chinese culture, the subjects preferred to use written English when they apologize to others.

5.3 When the subjects used an expression of regret, they always preceded by intensified adverbials (I’m so/terribly/really /very sorry). This may have something to do with the fact that they watch English movies and other English programs.

5.4 Their use of apology strategy is very monotonous because among 16 apology strategies they only used 8 of them.

6. Pedagogical Implications

The result and the discussions presented in the previous sections have the following implications for English pedagogy in China.

The subjects' poor knowledge about the speech act realization of apology suggests that classroom teaching should give learners a systematic, explicit and in-depth explanation of the culture values and tradition of the people who speak the target language. .

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