Various Means of Expressing Modality in the Speech Stereotypes of Apologies in Contemporary English

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the various means of expressing modality used for making and accepting apologies in contemporary English. Speech act realization patterns of apologies, typical for native speakers of English in different situations, have been compared and analyzed. Conclusions, concerning grammatical and lexical means of expressing modality in the SA of apologies in English, have been made.

Key words: SA (speech act), speech stereotypes/pragmatic clichés, modal means, apologies

INTRODUCTION

Speech acts are what the writer or speaker is doing in uttering a particular form of words, and their focus is on meaning (speaker's intention). The recognition of the meaning of a particular speech act in a given cultural setting is at the heart of successful intercultural communication. Speech acts are considered universal, nevertheless research shows that they can manifest differently across languages and cultures. Yet despite the routinized nature of speech acts, there are still various strategies to choose from - depending on the socio-cultural context - and often a variety of possible language forms for realizing these strategies, especially in the case of speech acts with four or more possible semantic formulas such as apologies.

Apologies are expressive illocutionary acts the goal of which coincides with the social goal of maintaining harmony between hearer and speaker [Edmondson 1981: 280; Leech 1983: 125]. Apologies have the effect of paying-off a debt, thus compensating the victim for the harm done by the offence [Сърл 1976: 12]. An apology is called for when social norms have been violated, whether the offence is potential or real [Olshtain-Cohen 1983:20].

Many comparative studies in this area show that apologies are culture and language-specific. Many researchers have studied apologies produced both by native and non-native speakers in different languages [Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper 1989 investigated apologies (and requests) in seven different languages, Owen 1983, Trosborg 1987, Olshtine 1989, Holmes 1990, Lipson 1994, Suszczynska 1999, Nikolayeva 2000]. They came to the conclusion that target language learners may tend to respond the way they would in their native language and culture and find that their utterances are not at all appropriate for the target language and culture situation [Cohen 1996:408]

Complex speech acts like apologies actually consist of a set of routinized patterns or strategies typically used by native speakers of the language. There are five possible strategies for making an apology [Cohen & Olshtain1981:119-125).

1. Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID) which is the explicit expression of an apology
2. Taking on responsibility
3. Explanation
4. Offer of repair
5. Promise of forbearance

The paper will look at IFID of apologies and will analyze the various means of expressing modality in the speech stereotypes used for making and accepting apologies in English. Taking into consideration the fact that **'The essence of "modality"** consists in the relativization of the validity of sentence meanings to a set of possible worlds' [Keifer 1994: 2515a]; from a speaker's-evaluation approach, modality is 'the speaker's cognitive, emotive, or volitive attitude toward a state of affairs' [Keifer 1994: 2516a], his 'commitment or detachment', his 'envisaging several possible courses of events' or his 'considering of things being otherwise' [Keifer, 1994: 2516b]. Modality may

be expressed through various means: phonetic (intonation), grammatical (verbal forms, moods, word order etc.), lexical (word-combinations and phrases), and lexico-grammatical (modal verbs, modal words and modal particles).

Grammatical Means of Expressing Modality in the SA of Apology in English

The most typical pragmatic clichés for this SA are formulaic expressions or sentences containing a verb such as ***"sorry," "excuse," "forgive," "apologize", "regret"*** or phrases with a noun like **"*apology, apologies*"**: *(I 'm) sorry / Excuse me / Pardon (I beg your pardon)/ I owe you an apology / Please accept my apologies /I do apologize for .../ I (We) regret... .*" Depending on how the person who caused the interactional friction perceives his or her own actions, along with other variables such as age or familiarity of the interlocutors, apologies take different forms:

- Performative apologies: *apologize, regret, be sorry, beg pardon*
- Imperative/requestive apologies: *excuse, pardon and forgive*
- 'Pseudo-apologies' - *be afraid*

1. Performative apologies

Formulaic expressions with ***apology, apologies, apologize*** in spoken language are used extremely rarely. According to Aijmer, their share among other speech formulas of apology is only 3,7% [Aijmer 1996: 86], which again confirms the general trend to avoid the use of performative verbs in English. These formulas are used, if necessary, to emphasize the formality of the relationship, and to avoid ambiguity, which is to express an explicit apology [Owen 1983: 63]. They are met when making a public apology (in cases of delays of trains, planes, canceled flights, delayed constructions, changes in work schedules, etc.).

An apology to our customers

Over the past weeks we have set out to improve the range of products we sell. Because of this many grocery items have been temporarily out of stock, for which we sincerely apologize [Owen 1983:36] (announcement in a shop).

Aerkianta apologizes for any inconveniences arising from the phased enlargement of the passengers terminal at Dublin airport (announcement at the airport).

Also phrases with ***apologize*** are characteristic for formal telephone conversations, messages left on answering machines, and public announcements: I apologize for the delay in acknowledging your kindness. *Please accept my (our) apologies*.

Formulaic expressions with ***I (we) regret*** ...can also be met in announcements: *We regret to announce that tonight's performance of 'Hamlet' has been cancelled* (announcement at the theatre) [Aijmer 1996: 89].

The most common formulaic expression for offering apologies in English is ***(I'm) sorry***. According to the analyses made by linguists, its use was 83.7%, while the form of an apology *Excuse me* was found in 4.7% of cases [Aijmer 1996: 86].

The most common pragmatic cliche for offering apologies sorry has several modifications: ***I am sorry / (I'm) sorry / Sorry***. Expressions that include a first-person pronoun emphasize the sincerity of the speaker's feelings [Owen 1983: 70]. Sorry is the most formalized ritual formula for an apology in which its semantic significance is lost to the greatest extent, and it is often used automatically as a signal for attention. Its lack of semantic meaning and its frequency of use causes sometimes confusion to non-native speakers of English. For Bulgarian speakers the use of sorry in the following situations would be considered inappropriate and irrelevant:

1) A teacher is asking for a colleague of his/her in the staffroom:

- Kate ?
- She isn 't here at the moment. I haven't seen her. ***Sorry***.

2) A lecturer and a student during consultation:

- *You've missed a preposition here.*
- *Oh, **sorry**. Does 'resolution' mean 'decision?'*
- *No, it means 'promise'.*

- *Sorry.*

According to P. Hobday *Sorry* is the most often used phrase in English: 'You will hear this used all the time. For some reason, the best known to themselves, the English, as a nation, seem to apologize a great deal as much for imagined discourtesies as for real injury' [Hobday, 1999:81].

This is due to the fact that personal privacy is an important characteristic of the etiquette communicative behaviour of the English-speaking nations. English communicants use the most common formulaic expression of offering apologies everywhere where there is a threat of invasion of privacy. For example, while representatives of the Slavic cultural communities (particularly Russian and Bulgarian) try to avoid confrontation with passers–by observing a distance of 1.5/2 meters, the English try keep this distance to 3-4 meters, respectively when this social norm is violated the British start apologizing [Brosnahan 1998; Prokhorov, Sternin, 2002:157].

Another interesting feature of the English communicative behavior is the fact that when there is an invasion of privacy usually both participants in the situation apologize and say *(Sorry - Sorry),* regardless of who caused the inconvenience. Thus, both communicators recognize the imbalance created in the relationship and express readiness to recover it. In the Bulgarian communicative behaviour patterns it is generally accepted that it is the one who is guilty who is supposed to apologize.

Pragmatic cliches with *pardon/I beg your pardon* in British English are a conventional way of asking the speaker to repeat his/her words [Owen 1983: 70]. An interesting illustration of this can be found in Carroll's book Alice in Wonderland*: I beg your pardon?' 'It is not respectable to beg', said the King.' 'I only meant that I didn 't understand', said Alice'* [Carroll, 1962: 280].

2. Imperative/requestive apologies

Excuse me is a speech formula, most often used for attracting attention: *Excuse me, is there a post office near here?* But also it can be used to draw attention to some negative effects: *Excuse me*! (a teacher to students misbehaving in class, a pedestrian or a passenger in public transport in violation of his privacy). In the latter case, the phrase *Excuse me!* is pronounced with a certain intonation with emphasis on each word, expressing dissatisfaction and in this is a case of a phonetic means for expressing modality.

Forgive me is not a typical speech etiquette formula for offering apologies in English.

These speech stereotypes are elliptical forms of performative origin which further rituality and thus express relative indifference to sincerity. Apologies in grammatical imperative form of the verbs *excuse, pardon and forgive* are pragmatically requestives, more tentative than commands associated with imperatives. Combinability with please marks them as tentative impositives.

Examples**: *Excuse me, please/Pardon me, please/ Forgive me, please.*

Imperatives with these forms (excuse and pardon) do not express so much an acceptance of responsibility rather then an attempt to achieve absolution. They are pragmatically expedient and deferential.

3. 'Pseudo-apologies'

Other pragmatic cliché used to offer apologies in English is *I'm afraid* [Owen 1983: 90, Aijmer 1996: 85], proving once again that British apology is an expression of regret. This SA is commonly used for giving unfavorable information in response to a prior question: *Is Ted there, please? - No, I'm afraid he's gone to London for the weekend actually* (from a telephone conversation).

Apologies occur frequently as social routines which may not meet the demands expressed in the sincerity conditions [Owen, 1983: 119]. If the sincerity rule is that the speaker feels regret for the committed act, many of the apologies made in everyday

communication must be classified as 'insincere' in the strict sense of the word. As a consequence, a distinction has been made between **'heartfelt apologies'** and **'routine apologies'** [Owen, 1983: 119]. B. Fraser calls the routine apologies **'ritual apologies'** [Fraser, 1981: 266].

These speech formulas in most cases do not sound like apologies but are more or less polite signs of attention to the hearer without expressing the real feelings of the speaker. Ritual apologies are typical for standard situations where the addressee apologizes for small, almost insignificant inconvenience, meeting social expectations of others [Bach & Harnish, 1979: 51].

LEXICAL MEANS OF EXPRESSING MODALITY IN THE SA OF APOLOGIES IN ENGLISH

An apology can also be internally modified by means of various strategies that either emphasize or soften the violation of the offense. These strategies include **modality markers** such as **downtoners** (*'possibly', 'perhaps'*), **hedges** (*'kind/sort of', 'somehow'*), **mental state predicates** (*'I suppose', 'I think', 'I believe'*), or **intensifiers** (*'I'm so/ very /really/ awfully/ terribly sorry'*).

Although these intensifiers can be used interchangeably, there actually is a difference in American English between **"*very*"** and **"*really*,"** with "*really*" implying more regret and *"very"* more etiquette. Thus, if you want to offer an apology to an American friend which you want to sound sincere it is better for you to say, "*I'm really sorry. Are you O.K.?"* in stead of just "*I'm very sorry*" [Cohen, Olshtain, & Rosenstein 1986:66-67].

Another intensifier which is used only in written apologies is the adverb ***extremely****: I was extremely sorry that I was unable to get to your father's funeral* [Aijmer 1996: 90]

Not only could an intensifier play an important role, but even an interjection like **"Oh!"** could have an important role. In fact, there could be times when a well-placed "Oh!" and an offer of repair could take the place of an expression of apology in American English: e.g., "*Oh! Here, let me help get something on that burn and clean up the mess*," as opposed to, "*I'm very sorry that I bumped into you*."

In response to an apology English communicators emphasize the insignificance of the damage or inconvenience caused and assure the addressee that the balance of the relationship is restored. The most conventional responses in accepting apologies in English are**: OK / It's OK / That's (It's) all right / No problem / Don't worry / Never mind.**
(I 'm) sorry to keep you waiting. — No, ***it's all right.***
Well, sorry about that. — ***That's all right****. It's not your fault.*
Sorry to ring you so early. - No, ***it's all right****. It's not early.*

It is interesting to note that the speech formulas ***That's (It's) all right / It's OK*** may be used as pragmatic clichés not only for accepting apologies, but also for accepting acts of gratitude, which confirms the fact that these speech acts have a lot in common.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the various means of expressing modality in the speech stereotypes of apologies in contemporary English show that:

1. Apologies aren't all the same. Choice of speech stereotype and form are reflective of content, sincerity and social attitude, linked with variance in purpose and illocutionary potential.

2. The English use a great variety of means of expressing modality in order to make and accept apologies.

3. The choice of the grammatical and lexical means for expressing this SA depends on whether the speaker makes 'heartfelt apologies' or 'routine apologies'.

4. Ritual apologies lack semantic significance and are typical for standard situations where the addressee apologizes for small, almost insignificant inconvenience, meeting social expectations of others.

5. *Sorry* is the most formalized ritual formula for an apology in English and it is used very often in everyday life. Its main pragmatic purpose is to keep harmony between the communicators.

6. *Excuse me* is a speech formula, most often used for attracting attention.

7. In the English communicative culture apology is not only an expression of regret, but also a commonly used courtesy to the addressee, an official marker of politeness.

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