

A Discussion of the Art of Apology From the Perspective of Speech Act Theory

YU Weihua^{[a],*}

^[a]Associate Professor, School of Foreign Languages, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao, China.

*Corresponding author.

Received 10 June 2015; accepted 13 July 2015
Published online 26 September 2015

Abstract

In our communication, apology is an important part of politeness in many speech communities. Starting from the general review of basic theories, the paper here explains the definition and functions of apology speech act, analyzes strategies taken by speakers when they make an apology, including directive apologetic speech act and indirect apologetic speech act. It explores influential factors for apology speech and highlights that the degree of offense determines different measures of apology. Finally it examines the pragmatic failure in receiving apology, pointing out that knowing when and how to make a proper apology is critical for our harmonious interpersonal communication.

Key words: Apology; Offensive; Remedy; Pragmatic

Yu, W. H. (2015). A Discussion of the Art of Apology From the Perspective of Speech Act Theory. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 11(3), 1-6. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/7539>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/7539>

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal communication in our social life is very complicated. In our communication with people, we often do something wrong or just improper unintentionally to offend others, which are unavoidable but may do great harm to interpersonal relationship. At that moment, it is necessary for us to make an apology in order to maintain speakers' friendly relationship. Therefore, "apology" is a kind of polite and remediable speech act. It can provide remedy for an offensive action and

help to regain social balance or harmony, representing speakers' communicative competence. In view of its great importance, it is quite necessary to study how and when to make an apology as well as many other factors concerned.

1. GENERAL REVIEW OF BASIC THEORIES

1.1 Speech Act Theory

Speech Act Theory is one of the most important theories in pragmatics study. It was put forward first by the famous linguist Austin, and later developed and improved by Searle and other scholars. According to the theory, our speech is not the simple combination of sound and meaning, and it can also produce acts. Austin believes that when we utter something, we are performing simultaneously three acts: locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act:

A locutionary act involves the uttering of an expression with sense and reference.

An illocutionary act is the act performed in saying the locution, such that what was said had the force of that illocution.

A perlocutionary act is the consequential effects of an utterance on an interlocutor, i.e., what is achieved by saying something.

(Austin, 1962)

In 1969, Searle further develops Austin's work and refines the theory of speech acts, especially Austin's concept of felicity. For Searle, each speech act is subject to a set of conditions for its successful and non-defective performance with a given utterance, and we can extract from these conditions a set of rules for the use of any act which define forms of intentional behavior that would not exist independently of the rules. He then proposes that all speech acts are defined by four types of felicity conditions: propositional content conditions, preparatory conditions, sincerity conditions and essential conditions. His theory is considered more rational and is widely accepted.

1.2 Brown and Levinson's Face-Saving Theory

Brown and Levinson's politeness theory builds upon Goffman's idea of "face" and their theory is so called "face-saving theory". They propose that people have an innate desire to monitor one's and others' "face" in social situations. The face here refers to "public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself and something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

They construe face as consisting of two specific kinds of desires or face-wants that individual interactants attribute to one another, and that every member knows every other member desires. They call these negative face and positive face. In their mind, linguistic acts are intrinsically face-threatening, so speakers will try to avoid such face-threatening acts and take strategies to lessen the threat and reduce any possible offense to all parties involved.

Brown and Levinson (1987) assume that there are three sociological variables that affect the assessment of the seriousness of a face-threatening act in many and perhaps all cultures:

Firstly, social distance between the speaker and the hearer, in effect, the degree of familiarity and solidarity they share.

Secondly, relative power of the speaker with respect to the hearer, i.e. the degree to which the speaker can impose his will on the hearer.

Thirdly, absolute ranking of imposition in the culture, both in terms of the expenditure of goods or services by the hearer, the right of the speaker to perform the act, and the degree to which the hearer welcomes the imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

2. DEFINITION OF APOLOGY SPEECH ACT

Apology is an important part of politeness in many speech communities. Therefore, many linguists showed great interest in this subject and have made systematic studies and defined it in various ways.

According to Searle (1979), apologizing is among the category of "expressive". Speech acts express the psychological state specified in the sincerity condition about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content", and apology speech act obviously shows the speaker's regret about some state or affairs.

Fraser (1981) indicates that the performance of apology needs two basic conditions: first, the speaker acknowledges responsibility for having performed some act. Second, the speaker conveys regret for the offense which came about as a result of the commission of the act. Neither of them can be sufficient condition for the performance of apology speech act.

Brown and Levinson (1987) consider apology as a

face-threatening act, which damages to some degree the speaker's positive face since in doing it the speaker admits that he has done a transgression. By apologizing, the speaker meanwhile pays the debt created by his transgression, thus restoring the interacting balance. In short, apologizing is face-saving for the hearer and face-threatening for the speaker.

For Leech, apologizing is a convivial speech act whose goal coincides with the social goal of maintaining harmony between speaker and hearer providing some benefit for the hearer and some cost to the speaker (Leech, 1983).

Janet Holmes (1989) has a different perspective on the apology speech act from Leech and Brown and Levinson. She considers apology speech acts as face supportive acts, which pay attention to the face needs of the addressee. Apologies express negative politeness. They signal the speaker's awareness of having impinged on the hearer's negative face and restricted his freedom of action in some way. He defines apology speech act as a speech act addressed to B's face needs and intended to remedy an offense for which A takes responsibility, and thus to restore equilibrium between A and B. (A is the apologist, B is the victim or person offended)

Holmes grants importance to the speaker's "positive face" by suggesting that apologies can be described as "face-supportive acts" for the speaker and the hearer since they derive benefit for both. She claims that although apologies are generally dealing with offense that have damaged the hearer's face and are thus regarded as "negative politeness" strategies, certain elements within the realization of the apologies may also address the victim's or the speaker's positive face needs.

All in all, apology speech acts are very important pragmatic and sociolinguistics issues, which involve many linguistic aspects, including the apologist's acknowledgement of the responsibility, the victim's consciousness of the offense, the apologist and the victim's face, the restoration of the social equilibrium, etc.. Only when the apologist apologizes in proper ways can the apology be successfully realized.

3. FUNCTIONS OF APOLOGY

3.1 Apologies Can Function as Social Speech Act

According to Brown and Levinson (1978), apologies are social or affective speech acts which are primarily oriented to support the relationship between participants rather than to the expression of referential information or propositional meaning. To apologize is to act politely, both in the vernacular sense and in the more technical sense of paying attention to the addressee's face needs. On most occasions, apologizing for an offense is very evidently in the speaker's interests and thus, at least in the longer term, is undeniably rational behavior.

3.2 Apologies Can Maintain Face

Holmes (1990) claims that although the speech act serving most directly as the apology functions as a negative politeness strategy, accompanying elements may address the victim's or the speaker's positive face needs, because the overall function of the remedial exchange is to maintain participants' face, and in order to do so elements in the exchange may address transgressions to positive or negative face wants. Since from the speaker's point of view, an apology may itself be the face-threatening act that damages the speaker's positive face by admitting that he had offended the victim, and the remedial exchange may incorporate an attempt to simultaneously address the speaker's positive face needs as well as the victim's face needs.

According to Holmes, as a speech act, an apology needs to satisfy three conditions: (a) an act has taken place, (b) speaker A believes that the act has offended speaker B, (c) speaker A wants to take the responsibility for it. Under such conditions, the main purpose of "apology" is to maintain listeners' face which is considered "face-supportive act", as in example (1)

(1) (A knocks against B carelessly, who is standing still)

A: Sorry

B: That's Ok.

In this example, speaker A, the apologist, used "sorry" to make an apology just for remedying the speaker B's face, not including his own face.

In addition to addressing the victim's face loss, apologies may simultaneously address the loss of positive face incurred by the speaker. Where a remedial exchange includes an explanation, the speaker's positive face needs are generally taken into account, as in example (2)

(2) (A is calling B)

A: I'm sorry but I'm going to be a little late for the class. It is rainy, and I have been caught in the traffic jam. The bus is about 15 minutes late.

B: Uh-huh, I see. I'll inform your students and ask them to wait for you.

In this remediable conversation, speaker A has realized that he has potentially offended speaker B's negative face, therefore he used words "I'm sorry". Meanwhile, he tried to address his own positive face by pointing out two reasons for his offense.

4. APOLOGY STRATEGIES TAKEN BY SPEAKERS

Complex speech acts like apologies actually consist of a set of routinized strategies typically used by native speakers. The classification of apology strategies develops in linguistic history, and we can adopt one single apology strategy or have preference for a combination of several strategies, which depend on the specific situation within

the given language and culture. Many scholars have made great studies of apologizing and have developed several models on apologies.

4.1 Cohen & Olshtain's Models

According to Cohen and Olshtain (1981), there are five possible strategies for making an apology.

a) An expression of an apology. The speaker uses a word, expression, or sentence containing a verb such as "sorry", "excuse", "forgive", or "apologize". Languages have certain words that are used to express an oral apology more than others. An expression of an apology can be intensified whenever the apologist feels the need to do so.

b) Acknowledgement of responsibility. The offender recognizes his fault in causing the infraction. The degree of such recognition on the part of the apologist can be placed on different scales.

c) An explanation or account. The speaker describes the situation which caused him to commit it offense and which is used by this speaker as an indirect way of apologizing. The explanation is intended to set things right.

d) An offer of repair. The apologist makes a bid to carry out an action or provide payment for some kind of damage resulting from his infraction.

e) A promise of non-recurrence. The apologist commits him to not having the offense happen again, which is again situation-specific and less frequent than the other strategies.

4.2 Holmes' Models

Holmes (1990) distinguishes four main strategies for her survey on New Zealand English, with some of which having sub-strategies:

(1) Explicit expression

a) Offering an apology

b) Expressing regret

c) Requesting forgiveness

(2) Explanations

Accounts, excuses and justifications

(3) Acknowledgement of responsibility

a) Expressing lack of intent

b) Explicit acknowledging responsibility

c) Expressing self-deficiency

d) Explicitly expressing acceptance of blame

(4) Promise of forbearance

4.3 Reiter's Models

Reiter (2000) distinguishes the following strategies in her discussion in the comparative study of the strategic differences in apologizing between the British and Uruguay culture.

Illocutionary force indicating device

a) Expression of regret, e.g. I am sorry

b) Offer of apology, e.g. I apologize

c) Request for forgiveness, e.g. Pardon me

- (2) An explanation or account
- (3) Acknowledgement of responsibility
 - a) Accepting blame, e.g. It was my fault.
 - b) Expressing self-deficiency, e.g. I didn't see you
 - c) Recognizing the other person as deserving an apology
 - d) Expressing lack of intent, e.g. I didn't mean to ...
- (4) An offer of repair or an offer of restitution
- (5) A promise of forbearance

4.4 Models by Chinese Speakers

The above models have been proved to be of great help to the study of western languages because these models originate from western languages. On the basis of their study and combined with our cultural custom, we can conclude that our Chinese speakers often take the following measures to make an apology:

(1) Direct apologetic speech act

Speakers often make apologies directly under these three conditions: (a) to raise his apology directly. e.g. I apologize (b) to show his regret. e.g. I'm afraid / I'm sorry (c) to ask for excuse. e.g. Excuse me/ Forgive me

(2) Indirect apologetic speech act

Sometimes people don't want to show his apology directly for some reason, but he knows he need do so. Instead of apologizing directly, speakers sometimes show their regret indirectly by taking the following methods:

a) To explain or find an excuse

e.g. I didn't know you've come
None of us are familiar with the job.

b) To confirm responsibility

- (1) To accept others' blame e.g. It was my fault.
- (2) To show that he himself has certain fault e.g. I was puzzled.
- (3) To admit that the listener has right to receive his apology

e.g. You're right.

You're worthy of an apology.

(4) To express that he has no intention of offense

e.g. I didn't mean to get in your way.

(5) To offer remedy

e.g. I'll find a better one for you.

We'll repair it for you tomorrow.

c) To make a promise of restrain

e.g. I promise I won't be late again.

It won't happen again, I promise.

Interestingly, in our daily life, these strategies don't exclude each other. Sometimes, they may occur at the same time, which can be shown in the following conversation:

(Speaker A and speaker B are classmates. Speaker B has asked speaker A to help her to return a book, and speaker A has forgotten.)

B: Thank you for your returning the book.

A: Oh, my dear! That's right. I forgot. I'm sorry, I'll remember tomorrow.

5. INFLUENTIAL FACTORS FOR APOLOGY SPEECH

5.1 The Degree of Offense

The function of apologetic speech act is to remedy offensive act. It is a polite strategy in nature. The more serious the offensive act is, the more polite the remediable measures should be. In Holmes' opinion, we can have the following six kinds of offensive act:

(1) Your acts can bring about inconvenience for listeners

e.g. (Teacher A is giving a lecture in a large room. B is a student)

A: You said you didn't know the proverb? I explained it just now.

B: I'm in the last line, and the room...

A: Oh, sorry. I should have spoken louder.

For such offense, apologetic speech acts often consist of simple apology and an explanation.

(2) You occupy others' space

For instance, you bump others or occupy others' chair. More often it can only cause slight inconvenience. You apologize just to show that you have no intention. Therefore, we often use directive apologetic expression, almost always using "sorry".

e.g. (Speaker A is sitting on speaker B's chair. speaker B is standing beside the chair)

A: Sorry.

B: That's OK!

(3) You waste others' time or interrupt other speakers

e.g. A: Where did you go last night? I remembered that I invited you to see a film together.

B: I'm really sorry. I thought you meant tonight. I'll invite you tonight.

Here, in addition to a directive apology, an explanation is necessary, just like the first kind of offense.

(4) You damage or lose what speakers possess, including money. Consider the following conversation:

A: You know that book you lent me. I'm afraid I've lost it. If you like, I'll buy you another one.

B: Oh, don't worry. I won't read it until next term.

In this case, besides the fact that you show your apology, you should often take your responsibility of compensation. Such events as crashing into one's car, spilling tea or coffee on their clothes, losing one's book or pen etc. are also included in such offense.

In addition, different words of apology can also reflect different offensive degree. Just like in the event of Wanghai's air crash, our Chinese people weren't satisfied with Bush's "I'm sorry", and we hope to hear the words "I make an apology" from him because Chinese people thought it was serious offensive act, but Bush refused. When our embassy was bombarded in Yugoslavia, they expressed their apology with "I make an apology" because of the most serious offensive degree.

In a word, the degree of offense is an important factor in choosing proper measures of apology. For slight offensive act, a simple directive apology is enough. But for more serious offense, an explanation is necessary besides directive apology. Sometimes, you should even take your responsibility actively. All in all, the more serious your offense is, the more complicated measures of apology become.

5.2 Speakers' Status, Power and Their Relationship

In addition to the above offensive degree, the relationship between speakers, especially their difference in power and status, is another important factor. Even if the offensive act is not very serious, the great difference in speakers' power and status may lead to more complicated and more polite strategies of apology. The greater a listener's power is, the more serious the offense is, more polite strategies of apology are needed.

6. PRAGMATIC FAILURE IN RECEIVING APOLOGY

A whole apologetic speech act can be completed only when the apologist makes an apology sincerely meanwhile the apologist hopes the other side can accept the apology. Language used in apologetic speech act should be standardized. In Chinese, when you accept other people's apology, you often say "mei guan xi", but in English, "It doesn't matter" or "never mind" can't be used in accepting apology, and in this case, such expressions as "That's all right", "That's Ok" or "No problem" should be better.

The concept "Pragmatic failure" was put forward by Britain linguist Thomas in 1980's, which means not understanding what other people have said. Thomas believes that pragmatic failure is the most important reason for leading to cross-cultural communication failure. Wang (1990) believes that Chinese students can easily have pragmatic failure in receiving apology. For example, a Chinese woman worker has done a good job in a company, and the foreign manager was very satisfied with her. Then we have the following conversation:

Manager: Thanks a lot. That's a great help.

Worker: Never mind.

In this example, the worker wants to express "that's all right", but he uses "Never mind" by mistake. "Never mind" in English is often used in the following circumstances: One part expresses apology, but the other doesn't mind, and this is the conventional phrase of consolation. Obviously, the worker used the English expression by mistake, leading to pragmatic failure.

Unconscious pragmatic failure may result in more serious consequence than grammar mistake. Thomas believes that in speech communication speakers' mistake in pronunciation, grammar and improper use of words is only superficial, and at most he is considered a poor

English speaker. But if he can't deal with speech act with English pragmatic principle, he may be considered not sincere or even liable to cheat deliberately. Therefore pragmatic failure is the root of communication problem, as in the following example:

On a train, a Chinese hits his head against the window as the train stops. Seeing this, an American sitting next to him expresses his pity:

American: I am sorry.

Chinese: It's not your fault.

Here, some pragmatic failure occurs in the communication. When the American says "I am sorry", the effect of the illocutionary force is just to show sympathy for the Chinese. But the Chinese misunderstands the expression of sympathy for an apology. It is no wonder the American is puzzled about the reply.

CONCLUSION

Apology is an important part of politeness in many speech communities. Apology speech acts are essential pragmatic and sociolinguistics issues, which involve many linguistic aspects, including the apologist's cognition of the responsibility, the victim's consciousness of the offense, the apologist and the victim's face etc..

Complex apology speech acts are actually made up of a set of fixed strategies typically used by native speakers, and we can adopt one single apology strategy or choose a combination of several strategies, which depends on the specific situation within the given language and culture, and it can often be influenced by many factors, including the degree of offense as well as speakers' status, power and their relationship.

In conclusion, knowing when and how to make a proper apology is critical for our harmonious interpersonal communication; being willing to make a sincere apology is an embodiment of a person's high quality. At the same time, it also represents a person's self-confidence and self-esteem. Only such people are more open to criticism and less demanding of others, and only such people can be liked and respected in our social communication.

REFERENCES

- Amy, B. M. (2000). *English conversation*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1978). *Universals of language usage: Politeness phenomena*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cohen, A. D., & Olshtain, E. (1981). Developing a measure of sociocultural competence: The case of apology. *Language Learning*, 31.

- Goffinan, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual*. New York: Anchor.
- Holmes, J. (1989). Sex differences and apologies: One aspect of communicative competence. *Applied Linguistics*, 10.
- Holmes, J. (1990). *Apologies in New Zealand English*, language in society. *VOL 15*(2), 155-199.
- Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Levinson, S. C. (1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Owen, M. (1980). *Apologies and remedial interchanges*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Rosina, M. R., & Benjamins, J. (2000). *A contrastive study of requests and apologies*. Publishing Company.
- Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Searle, J. R. (1979). *Expression and meaning: Studies in the theory of speech acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thomas, J. (1983). Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics*, 4(2).
- Wang, D. X. (1998). *English discourse analysis and intercultural communication*. Beijing Language and Cultural University Press.