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THE SOCIOPRAGMATIC DIMENSIONS OF APOLOGISING AS A COMMUNICATIVE ACT

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In the context of sociopragmatics, communication plays a fundamental role in the expression and negotiation of social norms and expectations. Effective communication hinges on an understanding of sociopragmatic principles, such as politeness strategies and speech acts. This study *aims* to examine the communicative act of apologizing, focusing on the speaker-sign-listener-social context correlation. The objective is to determine how the choice of various linguistic forms influences perceptions of politeness and social appropriateness in communication. By analyzing different types of apologies, the present paper seeks to identify apology strategies within the communication process and to evaluate how these strategies facilitate the repair of relationships and the restoration of trust. Ultimately, the research enhances our understanding of the power of language in interpersonal communication and underscores the significance of effective apologies in contemporary society. The findings provide insights into the diverse linguistic and social factors that contribute to effective apologies, which typically involve acknowledging responsibility for wrongdoing, expressing remorse, and offering reassurances for future conduct.

Keywords: *sociopragmatics, communicative act, apology strategies, social context, politeness strategy, expressives.*

Introduction

Language itself is a social behavior and it seems to be senseless to study speech without reference to the society. It has long and generally been established that the meaning of a particular linguistic expression is governed by rules of syntax, semantics, phonology and style, but the choice of that particular type is strongly affected by the

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sociopragmatic purpose of the utterance. Sociopragmatics is to be seen not so much as a linguistic discipline with a particular orientation, but as a confluence of trends and currents which studies speech in various aspects and stresses the role of the fourfold system “speaker-sign-listener-social context” as basically important in providing scope for achieving both sociolinguistic and pragmatic aims (Terkourafi, 2021; Cap & Nijakowska, 2007). The arrival of sociopragmatics on the scene has made it possible to look at the speech act of apologizing in a new perspective laying emphasis on the users of the language, the links between text and context, interpretation of literal and nonliteral meanings, norms governing interlocutors’ language use or linguistic behaviour, the impact of social and cultural factors on language use, etc. (Marmaridou, 2011).

Apologies can manifest in various forms, ranging from simple expressions of regret to more elaborate rituals involving gestures and actions. Studying apologies requires a multifaceted approach that considers their linguistic, social, and cultural dimensions. Hence, the theoretical foundations of apologies are diverse and interdisciplinary (speech act theory, discourse analysis, speech accommodation theory, etc. (Searle, Kiefer, & Bierwisch, 1980; Trosborg, 2010; Holmes, 2013) reflecting the complex nature of this communicative act and contributing to understanding how apologies are constructed and interpreted in language, emphasizing the role of sociopragmatic norms. Apologizing is a common communicative act used to express regret, empathy, sympathy, or to repair social relationships. The use of apologies varies depending on the context, necessitating a comprehensive analysis. This analysis employs a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, including descriptive and discourse analysis, to examine apologies and their corresponding responses in various contexts. Examples are drawn from different movies, which offer a modern and engaging way to explore complex emotions and human experiences. The visual and auditory components of films provide a unique perspective and enhance the audience's understanding of the subject matter.

Functions and strategies of apologies

Communication is the process of sending and receiving messages through verbal or nonverbal means, including oral or written communication, graphical representations (such as infographics, maps, and charts) as well as signs, signals, and behavior. All creatures on earth have developed means to convey their emotions and thoughts to one another. However, it's the ability of humans to use words and language to transfer specific meanings that sets them apart from the animal kingdom (Nordquist, 2019).

In any communication there is a sender and a receiver, a message, and interpretations of meaning on both ends. The receiver gives feedback to the sender of the message, both while conveying the message and afterward. If the receiver can hear the sender, he or she can also pick up cues from the sender's tone of voice, such as emphasis and emotion (Baran, 2021).

Apology falls into the category of expressive speech acts. Apologizing is a speech act that involves acknowledging responsibility for a wrongdoing and expressing regret for any harm caused to others. It is an important social skill that allows individuals to repair damaged relationships and restore trust in interpersonal interactions (Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007, pp. 291-302).

An apology may also include elements of commissive speech acts when the speakers promise to make amends or take responsibility for their actions. Apologies can take many forms, from a simple "I'm sorry" to a more elaborate explanation of the situation and expression of remorse (Searle, 1980).

The way we apologize can impact how effective our apology is. Research shows that apologies that are perceived as sincere and remorseful are more likely to be accepted than apologies that are seen as insincere or lacking in empathy (Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989, pp. 219-227).

An effective apology typically includes three key elements: an acknowledgment of responsibility, an expression of regret, and a commitment to change behavior in the future. Apologies that lack any of these elements may be perceived as insincere or ineffective (Lazare, Klerman, & Armor, 1975).

- *Acknowledging the impact of one's actions*

Acknowledging the impact of one's actions is a frequently used way to express an apology in modern English. The following example from the movie "The Iron Lady" (2011) can serve as an illustration. In one scene Margaret Thatcher, played by Meryl Streep, gives a public apology for her handling of the poll tax riots:

e.g. Margaret Thatcher: I express my deep regret for the injuries to police and protestors alike and the damage to property caused by the events of the last few days.

(Lloyd, 2011)

This example shows how acknowledging the impact of one's actions can be a powerful way to show empathy and take responsibility for a mistake.

- *Offering to make amends:*

Offering to make amends is another significant way to express an apology. It shows that the person apologizing is willing to take action to make things right and repair the damage caused by their actions. In the movie "Atonement" (2007), directed by Joe Wright and starring Keira Knightley and James McAvoy a young girl named Briony (played by Saoirse Ronan) accuses her elder sister's lover, Robbie (played by McAvoy), of a crime he did not commit, which leads to his imprisonment and separation from his lover, Cecilia (played by Knightley). Later in the movie, Briony realizes the gravity of her mistake and attempts to make amends by apologizing and seeking restitution for her actions. The following dialogue between Briony and Cecilia highlights the theme of restitution:

e.g. *Briony: I'm sorry, Cecilia. I was foolish and childish, please forgive me.*

Cecilia: It's too late.

Briony: I know it's too late. I just wanted to say...I'm sorry.

Cecilia: But you were 13! And you were just a child. We all make mistakes. You've got to let it go.

*Briony: **I can't. I have to make amends. I have to try to undo the damage that I've done.***

Cecilia: How can you possibly undo what you've done?

*Briony: **I don't know. But I have to try. It's the only thing I can do.***

(Wright, 2007)

- *Explaining the reason for one's actions:*

Explaining the reason for one's actions can help the person who was hurt understand why the mistake was made and may help to avoid similar mistakes in the future. The following scene from the movie "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind" (2004) is a vivid example. Clementine initially reacts negatively to Joel's comment about her being nice. However, she later apologizes to Joel for yelling at him and explains the reason for her behavior.

e.g. *Joel: I don't know. I just... I don't know. I just, uh... You seem nice, so...*

Clementine: Oh, now I'm nice? Oh, God. Don't you know any other adjectives? I don't need "nice". I don't need myself to be it, and I don't need anybody else to be it at me. Okay... Joel? It's Joel, right?

Joel: Yes.

*Clementine: **I'm sorry I yelled at you. I'm a little out of sorts today. My embarrassing admission is, I really like that you're nice right now.***

(Gondy, 2004)

Clementine's apology is notable because she explains the reason for her outburst, which could help Joel understand her perspective and avoid misunderstandings in the future.

- *Expressing regret:*

Expressing regret is an important part of apologizing, as it shows that the speaker understands the gravity of the situation and feels remorse for his/her actions. Some

common phrases used to express regret in an apology include: *"I'm really sorry for what I did."*, *"I deeply regret my actions."*, *"I wish I could take back what I said/did."*

In the following example from the movie "The Notebook" Noah Calhoun (played by Ryan Gosling) apologizes to Allie Hamilton (played by Rachel McAdams) for losing his temper and yelling at her.

e.g. Noah: *I'm sorry for yelling at you. I didn't mean to hurt you. **I regret my actions** and wish I could take back what I said.*

- *Accepting responsibility:*

Taking responsibility for one's actions is a crucial component of a sincere apology. The person apologizing must acknowledge that they are responsible for the harm caused and express a willingness to make amends. Some examples of phrases that indicate accepting responsibility include: *"I take full responsibility for what I did."*, *"I know that my actions caused you harm, and I am sorry."*, *"I realize that I was wrong and I am committed to making things right."*, etc.

The following example from the movie "Atonement" can serve as an illustration. Robbie Turner (played by James McAvoy) apologizes to Cecilia Tallis (played by Keira Knightley) for writing an inappropriate letter about her:

e.g. Robbie Turner: ***I take full responsibility for** what I wrote. I know that my actions caused you pain, and **I am truly sorry.***
(Wright, 2007)

Response strategies

Studies have shown that people respond differently to different ways of apologies. In general, a sincere apology that takes responsibility for the offense and expresses remorse is the most effective. However, the way in which the apology is delivered can also have an impact on the response. For example, apologies that are accompanied by compensation, such as offering to make amends or providing a gift, may be more successful. Research has also shown that people respond more positively to apologies that are delivered in person rather than through technology, such as email or text message (Matsuzawa, 2016, pp. 67-75). The following example from the movie "The Social Network" (2010) shows the impact of delivery on the response to an apology. In the movie, the character Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, is sued by his former best friend Eduardo Saverin for cutting him out of the company. In an attempt to apologize, Mark sends Eduardo a private message on Facebook, saying, *"I'm sorry I made such a mess of things. I never meant for any of this to happen."* However, Eduardo is not satisfied with this message and responds, *"You wrote that on my wall,*

Mark. That's public." This scene highlights the importance of delivery and the impact that technology can have on the sincerity and effectiveness of an apology.

Also, people may have different ways of responding to apologies, depending on their personal values, cultural background, and the situation in which the apology is made. Here are some common ways of answering, accepting, and refusing apologies.

- *Accepting with forgiveness:*

One common way to respond to an apology is to accept it and offer forgiveness. This involves acknowledging the other person's apology, expressing appreciation for it, and letting go of any negative feelings or resentment. For example, in the film "The Princess Diaries," Mia apologizes to her best friend Lilly for not telling her that she was a princess, and Lilly responds to Mia:

e.g. *Lilly: I forgive you, Mia. I just wish you had told me sooner.*

(Marshal, 2001)

- *Accepting without forgiveness:*

Sometimes, people may accept an apology without fully forgiving the other person. This may happen if they feel that the apology is insincere, if they need more time to process their feelings, or if the harm caused by the offense is too great. For example, in the film "Atonement," Robbie apologizes to Cecilia for his past behaviour, and she responds:

e.g. *Cecilia: You are forgiven, but it does not change what you did.*

(Wright, 2007)

- *Acknowledging the apology but withholding forgiveness:*

Another way to respond to an apology is to acknowledge it, but make it clear that forgiveness will not be given easily or quickly. This may happen if the offense is particularly serious, if the person has been hurt deeply, or if they need to see more effort on the part of the apologizer before they can fully forgive. For example, in the TV show "The Office" Jim apologizes to Pam for kissing her while he was still with Karen, and Pam responds:

e.g. *Pam: I appreciate your apology, but it's going to take some time for me to get over this.*

(Daniels, Gervais, & Merchant, Episode 17, 2007)

- *Rejecting the apology:*

Sometimes, people may choose to reject an apology altogether, either because they feel that the other person is not sincere, or because the offense was too great to be forgiven. This may also happen if the person believes that the apologizer does not understand the full extent of the harm they have caused. Here is an example from the movie "La La Land" (2016):

e.g. *Sebastian: Look, I'm sorry, all right? I screwed up.*

Mia: You really did. You really, really did.

Sebastian: But I'm not gonna lose you.

*Mia: **You already did.***

(Chazelle, 2016)

In this scene, Sebastian is apologizing to Mia for his behaviour and mistakes that led to the deterioration of their relationship. However, Mia rejects his apology with an assertive speech act, emphasizing that he has already lost her. This rejection highlights the severity of the situation and the impact of Sebastian's actions, making it difficult for him to regain her trust.

- *Seeking reparations:*

In some cases, people may respond to an apology by seeking reparations, either in the form of compensation, restitution, or some other form of tangible or intangible restitution. This may happen if the offense caused financial or other kinds of damage, or if the person wants to see concrete evidence of the apologizer's commitment to making things right. Here is an example of seeking reparations from the film "Sorry to Bother You" (2018) directed by Boots Riley. In this film, the main character, Cassius Green (played by Lakeith Stanfield), works as a telemarketer and is offered a promotion if he adopts a "white voice" over the phone. Cassius initially resists, but eventually gives in and becomes successful. Later in the movie, Cassius realizes the consequences of his actions and decides to apologize to his co-workers and community for his complicity in perpetuating systemic racism:

e.g. *Cassius Green: I'm sorry for the role that I've played in maintaining a system that oppresses people like us. And I want to make it right. So, to all my colleagues here, I want to offer reparations. I'm going to give each of you \$100,000. And I want to use my platform to raise awareness and fight for systemic change.*

(Boots, 2018)

This dialogue highlights the importance of taking responsibility for one's actions and seeking to make amends by offering reparations and taking action to address systemic issues.

- *Seeking an explanation:*

Another way to respond to an apology is to seek an explanation for the behavior or actions that led to the offense. This may happen if the person wants to understand why the other person acted in a certain way, or if they need to see evidence that the behaviour will not be repeated in the future.

For example, in the movie "Moonlight" (2016) directed by Barry Jenkins is seen the example of seeking an explanation. In this film, the main character, Chiron (played by Alex Hibbert, Ashton Sanders, and Trevante Rhodes), grows up in a rough neighbourhood in Miami and struggles with his identity and sexuality. In one scene, Chiron visits his childhood friend, Kevin (played by André Holland), who apologizes for betraying him in high school. Chiron responds by seeking an explanation, asking Kevin why he did what he did. The conversation becomes quite lengthy and emotional, with Chiron expressing his hurt and confusion.

e.g. Chiron: ***Why'd you do that to me, man?***

Kevin: *I'm sorry, man. I was young. I didn't know any better.*

Chiron: *You knew enough. You knew not to do that.*

Kevin: *I know. I was scared. I didn't know what else to do.*

Chiron: *You weren't the only one who was scared. I was scared too. And you did that to me. You broke my heart.*

Kevin: *I know, man. I know. I can't take it back. But I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.*

(Jenkins, 2016)

This dialogue showcases the importance of seeking an explanation when receiving an apology, as it can help to understand the motivations behind someone's actions and provide closure. It also highlights the emotional impact of betrayal and the difficulty of forgiveness.

- *Ignoring the apology:*

Finally, someone may choose to ignore an apology altogether. This response may involve not responding to the apology or not acknowledging it in any way. For example, if someone apologizes for being late, the other person may choose to simply change the subject and not acknowledge the apology at all. For example, in the movie "Marriage Story" (2019) there is a scene of ignoring the apology:

e.g. Charlie: *(expressive speech act) I'm sorry, I know I screwed up.*

Nicole: *(silence)*

Charlie: *(expressive speech act) I really messed up. I'm sorry.*

Nicole: *(silence)*

(Baumbach, 2019)

In this scene, Charlie is apologizing to Nicole for his past mistakes that led to the breakdown of their marriage. However, Nicole does not respond with any speech acts,

instead choosing to remain silent. This silence can be interpreted as a form of ignoring the apology, as Nicole does not acknowledge Charlie's attempts to make amends or address the issues in their relationship.

To sum up, apology is a multifunctional communicative act that serves various purposes such as expressing regret, acknowledging responsibility, repairing relationships, restoring trust, and preserving social harmony. It is a powerful tool for conflict resolution and can have significant psychological and social benefits for both the apologizer and the recipient of the apology (Lulofs&Cahn, 2000). Correspondingly the responses to apologies may vary, too.

Apologies from a gender perspective

We are all well aware of the fact that women's speech differs from men's in various social settings.

Robin Lakoff identified a number of linguistic features which she claimed were used more often by women than by men, and which in her opinion expressed uncertainty and lack of confidence. Robin Lakoff argued that gender differences in language reflected a power difference. Deborah Tannen has compared gender differences in language as more similar to “cultural” differences. Comparing conversational goals, she argued that men have a *report* style, aiming to communicate factual information, whereas women have a *rapport* style, more concerned with building and maintaining relationship (Holmes, 2013). In terms of using apologies women also tend to be more likely to apologize than men, perhaps due to social expectations of women to be more empathetic and nurturing (Schumann, Ross, & Gere, 2019, pp. 208-224). A study conducted by Lazare and others (1975) found that men and women had similar reasons for apologizing, but women apologized more frequently than men (Lazare, Klerman, & Armor, 1975). This could be because women are socialized to be more empathetic and nurturing, and therefore more likely to take responsibility for the well-being of others. On the other hand, men may view apologizing as a sign of weakness, which could explain why they are less likely to apologize. Lazare's research has shown that there are differences in the ways that men and women apologize. Women tend to apologize more frequently, use direct apologies, and express their emotions more openly. Men, on the other hand, tend to use indirect apologies, maintain their social status, and use a more factual tone. It is important to recognize and understand these differences to facilitate effective communication and conflict resolution (Lazare, Klerman, & Armor, 1975). Some examples of men and women apologizing can help to illustrate the point.

In the movie "Silver Linings Playbook" (2012), directed by David O. Russell, the character played by Jennifer Lawrence, Tiffany, apologizes to the character played by Bradley Cooper, Pat, for manipulating him into doing something he didn't want to do.

e.g. *Tiffany: I'm sorry. I shouldn't have tricked you into coming over. I was just trying to help, but it was selfish of me, and I'm sorry.*

Pat: No, it's okay. You did help. You got me out of the house, and I needed that.

Tiffany: I know, but I shouldn't have done it the way I did. I'm sorry.

(Russell, 2012)

This scene shows a direct and straightforward apology from a woman who takes responsibility for her actions and expresses genuine remorse.

In the movie "Lost in Translation" (2003), directed by Sofia Coppola, the character played by Bill Murray, Bob, tries to apologize to the character played by Scarlett Johansson, Charlotte, for a past behavior that hurt her feelings. The dialogue goes as follows:

e.g. *Bob: Hey, I'm sorry about that thing with the phone. I'm sorry about that.*

Charlotte: It's fine. Really, it's fine.

Bob: No, it's not. I feel terrible about it.

Charlotte: Honestly, it's okay. It was a mistake. Let's just forget about it.

Bob: Okay, well... I just wanted to say that I'm sorry.

(Coppola, 2003)

This scene shows a more indirect and tentative apology from a man who struggles to express his remorse clearly. He doesn't fully take responsibility for his actions, but he still tries to make amends in his own way.

These examples showcase different ways in which men and women apologize, with some similarities and differences in their approach and language used.

Gender differences have been observed also in the way man and women respond to an apology. Research has shown that women are more likely to apologize than men, and they are also more likely to perceive an apology as necessary in certain situations. However, this does not necessarily mean that women are easier to apologize to. Observations show that women may be more likely to hold grudges and to dwell on negative experiences, which could impact their response to an apology (Graham, Huang, Clark, & Helgeson, 2018). An example from the movie "The Break-Up" (2006) can serve as an illustration. The female lead character Brooke is upset with her boyfriend Gary for not showing enough effort in their relationship. After a heated

argument, Gary attempts to apologize by buying her a bouquet of flowers and saying “sorry”. However, Brooke is not satisfied with this gesture and tells him,

e.g. Brooke: You know what? You're right. I don't want you to do the dishes.

I want you to want to do the dishes.

(Reed, 2006)

This scene highlights the importance of sincerity in apologies and how the way in which they are delivered can impact the response.

The differences in responding to apologies are also observed in the following examples:

In the movie “Mean Girls”, the character Regina apologizes to her friend Cady for spreading rumours about her. Cady responds by saying “I appreciate the apology, but I can't forgive you just yet.” In the movie “The Proposal”, when the character Margaret apologizes to her assistant Andrew for being rude and demanding, Andrew responds by saying “It's okay, I understand. But please try to be a little nicer to me in the future.” This response is an example of accepting the apology but also setting boundaries for future behaviour. An example of minimizing the offense and accepting the apology without dwelling on it is found in the movie “The Intern”, where the character Jules apologizes to her intern Ben for snapping at him. Ben responds by saying “It's all good, don't worry about it.”

The study has come to prove that men are more likely to use mitigating devices when apologizing, while women are more likely to use a more direct and sincere approach. This may be due to societal expectations and gender norms that dictate how men and women should express emotions and take responsibility for their actions.

Conclusion

The study of apologies highlights the critical role of effective communication in daily life. Apologies function to express regret or remorse for actions that have caused harm or offense to another individual. Prompt apologies are essential for their effectiveness in repairing relationships and restoring trust, as delaying an apology can diminish its impact and increase the likelihood that the offended party will perceive their feelings as being disregarded.

In contemporary English, there are various forms of apologies, each with specific nuances and implications. Effective apologies should be sincere, take responsibility for the wrongdoing, and offer a commitment to make amends or take corrective action.

Research indicates gender differences in apology strategies: women tend to employ direct apologies that explicitly acknowledge responsibility for the wrongdoing, whereas men often use indirect apologies that express regret or empathy without

explicitly admitting fault. Furthermore, women are more likely to use a more emotional tone, while men typically adopt a factual tone.

Thus, the study of apologies highlights the significance of speech acts and effective communication in building and maintaining relationships. Understanding the different strategies and nuances of speech acts is essential to prevent misunderstandings and potential conflicts.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflict of interests in this research.

Ethical standards

The author affirms this research does not involve human subjects.

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Գոհար Հարությունյան
Շուշանիկ Ազարյան

Հոդվածում անդրադարձ է կատարվում ներողություն հայցելու հաղորդակցական ակտի քննությանը հանրագործաբանական դիտանկյունից: Հիմնվելով լեզվական և արտալեզվական գործոնների սերտ փոխներգործության վրա՝ նման մոտեցումը թույլ է տալիս խնդրո առարկա հիմնահարցը քննել համակողմանիորեն՝ սկսած ձևավորումից և առկայացումից մինչև մեկնողական ընկալում:

Ներողություն հայցելու հաղորդակցական ակտի տարբեր դրսևորումների բնութագրական գծերի բազմակողմանի վերլուծությունը անհրաժեշտաբար ենթադրում է խոսող-նշան-լսող-հաղորդակցման նպատակ-հասարակական միջավայր-արդյունք բաղադրիչների սերտ կապ: Բոլոր բաղադրիչների համակարգված, ներդաշնակ փոխներգործությունն է ապահովում ասույթի ճիշտ կողավորման և արդյունավետ ապակողավորման գործընթացը այս կամ այն գործառության ոլորտում:

Ուսումնասիրությունները ցույց են տալիս, որ համապատասխան հանրագործաբանական համատեքստում, պայմանավորված նաև գենդերային առանձնահատկություններով, ներողություն հայցելու ձևերից յուրաքանչյուրն ունի իր յուրահատուկ նրբությունները և հետևանքները: Ժամանակին և տեղին հայցված ներողությունները կարևոր են հարաբերություններ ձևավորելու, պահպանելու և վստահությունը վերականգնելու համար: Արդյունքում, ներողություն հայցելու հաղորդակցական ակտի հանրագործաբանական քննությունը նպաստում է տարբեր ռազմավարությունների արդյունավետ կիրառմանն ու ընկալմանը՝ կանխելով թյուրըմբռնումներն ու հնարավոր հակամարտությունները:

Բանալի բառեր՝ *հանրագործաբանություն, հաղորդակցական ակտ, ներում հայցելու ռազմավարություն, հանրային համատեքստ, քաղաքավարի պահվածքի ռազմավարություն, հուզարտահայտչական խոսողական ակտեր:*