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Original research paper

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS ON APOLOGY SPEECH ACTS IN AMERICAN ENGLISH AND MACEDONIAN

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Abstract: The subject of analysis in this paper is the speech act of apology. The comparative analysis was conducted in relation to the form of the speech act and the strategies used to express it. The analysed data were obtained through an online discourse completion task among American and Macedonian university students. The DCT includes three situations that differ in accordance to the social distance and the social status of the participants, and the severity of the offence. The aim of the research is to define the pragmatic structure of apologies, by determining the possible similarities and differences in both languages. Herein, speakers in both languages can avoid future miscommunication and become aware of different communication styles and cultural features of the languages.

Keywords: *speech acts; apologies; American English; Macedonian*.

Introduction

Cross-cultural communication has become an inherent feature of the professional and daily life of most people. It is not surprising that cross-cultural pragmatics is one of the fastest growing fields of linguistics. Pragmatics studies meaning in context, while cross-cultural pragmatics is concerned with the influence of different cultures on language and communication. It involves different cultural aspects such as the background of the interlocutors, the communicational and language norms that derive from a particular culture, and the analysis of the forms of language through which the interlocutors express meaning. Studying meaning or language in context inevitably entails the study of longer utterances. Therefore, linguists have emphasized the importance of speech acts, which is confirmed by the vast number of papers and analysis of various speech acts from the 1980s until today.

Literature review

Speech acts are actions accomplished through language (Finegan, 2008, p.304). They are language acts that enable the speaker to perform a certain function (Kusevska & Buzharovska, 2020). One of the most frequently studied speech acts is the speech act of apologizing due to its constant presence in all languages and cultures.

Apologies are considered expressive acts (Searle, 1975) that express the speaker's psychological state. They are universal acts (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983) since the necessity to maintain social harmony is universal for all cultures. As Goffman (1971) stated, an apology is a remedial interchange that is used to restore social equilibrium after the violation of social norms. Goffman (1971) further highlights the complexity of apologies by stating that "to apologize is to do two things: take responsibility for an offensive act, and express regret for the offense committed, though not necessarily for the act itself" (p. 262). Apologizing is an act that re-establishes the damaged relationship between the interlocutors caused by an error, an offence or a violation (Smichkovska, 2014). It has a social function and serves as a repairment of a damaged social norm and aims to retain or renew the social harmony in communication (Donevska, 2000, p. 22). It is also a post-event act (Trosborg, 1995), because it needs to be preceded by a certain offence in order to occur. The act of apologizing is an act of accepting the fact that there is a violation of a certain social norm and the speaker accepts that he/she is related or part of the cause for that violation (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). Furthermore, Olshtain & Cohen (1983) emphasize that the realization of an apology occurs only if the speaker acknowledges his/her responsibility to apologize for the caused offence.

Although apologies are universal acts, their forms differ since they are derived directly from the cultural features in a particular language. It is very important to be aware of the fact that American culture is individualistic, while Macedonian culture is collectivist. Individualistic cultures value the individual and understand apologies as an acknowledgement of the speaker's need not to be impeded by others. On the other hand, collectivist cultures value the group and view apologies as desired acts that maintain the relations among the people in the group. It is essential to comprehend that apologizing cannot be truly understood without taking reference to cultural values and attitudes into consideration (J. Ilic, 2014, p. 158).

Eventually, all cross-culture research on apologies is due to the fact that "to be able to apologize at the correct form is as important as the action itself" (Tabatabaei, S., Gencer, G., Eldem, E., Bakhtiarvand, M. 2018, p. 49).

Methodology

The subject of this paper is the form of the speech act of apologizing. The apologies were analysed and differentiated in accordance to the strategy used to express the apology. The aim of the research is to define the most common

pragmatic form of an apology for American English speakers and Macedonian speakers. This can help determine if there are major differences of apology expression in both languages, which is furthermore helpful for EFL teachers and EFL speakers. If teachers and learners of English as a foreign language are aware of the differences of apologizing due to cultural influences, future miscommunication can be prevented. The quantitative analysis was conveyed by the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) system and an independent T-test. This analysis defines the frequency of each apology strategy by a T-test that determines the average value for each situation in both languages. The dependent variables are the social distance between the interlocutors and their social status, and the degree of the offence. These variables are in relation to the speech acts analysis done by Brown and Levinson (1978). The social distance is measured by the degree of familiarity between the interlocutors, which can be close, medium or distant. The social status is determined by the role of the interlocutor in society, and it can be equal, unequal or neutral. The degree of offence that causes the act of apologizing can be low, medium or high. The independent variable is the native language of both groups, which are American English and Macedonian.

The participants in the study are university students. The number of students that voluntarily participated in a discourse completion task is 212 respondents, half of them are students at the University San Diego in California, USA, while the other half are students at the University of Goce Delchev in Shtip, North Macedonia. The age range of the participants is between 18 and 54 years old. The mother tongue of Macedonian respondents is Macedonian, while the mother tongue of American speakers is English. Also, there are unsurprisingly many bilingual American respondents.

The Discourse Completion Task (DCT) consisted of three situations with different contextual and social factors. Each situation was expected to cause an apology by the respondents, more specifically an apology to an unknown person, a friend and a professor. The participants were not informed by any means that they are expected to apologise in these particular situations. In this way the responses are believed to be the closest to the natural reaction of the respondent in a real-life situation.

Results and Analysis

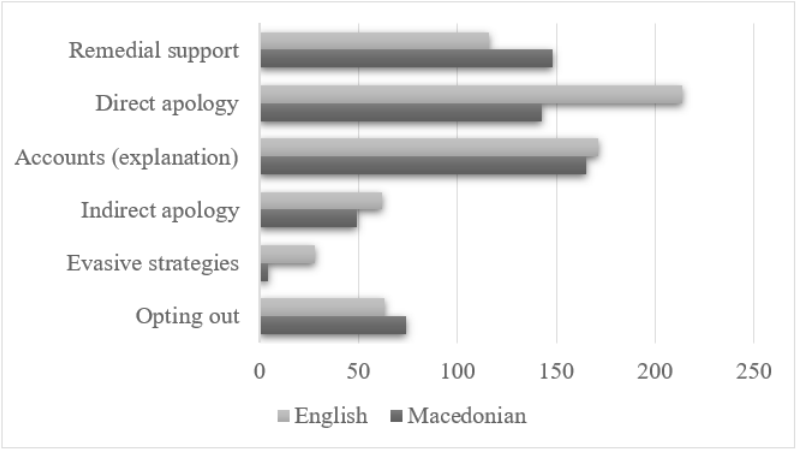
In this study, we aimed to define the different realization forms of an apology. These forms were classified in categories or strategies depending on the communicational intent and the elements of the head act. In the classification, we followed the model of A. Trosborg (1995). Trosborg differentiates among four main categories of apology, a category of additional elements and also a category that includes the possibility for the hearer to ignore the offence and opt not to give any commentary in a particular situation. The four main categories include: evasive strategies, indirect apologies, accounts and direct apologies. In the evasive strategies, we have detected only one strategy in our data and that is

the minimisation of the degree of the offence. The indirect apology consists of a few subcategories: acknowledgment of responsibility, lack of intent, expression of self-deficiency, embarrassment or acceptance of blame. The category of accounts involves direct or indirect explanations. The category of direct apologies includes expressions of regret, offer of apology or request for forgiveness. All of these strategies are very often accompanied by remedial support strategies that can be expressions of concern for the hearer, promise of forbearance or an offer of repair.

The obtained data were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The overall results from the quantitative analysis (see in graph 1) indicate that there is no significant difference in the strategy application between speakers of American English and speakers of Macedonian.

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Apology	Macedonian	102	21.91	7.669	.759	20.41	23.42
	English	49	22.63	6.604	.943	20.74	24.53
	Bilingual	61	22.87	7.546	.966	20.94	24.80
	Total	212	22.35	7.380	.507	21.35	23.35

Graph 1: Difference of averages in the pragmatic structure of apologies in Macedonian and AE



Graph 2: Categories of apology strategies and their frequency of usage

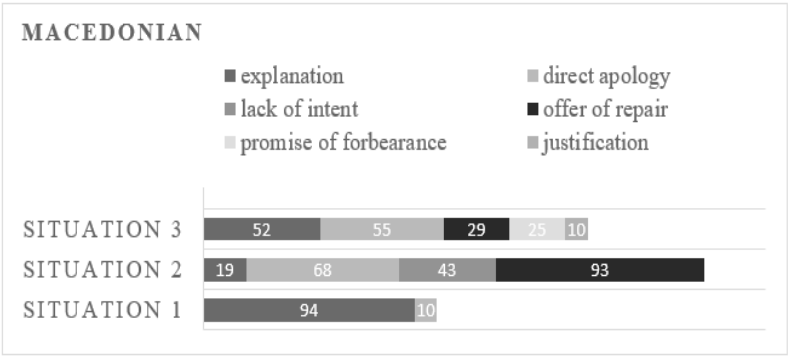
A more detailed representation of the results is given in graph 2 below. It is clear from the that the two most frequent strategies for apologizing are shared in both languages as well as the presence of remedial support elements that take the third place as an additional strategy. The act of a direct apology is the leading strategy for speakers of American English, but for Macedonian speakers both direct apology and an account (explanation) are equally used. The three most used forms of apologising are the same in both languages. The most frequent is the explanation, then the direct apology and the additional supporting elements that were always in a combination with another apology strategy.

However, the initial quantitative analysis does not take into consideration the different sociocultural factors in each situation and it does not give an insight into the features of each language. Herein, the next step was a more extensive qualitative analysis for each situation separately. The situations given in out DCTs are the following:

- Situation 1: You are walking on campus and see a classmate. You call their name, but when they turn around you realize it's a stranger. You say…
- Situation 2: You're using your friend's phone charger and you accidentally break it. When you meet with your friend the next day, you say…
- Situation 3: Your professor had lent you a book. You need to return it, but somehow you can't find it. You meet the professor on campus and you say…

In the first situation, the interlocutors are distant, the social status is neutral and the degree of imposition is small. The responses from both groups show the applications of the same two strategies which are the strategy of explanation and/or the strategy of a direct apology. It is important to note that very often both strategies are used as a combination in a lengthy apology by the respondents.

Examples:
I'm so sorry. (regret)
Се извинувам, се препознав. (direct apology + explanation)
[I apologize, I mistook you for somebody else]

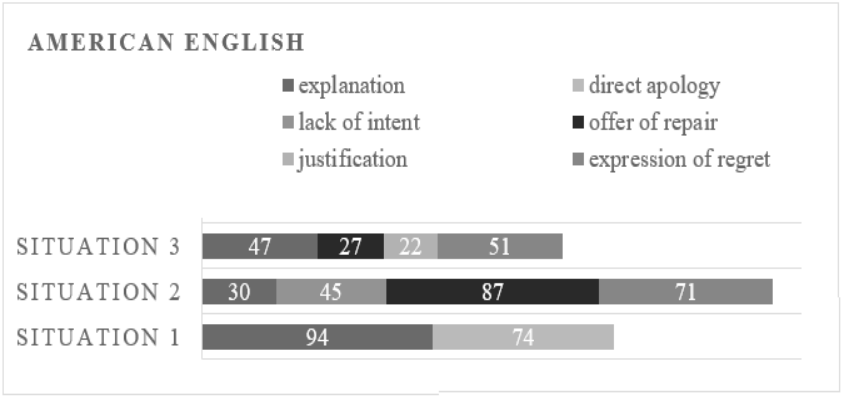


Graph 3: Frequency of apology strategies usage by Macedonian respondents

In the second situation, the interlocutors have close social distance, equal social status and the degree of the offence is medium. The offer of repair is the most frequent strategy for both groups, but as a remedial support element it is always used in the combination with another strategy. This means that the speakers of American English most often express regret, then lack of intention or an explanation. On the other hand, the speakers of Macedonian most frequently express a direct apology, and also show lack of intention or an explanation.

Examples:
I'm so sorry sir, I lost the book. (regret + explanation)
Сакам да ти кажам дека ненамерно го скршив полначот. (lack of intent)
[I want to tell you that I unintentionally broke the charger.]

In the third situation, the social distance between the interlocutors is medium, the social status or power is unequal and the degree of the offence is large. The responses in this situation are quite different. The most frequent strategy for speakers of American English is the offer of regret, and the second most frequent is the explanation. Then there are also offers of repair and justifications. The responses by speakers of Macedonian also show more variety in this situation. The most frequent strategies are the direct apology and the explanation with a very similar frequency of usage, and then there are also offers of repair, promise or justification.



Graph 4: Frequency of apology strategies usage by American respondents

Examples:
Professor, I cannot find the book you lent me. I might have lost it.
(direct explanation)
Многу се извинувам, но не можам да ја најдам книгата.
[I apologize, but I can't find the book] (direct apology + explanation)

Discussion

Although the overall analysis showed that there are many overlaps and similarities, a more detailed analysis considering the influence of the different parameters over the act of apology helped detect three differences. The first difference appears in the first situation, which is highly noticeable on the graphs given in the results section. In a situation when the speaker apologizes to an unknown person for a lower offence, the American English speakers tend to use a direct apology. We believe that the direct apology is a ritual apology that is derived by formal politeness in English. On the other hand, in the Macedonian responses the direct apology is evidently absent. In this situation, Macedonian speakers tend to express an indirect apology without any additional strategies. Here, we believe that the neutral social power and the large social distance cause the indirectness in the Macedonian apologies. Macedonian culture is collectivist and strives toward the improving and maintaining of social relations, but in this situation, there is not any social relation between the interlocutors that needs to be maintained and the speaker cannot lose face by any means.

Examples:
I'm so sorry. My apologies. (direct apology)
Се препознав. (indirect apology)
[I thought it was someone else.]

The other two differences occur in the second and third situation. As the social distance decreases and the degree of offence increases, Macedonian speakers start expressing direct apologies very frequently, as well as explanations and offers for repair. On the other hand, the direct apology is surprisingly missing in the responses from the American English speakers. We suppose that in the American culture the formal and ritual apologies are considered unnecessary between people with closer social distance, and this causes the sudden and unexpected lack of direct apologies. Macedonian culture value sincerity and directness between the members of a group or people with closer relation, and this causes the sudden shift toward direct apologizing.

The other difference is the usage of the strategy expressing regret together with an explanation of the offence and offer for repair by American speakers, and the complete absence of the strategy of regret in the Macedonian responses. These two differences show the different influence of the parameter of social distance between the interlocutors over the speakers from both cultures.

Examples:
Professor, I am deeply regretful that I lost the book. (expression of regret)
Многу се извинувам. Ќе ти купам нов полнач.
[I'm so sorry. I will buy you a new charger]
(direct apology + offer for repair)

According to the results of our study, Macedonian speakers and American English speakers share the most common forms of apologising. The quantitative analysis showed that there is no meaningful difference in the strategies used for apologising. The three most applied apology strategies in both languages are a direct apology, an explanation and an offer of repair. This confirms the universal character of the speech act of apologising. Beside the very similar use of strategies in Macedonian and American English, the speakers of both languages also share the tendency of using a combination of strategies. This is particularly noticeable in the second and the third situation, where both Macedonian and American English speakers often follow the pattern of explaining the cause of the offence, then providing an apology and finally offering a repair for the offence.

Examples:
Professor I lost the lent book. I sincerely apologize.
Can I buy you a new one? (explanation + direct apology + offer of repair)
Многу се извинувам, не беше намерно. Ќе ти го дадам мојот полнач.
[I deeply apologize, it wasn't intentional. I will give you my charger]
(direct apology + lack of intent + offer for repair)

Conclusion

Our research has detected three differences in strategy use that are statistically considered as showing no meaningful difference. However, since speakers naturally follow their native cultural norms in communication and hearers acknowledge the communication through their own cultural norms, these slight differences can have a major influence on communication. In order to have a successful realization of an apology, the speaker needs to use the appropriate form so that the hearer can recognize the intended meaning. If interlocutors are aware of cross-cultural differences in communication, it will immensely help in preventing possible future miscommunication by simply adjusting the utterances toward the accepted norm.

Based on our research, it can be concluded that the similarities outnumber the differences in the apology act in American English and Macedonian. It has been confirmed that the shared apology forms in the two languages are direct apologies and explanations in a combination with additional remedial support strategies.

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