A Mini Research on Differences in Performing Apologies of Mainland MIT Students in Using L1 and L2

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Abstract

Having apology as the particular speech act studied in the paper, this research looked into the differences of the ways in realizing apology between using L1 Chinese and L2 English among a group of English students. The data were collected twice in English and Chinese Mandarin respectively to see whether the same speaker's apology performance is influenced by the language he/she is using under certain situations.

Keywords

particular speech; apology ways; certain situations.

1. Introduction

Cross-Cultural Pragmatics (CCP) is defined by Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993) as the study of how language users from different cultural contexts performing linguistic acts. (Kasper and Blum-Kulka, 1993, cited in LoCastro, 2012, P. 84)[1]. In a broader sense, CCP not only focuses on the different Cultures that people from different cultural backgrounds have, but also examines the non-capitalised culture as the values and beliefs held by certain members of a group from the sociolinguistic perspective (LoCastro, 2012, P. 83-85). Thus to look at one group's differences in performing the same speech act between using two different languages can arguably fall under the theoretical framework of cross-cultural pragmatics due to the social and cultural variables it involves. The attention to which this paper paid is the act of apology.

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2. Literature Review

Apology, among the various speech acts we all deploy in our daily life, is one of the most frequently used speech acts, either consciously or unconsciously. It is "an attempt by the speaker to make up for some previous action that interfered with the hearer's interests." (Blum-Kulka, et al 1989)[2]. By performing this remedial action (Goffman, 1971, cited in Farashaiyan, A. 2011)[3], people try to maintain, restore and augment the interpersonal relationship.

Wouk (2006)[4], by the means of discourse completion task, investigated Indonesian students in Lombok their choices and preferences in using types of apology terms and of upgrading in different situations. Her study finds that Lombok Indonesians prefer to request for forgiveness than use other apology terms. This is same as saying her informants tend to resort to IFID strategy and ask for forgiveness in a situation where apology is needed.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

In the light of other studies on speech acts in which most of the time university students had been chosen to participant in, 6 postgraduate students at their ages of 24 or so from mainland China were asked to take part in this study. They are now proceeding their academy as Master of Interpretation and Translation in a Foreign Language Institution. It is justifiably to say that they are at least intermediate or upper-intermediate English learners given their *status quo*.

3.2. Procedure

The informants were asked to complete two separate discourse tasks in two languages, i.e. English and Chinese. The English version of the task was first given to the informants, and the Chinese version of the task was presented to them the next day in order to minimise the influence of translation from Chinese to English, or the other way around. They were asked to imagine themselves as the subjects in the situations described in the task and give responses without too much thinking.

Discourse completion task/test was adopted in this study because by putting informants into certain situations, it is easy to obtain the data on particular speech acts. It will give full play of informants in their imaginary utterances, thus ensure the data is reliable, at least in indicating informants' preferences. Besides, given the limited resources at hand, production questionnaire like discourse completion task is much more convenient and feasible to collect data for the study.

3.3. Data Analysis

Blum-Kulka et al. (1989, P. 206)[5] identified 5 potential strategies for performing the act of apologizing: (1) Illocutionary force indicating device (IFID); (2) account for causes; (3) acknowledgement of the responsibility; (4) offer of repair and (5) promise of forbearance. This is the model on which the analysing of data in this study is based. Table 1 illustrates a clear picture of the model.

Table 1. The model on which the analysing of data in this study

STRATEGIES:	EXAMPLES:
IFIDs	I am sorry, I apologize, forgive me, etc.
Explanation or Account	because something happened, etc.
Acknowledgement or denial of responsibility	It is (not) my fault, I forgot, etc.
Offer of repair	I will treat you a dinner, I will fix it, etc.
Promise of forbearance	It won't happen again, etc.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 2. Shows the proportion of the informants' preferences in dealing with apology using two languages in 6 situations.

STRATEGIES/LANGUAGES	English	Chinese
IFIDs	25/36 (69%)	28/36 (78%)
Explanation or Account	4/36 (11%)	9/36 (25%)
Acknowledgement or denial of responsibility	10/36 (28%)	12/36 (33%)
Offer of repair	15/36 (42%)	17/36 (64%)
Promise of forbearance	3/36 (8%)	0/36 (0%)

From the table above it is quite clear that this group of students are rather consistent in performing the act of apology in English and Chinese. They hold a similar tendency in adopting apology strategies in dealing with identical apology situations in two languages with a slight differences in certain situations. For example, in most cases, they would, as statistically showed in the table, use IFIDs like "Sorry, I apologize" to indicate their regret to the matter they involved in given their high proportions of using IFIDs. Specifically, in their English responses, the IFIDs they often use are expressions of regret and direct offers of apology, requests for forgiveness like "pardon me, forgive me" did not emerge, resembling with their Chinese responses. By comparison, native English speakers like American would normally adopt the strategy of request for forgiveness like "I hope you will understand" in many situations.

Offer of repair is the second most used strategy in both languages. It is probably the values and beliefs as well as transfer from L1 to L2 resulted the similar amount of offer of repair in their responses. Both in English and Chinese responses, they tend to offer remedial actions in similar situations, i.e. situation 2 where there is a low level of offence between intimate classmates, and situation 5 and 6 where there is a severe offence and actual damage.

Discrepancies between two languages exist too. Every strategy they use in English (except promise of forbearance) shares a relatively low adoption rate compare to their Chinese responses. In other words, they tend to use less apology strategies when they use English than when use L1 Chinese. This is a tricky question that could be possibly answered in several ways such as, laziness (given that their responses contain only several words "sorry, I'm sorry" in some cases), inadequate knowledge about how to deal with the situations they were provided with (given that they are mostly ivory tower students and were asked to imagine themselves to be the subjects in the situations which they may never encountered before), or low proficiency of L2 English impede them from saying more. The answer is uncertain and needs to be confirmed in further studies.

Another difference that stands out in the data is their usage of promise of forbearance. Promise of forbearance like "I promise it won't happen again" appeared 3 times in their L2 English responses in situation 1 where the subject forgot to bring along the book he borrowed from his lecturer and situation 2 where he is late for meeting his classmate, whereas in their L1 Chinese responses, no promise of forbearance is found. In spoken discourse, promise of forbearance is not common among Chinese whereas in L1 English speaking regions like America, this strategy of apology is normal and commonly used. The influence of L2 English has more or less a role to play in accounting for this difference.

It is worth mentioning that there are continua between acknowledgement of responsibility and denial of it, starting from directly taking on the responsibility, self-blaming, to denial of responsibility like "It wasn't my fault", even blame the hearer "It is your fault". Fortunately no such strategies were found in the data collected. Unexpectedly, swearing words of blaming others in situation 6 where the subject was bumped into by a passer-by were found both in their Chinese and English responses, once only. But they took on the responsibility by offering remedy to get the phone fixed or replaced with a new one immediately after swearing.

5. Conclusion

As stated above, the informants share mainly similar tendencies with slight differences in dealing with the apology under identical situations when using L1 Chinese and L2 English, with a preference of using more strategies in L1 Chinese than when using L2 English. Generally speaking, the most potential reason that underlies these differences and similarities is the cultural values and beliefs they hold. Certainly, the influence of L2 English upon their choices of strategies of apology does exist given their slight preference for promise of

forbearance. There also appears clear traces of direct translation between the two languages in the original data like situation 1 and 3 where some apologies were made totally the same in two languages, suggesting that a longer interval between two DCTs or other reliable methods or combination of methods are needed in further study.

6. Limitations

Surely, the number of the informants is rather less than is enough to proceed a properly designed research on particular speech acts. Secondly, since the method this study adopted is a production questionnaire of DCT which provides created situations, the data collected are not the same as the genuine data that may occur in reality. It only serves as a set of coarse data that cannot be fully rely on. A mixed method of collecting data including interviewing, observation and recording authentic discourse is more reliable in collecting authentic data. Last but not least, the paper did not take into consideration the social factors like social distance, power and level of imposition given that the differences of informants in using two languages did not occur significantly.

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