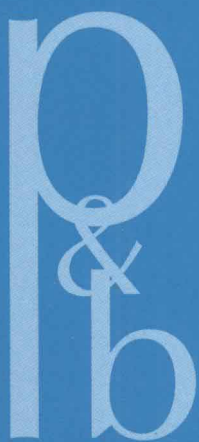


On Apologising in Negative and Positive Politeness Cultures

Eva Ogiermann

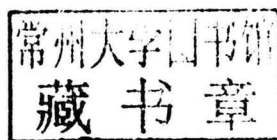


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Amsterdam / Philadelphia



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ogiermann, Eva.

On apologising in negative and positive politeness cultures / Eva Ogiermann.

p. cm. (Pragmatics & Beyond New Series, ISSN 0922-842X ; v. 191)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Apologizing--Cross-cultural studies. I. Title.

BF575.A75O35 2009

306.44--dc22

2009030324

ISBN 978 90 272 5435 1 (HB; alk. paper)

ISBN 978 90 272 8889 9 (EB)

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John Benjamins Publishing Co. · P.O. Box 36224 · 1020 ME Amsterdam · The Netherlands
John Benjamins North America · P.O. Box 27519 · Philadelphia PA 19118-0519 · USA

Abbreviations, figures, tables

Abbreviations used in the text

P	Social Power
D	Social Distance
R	Ranking of Imposition
S	Speaker
H	Hearer
FTA	Face Threatening Act

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Preface

“I have been seriously told that ‘Poles/Russians/etc. are never polite’”

(Leech 1983: 84)

Since the first systematic accounts of politeness have emerged from pragmatic theory in the late 70s and early 80s, politeness research has been continuously gaining in popularity and broadening its scope. However, although empirical studies have provided insights into politeness in numerous cultures, up to the present day, little is known about polite behaviour of “Poles/Russians/etc.”

In recent years, many politeness researchers have moved away from pragmatic theory and towards social theory while adopting a postmodern approach to the study of politeness. Interestingly, it seems that the longer politeness is studied the more ambiguous and less transparent this term becomes and the more difficult it appears to capture culture-specific features of politeness. While pragmatic theories view politeness as a set of strategies used to redress face and culture as a factor influencing strategy choice, postmodern theories emphasise the unpredictable nature of politeness and the heterogeneous nature of culture.

Both pragmatic and social politeness theories have been developed by Western researchers, and thus influenced by the Western, notably Anglo-Saxon understanding of politeness. Brown and Levinson’s theory has been most influential in the field of cross-cultural pragmatics, and it has been as widely criticised as it has been applied. While many Non-Western researchers point to a cultural bias in their framework, much of the criticism directed at their framework in recent years has come from postmodern politeness theorists. However, the alternative view on politeness they offer does not provide a framework for a cross-cultural comparison.

The present study carries out such a cross-cultural comparison and it is based on Brown and Levinson’s theory, while taking a critical approach to and introducing a new perspective on some of their concepts. It attempts to integrate cultural values underlying the perception of what constitutes polite behaviour into their potentially universal framework, while focusing on Polish and Russian cultures. What makes the study of Polish and Russian particularly interesting is not only the fact that these two languages have received little attention in previous politeness research, but also the political isolation of the two countries, the Iron Curtain

shielding them from the influence of Western culture and the process of cultural globalisation for over forty years.

The present study focuses on responses to offensive situations, their most polite variant taking the form of an apology. By choosing a speech act which is inherently polite, I attempt to avoid the common view of politeness underlying Brown and Levinson's theory as a set of strategies employed to minimise imposition on the hearer's right to non-distraction.

The first chapter of the introduction outlines the theoretical background of cross-cultural pragmatics. Brown and Levinson's theory (1987) is discussed as the theory underlying most research conducted in this field and assessed in the light of the criticism it has received – in particular from the proponents of the post-modern politeness theories (Mills 2003, Watts 2003).

The second chapter evaluates how the notion of culture has been dealt with in previous politeness research and describes some culture-specific features of the communicative styles prevalent in the two Slavic cultures under investigation, while linking Brown and Levinson's theory with Hofstede's dimensions of cultural comparison (1991). I argue that the variables of social power and distance can be interpreted in relation to Hofstede's dimensions of power distance and collectivism vs. individualism, and that the latter is also closely related to Brown and Levinson's distinction between positive vs. negative politeness cultures. By linking the two types of politeness with cultural values, I show that culture-specific aspects of politeness can be accommodated within Brown and Levinson's universalistic theory.

Chapter 3 narrows down the discussion of politeness to the speech act of apologising and examines the applicability of Brown and Levinson's theory to apologies. I discuss the face considerations motivating the formulation of an apology while taking into account the speaker's and the hearer's positive as well as negative face needs, which can be expected to carry different weight across cultures. I then show that the social function of apologies, the restoration of social equilibrium, depends on the mutuality of the interlocutors' positive face needs. Consequently, contrary to Brown and Levinson classification of apologies as negative politeness devices, I define remedial apologies as positive politeness strategies, while restricting Brown and Levinson's classification to disarming apologies.

Chapter 4 offers a review of previous research on apologies, illustrating the wealth of cross-cultural studies contrasting English with numerous languages as well as the scarcity of studies on Polish and Russian apologies. Particular attention is devoted to the status of speech act studies in Poland and Russia and the parallels between Austin's speech act theory (1962) and Bachtin's theory of speech genres (1979).

Chapter 5 explains the choice of the data collection method used in this study by discussing the advantages and disadvantages of the methods employed in cross-cultural pragmatics, with a focus on naturally occurring data, role plays and questionnaires. I show that none of the disadvantages of the discourse completion test (DCT) discussed in the literature interferes with a cross-cultural comparison of general patterns in speech act realisation. I argue that the DCT is indispensable when it comes to collecting large corpora of comparable data and analysing under-researched languages for which no previous classification of strategies exists.

Chapter 6 describes the design of the DCT: the choice of scenarios describing six personal and two legal offences, the social variables incorporated into them, and the procedure of translating and testing the DCT. The introduction ends with a description of the population and the considerations underlying the categorisation of the data.

The first part of the analysis is organised according to the strategies identified in the data. In Chapter 7, which analyses Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs), I discuss the repertoire of IFID formulae established for each of the languages and classify them according to their illocutionary forces. Since all three languages have at their disposal the full range of linguistic formulae and each of them exhibits a strong focus on one conventionalised apology formula, I discuss the cultural implications underlying these diverging preferences.

Another insight into cross-cultural differences in the use of IFIDs is provided by examining the syntactic frames in which they occur and linguistic devices upgrading their illocutionary force, such as adverbial intensifiers and exclamations. I show that although IFIDs tend to be used without reflection upon their semantic meaning, conventionalised formulae provide an insight into culture-specific concepts of politeness.

The analysis of the remaining apology strategies takes into account that they reflect the circumstances of the offence, which makes it necessary to examine them in relation to the scenarios that have elicited them. Chapter 8 begins with a discussion of the role responsibility acceptance plays in performing an apology and of taxonomies of strategies denoting the speaker's responsibility suggested in pragmatics and sociology. I then propose an alternative classificatory scheme, depicting a continuum stretching from acceptance to denial of responsibility and distinguishing between five upgrading and five downgrading account types. Differences in portraying the offence and assuming responsibility across contexts and languages are shown to reflect a focus on positive vs. negative face as well as culture-specific perceptions of the need to restore the hearer's damaged face and to protect one's own.

Chapter 9 is devoted to the analysis of positive politeness apology strategies, with offers of repair being the most frequent of these strategies. After examining

the distribution of offers of repair across languages as well as their linguistic realisations and the intensifying devices accompanying them, the analysis proceeds with an investigation of the various forms offers of repair take in relation to the offences they are intended to remedy.

Considering the limited applicability and low occurrence of the two remaining positive politeness strategies, namely promise of forbearance and concern for hearer, their analysis is restricted to providing definitions of their functions and briefly outlining their distributions and linguistic realisations.

While the first part of the analysis provides a detailed discussion of each of the strategies, the second part looks for culture-specific features of apologising and politeness in general. It places the results within Brown and Levinson's and Hofstede's frameworks by interpreting them in terms of preferences for positive and negative politeness and examining the impact of contextual variables on strategy choice.

In the first part of Chapter 10, I return to the issue of the role responsibility acceptance plays in apologising. I examine the responses according to whether they include an IFID and whether they accept responsibility, while devoting particular attention to responses combining IFIDs with downgrading strategies. The analysis of the distribution of strategies in relation to the social variables of distance and relative power shows that the English responses are least and the Polish most sensitive to these contextual factors. These results are interpreted within Hofstede's theory of cultural comparison and in the light of the predictions as to the impact of social variables on strategy choice made by Brown and Levinson's weightiness formula.

The last part of Chapter 10 takes a closer look at the exact formulations of the strategies and attempts to classify them as instances of positive and negative politeness. Tendencies towards preferences for these politeness types can be best established on the basis of the formulations of accounts accepting responsibility, avoiding its acceptance and providing mitigating circumstances. One of the key factors in assigning these strategies to positive politeness is a high degree of involvement, as evidenced by the willingness to deal with the situation. Negative politeness, on the other hand, seems to be operative where any unnecessary reference to the offence is avoided. Finally, the discussion addresses some features of interactional styles going beyond the use of apology strategies, such as the use of diminutives and formal vs. informal address forms.

An evaluation of the analysis conducted in Chapter 10 leads to a general conclusion in Chapter 11, summarising the main findings of the study, evaluating Brown and Levinson's framework – as well as the usefulness of the modifications introduced and tested in this study – and making suggestions for future research.

I would like to express my gratitude to those who have made this book possible. First and foremost, I would like to thank the German National Academic Foundation (Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes). The trust they have placed in me by funding my work was an enduring source of confidence and motivation. Since this book originated as a PhD thesis, thanks are also due to the Doctoral Committee and my colleagues at the University of Oldenburg for their helpful comments on earlier versions of (parts of) this book. Finally, this book would have never come into existence without the data on which it is based, and which several people in three countries have helped me collect. My most sincere thanks to: Clare O'Donoghue, Adam Jaworski, Maria Peisert, Marek Bielski, Henryk Kardela, Pavel Kromenko, Oleg Kudrjavcev, and Dmitrij Dobrovol'skij.

CHAPTER 1

Cross-cultural pragmatics

Cross-cultural pragmatics is a subdiscipline of pragmatics that closely follows the original thought of ordinary language philosophy. Austin's, Searle's and Grice's contributions to the development of the field of pragmatics are also central to the politeness theories on which most research conducted in cross-cultural pragmatics is based.

1.1 Ordinary language philosophy

Austin's "How to do Things with Words" (1962 – based on his lectures delivered in 1955) is generally regarded as the first attempt at a systematic account of language use.¹ His observation that when people talk, they do not just make statements but often perform actions led him to suggest the distinction between constatives and performatives, with truth-conditions applying to the former and felicity conditions to the latter. By arguing that for a performative utterance to be felicitous "the *circumstances* in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, *appropriate*" (1962 [1975:8]), Austin drew attention to an aspect of meaning beyond the scope of semantics.

As he developed his theory, Austin first expanded the category of performatives to utterances which do not include a performative verb and ultimately arrived at the conclusion that all utterances are potentially performative. He therefore abandoned his initial dichotomy and replaced it with a threefold distinction applicable to all utterances and comprising the locutionary act (the words uttered), illocutionary act (the force behind them), and the perlocutionary act (their effect on the hearer). This distinction shows that Austin was not only aware that there is no one-to-one correspondence between illocutionary force and linguistic structure and that speech acts can be performed by a potentially unlimited range of forms, but also that they only become complete with the effect they have on the hearer – as evidenced by the inclusion of the perlocutionary act.

Unfortunately, Austin does not elaborate on these ideas. Instead, he proceeds by developing a taxonomy based on performative verbs, which he identifies by prefacing their first person singular forms with the word 'hereby'. His focus on illocutionary acts and their classification is then adopted by Searle who

continues and systematises Austin's work. Searle's main objective is to improve Austin's taxonomy and to move away from his focus on performative verbs by extending the concept of felicity conditions to a set of rules necessary for a successful performance of a speech act. At the same time, however, he argues that "to study the speech acts of promising or apologizing we need only study sentences whose literal and correct utterance would constitute making a promise or issuing an apology" (1969:21), which leads him back to performative (English) verbs.

Whereas Searle views the performance of speech acts as a "rule-governed form of behaviour" (1965 [1971:40]), Grice focuses on the speaker's intention. His distinction between natural and non-natural (intentional) meaning (1957), foreshadows, as do Austin's concepts of locutionary and illocutionary acts, the distinction between semantics and pragmatics.

In "Logic and Conversation" (1975 – based on his lectures delivered in 1967), Grice further develops the intentional aspect of meaning and introduces the term 'implicating', as opposed to 'saying'. His theory of conversational implicatures, which he proposes in this paper, is widely considered to be the most influential step in the development of pragmatics. The basis for this theory is provided by an 'apparatus' of rules underlying communication, which Grice terms the Cooperative Principle (CP), and which says: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (1975:45). The four maxims that the cooperative principle is composed of function as guidelines for rational and efficient language use: Utterances adhering to the CP are generally truthful (maxim of quality), adequately informative (quantity), relevant (relation), and clear (manner).

Grice thus constructs a model of an ideally cooperative conversation, "an 'unmarked' or socially neutral (indeed asocial) presumptive framework for communication", as Brown and Levinson put it (1987:5). At the same time, he points out that in everyday interaction, speakers violate the maxims; opt out of them, find themselves facing a clash between two maxims, and occasionally even blatantly flout them. The intentional non-observance of the maxims, in particular, is central to Grice's theory since it generates conversational implicatures, which, unlike conventional implicatures, convey an implicit meaning not derivable from their conventional use.

The theory of conversational implicatures offers a useful alternative to Searle's rule-based approach to speech behaviour. While Searle confines his classification of illocutionary acts to their most prototypical realisations, Grice draws attention to cases in which people communicate without adhering to or even by breaking the rules – be they felicity conditions or maxims of the CP. Searle identifies such