

Responses to Unfounded Accusation across Cultures

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Abstract

To apology for an offence or violation of social norm has been agreed by people in most cultures; however, when and to whom we should apologize is of controversy. This study aims at investigating Iranian and Malaysian university students' apology strategies especially in situations where responsibility is in doubt. The respondents are Iranian and Malaysian students at University Sains Malaysia. The instrument is an open-ended questionnaire followed by some contextual assessment in the form of three five-point Likert rating scale items. Findings show that both nationalities are similar regarding perception and production of responses in terms of apologies. The findings are hoped to have implications for comparative cross-cultural communication studies and for more efficient interactions across cultures.

Keywords: *speech act of apology; cross-cultural communication; Iranian; Malaysian; English language*

Introduction

Cross-cultural communication skills are required whenever people from different languages and cultures come into contact. Nowadays, the number of people who travel internationally, on business, as tourists, or for educational purposes is increasing. As a result, it is only natural to feel the concern for efficient communication among different cultural groups and ethnicities.

Pragmatic failure or breakdown in communication occurs when one is not aware of the sociolinguistic rules of the language at stake. Therefore, empirical studies which describe and compare the speech acts of various cultures would contribute to our understanding of the norms of language use in other cultures and reduce instances of miscommunication which might occur in inter-cultural communication situations. Cross-cultural studies show that sociolinguistic transfer is one of the sources of inter-cultural miscommunication. Sociolinguistic transfer is 'the use of the rules of speaking of one's own cultural group when interacting with members of another group' (Chick, 1996, p. 332).

Cross-cultural pragmatic failure is not only restricted to interactions between native and non-native speakers; it can also pertain to communication between two people who in any particular domain do not share a common linguistic or cultural background (Thomas, 1983, p. 92). Many people who communicate across linguistic and cultural boundaries have experienced communication breakdowns with interlocutors who are from a different first language (L1) background. Sociolinguists recognize that such intercultural miscommunication is partly due to different value systems that underlie each speaker's L1 culture group (Damen, 1987).

People in most cultures would probably agree that an apology is needed when an offence or violation of social norms has taken place. Nonetheless, there may be conflicting opinions as to when we should apologize (what situations call for an apology), and how we should apologize (what semantic components are necessary for an adequate apology in a given situation) (Tanaka, Spence-Oatey, and Cray, 2000, p. 76). Moreover, most of socio-pragmatics studies seem to be both geographically and culturally restricted to western societies and cultures (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989).

Different value systems are reflected in speech acts. Speech act of apologizing aims at maintaining, restoring and enhancing interpersonal relationship (Xiang, 2004). Speech act of apology is a post-event act in which the speaker acknowledges that some violation of a social norm has been committed and admits to the fact that they are at least partially involved in its cause. Apologies damage the speaker's positive face to some degree because they regret doing a prior Face Threatening Act (FTA) (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 68). The act of apologizing is face-saving for the recipient, and face-threatening for the speaker. Thus, the act of apology is performed at a cost to the speaker. Apologies can be categorized as Expressive in Searle's categorization of illocutionary acts (Leech, 1983; Yule, 1996).

In apology speech act set, there are two participants: the one who perceives themselves as deserving an apology, and the second who is perceived by the first as having responsibility for causing the offense. The second participant needs to apologize, yet may not perceive themselves as responsible for the offense and may therefore choose to accept or deny it. With regard to the interaction between recipient and the apologizer, according to Olshtain and Cohen (1983, p. 21) the apology speech act set from a number of different perspectives can be described:

- the recipient's expectations based on their perception of the degree of severity of the offence
- the offender's apology based on their perception of the degree of severity of the offence
- the offender's apology based on the extent of reprimanding expected from the recipient
- the interactive nature of both the initial apology and the recipient's response
- the social status of the two participants
- the way the tone of voice may function to convey meaning

In a study of apology strategies from undergraduate university students in Japan, Britain and Canada, Tanaka, Spencer-Oatey and Cray (2000) found out that the three nationalities have similar perceptions in situations where complaining person was mainly responsible for the problem (henceforth, CP scenario) and situations where third party was responsible for the problem (henceforth, EC scenario): they rated themselves as 'not very responsible' for the problems described in questionnaire, and it was very important to all three nationalities to make the complaining person less annoyed in EC situations. However, for the CP scenarios, the effect of nationality was greater, with Japanese respondents judging it to be significantly less important to placate the person than the British and Canadian respondents did. In terms of production, Tanaka et al. (2000) found out that their findings do not fit with either Western or Japanese conceptions of Japanese versus English apologizing behavior. Overall, the Japanese did not apologize significantly more frequently than the British or Canadian respondents, and where the person who was complaining was at fault, the Japanese respondents actually apologized very much less frequently than either British or Canadian respondents.

Objectives

There were nearly 3000 to 4000 Iranian students in 2008 in Malaysia (cited in AFP, 2008). However, presently, an unofficial account reports this number between 7000 to 10000 students and the number is increasing where there were only 900 students in 2006. In the present study, the Iranian and Malaysian university students' perception of the degree of severity of the offence in situations where the guilt and responsibility is in vague and is not clearly founded are investigated. The study aims at exploring the respondents' perception and production of apology in the situation where an offence is committed. So as to expand the scope of studies of speech act of apology, the present research concentrates on two non-western ethnicities. It is attempted to explore the possible cultural differences in expressing apology among Malaysian university students and the Iranian who study in Malaysian higher education where English language is the medium of instruction as well as the lingua franca for daily social interaction.

Methodology

Instrument

The instrument of the study is an open-ended questionnaire in the form of discourse completion task (DCT). Every questionnaire item comprises of a distinct scenario according to which participants are asked to produce a written response. In addition, three five-point Likert-type rating scale items follows

every scenario and the participants are requested to rate the described offense-related scenarios on a scale of one to five in terms of the three aspects in question. The instrument is adopted from Tanaka et al. (2000). Their questionnaire (See Appendix) originally included eight items each with a different scenario; however, in this study only two scenarios pertinent to academic contexts are used. The questionnaire was designed to find out how respondents apologize in situations where 'guilt' and 'responsibility' are in doubt. Thus, in the scenarios, the person who is responsible for the offence is unclear. In the present study, in one of the selected scenarios, responsibility for the offence lays mainly with the person who was making the complaint (CP, scenario 1); in the other, responsibility for the offence lays mainly with a third party or with external circumstances (EC, scenario 2). Below are the two selected scenarios used to illicit responses:

1. You have a meeting with one of your lecturers at 2.30 pm. You arrive there at exactly 2.30 pm, but he is cross with you saying you promised to be there at 2.00 pm. Your lecturer says in an annoyed tone:

- Your lecturer: *You're 30 minutes late! We agreed to meet at 2 o'clock. What happened?*
- You: ...

2. You have a meeting with your lecture at 2.00 pm. As you are on your way, another lecturer stops you to talk about a serious problem with one of your assignments. Because of your discussion, you arrive 30 minutes late for your meeting, your lecturer is cross with you and says in an annoyed tone:

- Your Lecturer: *You're 30 minutes late! We agreed to meet at 2 o'clock. What happened?*
- You: ...

Participants

In this research, twenty Iranian student and twenty Malaysian students in tertiary education at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia contributed to the study. Their ages range 22 to 28. The questionnaire was completed by the respondents on a voluntary basis. They were informed that no personal information or names will appear in any report of the results of the study. Having agreed to contribute to the study, the participants were emailed the questionnaire with instruction. They were asked to return their responses as soon as they could on email. Eventually, discarding a few incomplete contributions, forty fully completed questionnaires were obtained.

Procedure

The aim of the questionnaire was to probe people's sense of corporate (non-) responsibility, as well as personal (non-)responsibility. Respondents were asked to read scenarios and write down what they would exactly say in a real-life conversation. In addition, they were asked to provide some contextual assessments of the scenarios: how annoying they thought the problem was for the person complaining; how far they felt responsible for the problem occurring; and how important they felt it was to calm the person complaining. These contextual assessments are as follows:

1. How annoying do you think the problem is for the lecturer, at this point before you reply?
Not at all annoying 1 2 3 4 5 Very annoying
2. How far do you feel responsible for the problem occurring?
Not at all responsible 1 2 3 4 5 Very responsible
3. How important do you think it is to try and make your lecturer less annoyed?
Not at all important 1 2 3 4 5 Very important

After collecting the data pool, descriptive statistics as well as t-test formula on Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 15.0 were employed to process the data obtained and study the comparison between the Malaysian and the Iranian perceptions and responses.

Results

Contextual Assessment

Having collected the data, the responses were coded and were keyed into SPSS software package for statistical analysis. As mentioned earlier, the respondents were given a two-item, open-ended questionnaire in a form of DCT followed by the same three five-point Likert rating scale items, where they were asked to rate their perception of the scenarios in terms of how annoying the situation was, how responsible they felt themselves in the situation, and how important it was to placate the person complaining.

Table 1 below illustrates the mean and standard deviation of ratings of the two groups of respondents in terms of the CP and EC scenarios. As can be seen from Table 1, the two groups of respondents rated both the CP and EC scenarios as 'annoying' to the person complaining. There is a tendency for the Iranian respondents to rate them slightly less annoying than the Malaysian respondents did, even though the results of t-test show that there is not a significant difference between the Malaysian's perception and the Iranian's in this regard.

In terms of responsibility, the two groups rated themselves as 'not very responsible' for the problem described in CP scenario, while rated it more responsible for the problem described in EC scenario. As can be seen, Iranian respondents rated this scenario as being less responsible than the Malaysian respondents did. Nevertheless, this difference is not statistically significant, either.

In terms of the importance of 'making the person less annoyed', the two groups of respondents rated this as 'important' for EC scenarios with Iranian giving higher ratings. Results of t-test in terms of the third contextual aspect as well did not indicate to any statistically significant difference between the two samples of cultures. Accordingly, it seems safe to assume that the two groups of respondents bear certain similarity as for perceptions of the CP and EC scenarios in terms of 'annoyance', 'personal responsibility' and 'importance of making the person in question less annoyed'.

Table 1: Mean rating of contextual assessment factors in the two scenarios

Contextual Factors		The Malaysian		The Iranian	
		Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
'Annoying'	CP	4	0.79	3.75	1.33
	EC	3.9	1.21	3.70	1.34
'Responsible'	CP	2.65	1.53	2.50	1.57
	EC	4.25	0.79	3.80	1.15
'Make less annoyed'	CP	4.15	0.81	4.20	1.15
	EC	4.5	0.69	4.65	0.59

Note: Ratings are based on a five-point Likert-type scale from 1 (not at all annoying/ responsible/ important) to 5 (very annoying/ responsible/ important)

Production Responses

The production responses given by the two contributing groups were analyzed for the semantic components that they contained. The coding scheme likewise was adopted from Tanaka, et al. (2000) research work. As mentioned earlier, the original questionnaire consists of eight open-ended scenarios including four scenarios in CP and four in EC. In the present research, yet only two scenarios occur-

ring in academic context between lecturers and students are discussed. The adopted coding scheme is detailed in the following:

1. IFID (Illocutionary Force Indicating Device), e.g.
 I'm sorry for the misunderstanding
 I'm sorry for being late.
2. Responsibility
 - 2.1. Admission of responsibility, e.g.
 I thought we agreed to meet at half past two. I must have misunderstood.
 It was my fault.
 - 2.2. Indeterminate responsibility, e.g.
 On the way to your office, I had a discussion with Dr. A about the assignments. (Scenario #1)
 Didn't we agree to meet at 2.30? (Scenario # 2)
 - 2.3. Rejection of responsibility, e.g.
 I think the appointment was at 2.30, I noted in my notebook. (Scenario # 2)
 If you remember we agreed to meet at 2.30. (Scenario # 2)

Table 2 shows the percentage of production responses for the two scenarios. In addition, the subcategories of Responsibility were also analyzed for more detailed a study. As can be seen in Table 2, the responses produced by the two groups contained a very high percentage of 'Responsibility' comments; and for the CP scenario, the proportion of responses that explicitly rejected responsibility was very similar across the two nationalities. Moreover, in terms of use of 'IFID's, the percentages of responses containing at least one IFID was very similar across the two groups in CP scenarios. However, Malaysian respondents use slightly more IFID in EC scenarios. Results of t-test analysis did not demonstrate any significant differences in responses for CP and EP scenarios.

Table 2: Percentage of production responses containing two types of semantic components

	Complaining person mainly responsible for the problem (CP Scenarios)		Third Party/External Circumstances mainly responsible for the problem (EC Scenarios)	
	Malaysian respondents	Iranian respondents	Malaysian respondents	Iranian respondents
Total number of responses	38	38	40	44
IFID	36.85%	36.85%	47.50%	43.20%
Responsibility	63.15%	63.24%	52.50%	56.80%
Admit	15.80%	18.45%	22.50%	27.25%
Indeterminate	15.80%	10.50%	30%	29.55%
Reject	31.55%	34.29%	-	-

Discussion

The findings of the study tend to demonstrate that there is no statistically significant difference in the responses of the two groups of the participants in terms of both perception of the situations and pro-



duction of semantic components. Both Iran and Malaysia are hierarchical societies in nature. The results seem to point out that Iranian and Malaysian respondents are concerned about the social status and power of the person complaining (in the scenarios, the Lecturer), and therefore the perceptions are more toward keeping the face and making the person (here the lecturer) less annoyed, even in the situation where they felt less responsible for the problem occurred (e.g. in CP scenario). Moreover, there is no statistically significant difference regarding the frequency and types of semantic components.

Since interaction between Iranian students in Malaysia and their lecturers and supervisors as well as Malaysian students are in English language, comparative studies between the two cultures would be of considerable value for having better understanding of the similarities and/or the differences of the two nationalities in terms of cultural factors and social norms – to apologize, being an important one. Findings of such studies and research ought to be sought since at often times, they can help improve the international visitors establish more efficient interaction when in contact with people from other cultures. For, the fear of not being socially fitting may cause people specially international students to shy away from initiating or maintaining conversation and as a result a decent relationship (e.g. in the case, with their supervisors or fellow students, which is exceedingly vital for their educational success).

Conclusion and Recommendation

In this paper the apology strategies among Malaysian and Iranian students have been examined in situations where responsibility is in doubt. Findings displayed that both groups had similar perception in contextual assessment. Malaysian and Iranian students' production in terms of semantic components were also closely similar.

It goes without saying that owing to the small size of sample of respondents, the results cannot be strongly generalized. Other studies with larger samples and more questionnaire items are needed to highlight and draw analogy between the two nationalities in question. Furthermore, using other types of instruments to collect data would also benefit a better conclusion. Besides, it is highly recommended to employ mixed-method approaches to cross-validate the results and achieve more reliable conclusions at the end. More studies with more samples and item-questionnaires which are varied in contextual factors (lower/higher status, high/low familiarity) can and should help access results that could be more generalized. Not to mention, using authentic data would add to the benefit of such studies.

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Appendix

Original Questionnaire adopted from Tanaka et al. (2000)

- Read every item and produce a written response based on the given situation described. Please, also rate you perception of the scenario with regard to the following three contextual factors on a scale of one to five.

1. This morning your father went to a clinic for his annual medical health check (which his company provides for their employees). About a week ago, you overheard your father telling his boss about the date and time of the health check on the phone. However, midmorning today, the telephone rings and it is your father's boss. He says in an annoyed tone:

Father's boss: *I'm phoning to ask where your father is he's supposed to be here for our team meeting, and we've all been waiting for him for about 30 minutes. What's happened to him?*

[Please write the EXACT words you think you would say in responses.]

You: ...

2. You arrange to go to a concert with a friend. As you clearly agreed, you wait for him in front of the train station, but after 30 minutes he still does not appear, you give up on him, and go into the station. You then find him at the ticket gate. It is still just possible to get to the concert in time. Your friend is cross with you and says in an annoyed tone:

Your friend: *You're 30 minutes late! What happened?*

3. You have a meeting with your lecture at 2.00 pm. As you are on your way, another lecturer stops you to talk about a serious problem with one of your assignments. Because of your discussion, you arrive 30 minutes late for your meeting, your lecturer is cross with you and says in an annoyed tone:

Your Lecturer: *You're 30 minutes late! We agreed to meet at 2 o'clock. What happened?*

4. You are working in the Customer Service section of a department store. The telephone rings, and a customer complains that his goods have not been delivered yet. The purchase is in front of you, and you see that he signed for the goods to be delivered tomorrow morning. The customer says in an annoyed tone:

Customer: *I bought a table from your store yesterday. You were supposed to deliver it this morning, but it's 12.30 now, and it hasn't arrived. What has happened?*

5. You have a meeting with your lecturer at 2.30 pm. You arrive there at exactly 2.30 pm but he is cross with you saying you promised to be there at 2.00 pm. Your lecturer says in an annoyed tone:

Your lecturer: *You're 30 minutes late! We agreed to meet at 2 o'clock. What happened?*

6. Your father left home for work at the normal time this morning. Afterwards, you happened to hear on the local radio that there was an accident on the line your father uses and the trains are running late. Later the telephone rings; it is your father's boss. He says in an annoyed tone:

Father's boss: I'm phoning to ask where your father is. He's supposed to be here for our team meeting, and we've all been waiting for him for about 30 minutes. What's happened to him?

7. You are working in the Customer Service section of a department store. The telephone rings, and a customer complains that his goods have not been delivered near your warehouse, and that the road from your warehouse was closed for several hours. The customer says in an annoyed tone:

Customer: I bought a table from your store yesterday. You were supposed to deliver it this morning, but it's 12.30 now, and it hasn't arrived. What has happened?

8. You arrange to go to a concert with a friend. You agree to meet at the ticket gate of the station near the concert hall, but you are 30 minutes late because there was an accident and your train was late. You find your friend still waiting at the ticket gate. It is still just possible to get to the concert in time. Your friend is cross with you and says in annoyed tone:

Your friend: You're 30 minutes late! What happened?

✚ Follow-up Likret rating scale items.

a. How annoying do you think the problem is for your lecturer, at this point before you reply?

Not all annoying 1 2 3 4 5 Very annoying

b. How far do you feel responsible for the problem occurring?

Not at all responsible 1 2 3 4 5 Very responsible

c. How important do you think it is to try and make your lecturer less annoyed?

Not at all important 1 2 3 4 5 Very important