A Cross-Cultural Approach to Speech-Act-Sets: The Case of Apologies

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Abstract
The aim of this paper is to contribute to the validity of recent research into speech act theory by advocating the idea that with some of the traditional speech acts, their overt language manifestations that emerge from corpus data remind us of ritualised scenarios of speech-act-sets rather than single acts, with configurations of core and peripheral units reflecting the socio-cultural norms of the expectations and culture-bound values of a given language community. One of the prototypical manifestations of speech-act-sets, apologies, will be discussed to demonstrate a procedure which can be used to identify, analyse, describe and cross-culturally compare the validity of speech-act-set theory and provide evidence of its relevance for studying the English-Czech interface in this particular domain of human interaction.

Keywords
Cross-cultural approach, speech-act-set, apology, overt language manifestation, functional equivalents.

Introduction
The ability to communicate in a way that is socially and culturally appropriate is the aim of all learners of foreign languages. Methodologists say that native speakers have communicative competence - i.e. a subconscious knowledge of language use. Part of communicative competence is represented by socio-cultural knowledge and experience (also referred to as the pragmatic context or shared knowledge of the world). In foreign language teaching, however, only part of the competence can, but need not necessarily, be shared, and hence it should be taught together with grammatical and lexical competence. Our knowledge of the differences and discrepancies that exist between native and non-native speech acts and speech-act-sets can lead to more effective pragmatic instruction.

1. The need for a cross-cultural perspective
Foreign language learners need to be aware of different ways in which language is used in different situations; in other words they need to know how to get language to do what we want it to do in given circumstances. They should know the difference between formal and informal language use (i.e. they should know, for example, when they can get away with Sorry and when it would be better to say I really must apologise). There are many factors influencing the process of teaching communicative language functions, but we can agree with Harmer (1995, p.25) that it is safe to say that easy, transparent and neutral manifestations of a language function are better for students at lower levels, whereas difficulty, lack of transparency and extremes of formality (and informality) are more suitable for more advanced students. However, even learners at lower levels should be taught that there are many factors affecting how we choose the words we use and how ritualised language manifestations of situational scenarios are supposed to be. For example:

- Setting: Where are we when we use language? What situation are we in?
Participants: Who is taking part in the communication? What is the relation between/among the interlocutors?

Purpose: What is the purpose/communicative intention of the speaker or writer?

Channel: Is it written or spoken communication? If spoken, is it face-to-face interaction? Does it take place over the telephone (e.g. a phone-in talk show)?

Topic: What is the message about? And, consequently, what are the utterances, phrases and words about?

Information packaging: What do I want to present as given or new in the message? What do I want to highlight or background?

With the aim of helping learners in everyday routines that require socio-pragmatic competence (e.g. refusals, complaints, apologies, compliments, etc.), linguists study individual speech acts, as well as their combinations, which form speech-act-sets serving one communicative purpose. There are two basic perspectives from which speech acts have been looked upon since the Austinian taxonomy. The first is the single-speech-act-based model, which, however, is limited in its applicability since it focuses on prefabricated rather than real-life situations, and the second is the speech-act-set-model, which approaches speech acts as analytical chains of sequentially activated discrete sets, patterned into a rather flexible matrix of socio-pragmatic preferences. This model opens up space for a more systematic and, at the same time, more transparent methodological approach to real-life language manifestations both from the intra- and cross-language perspectives.

The comparison and contrasting of various speech-act-sets and the results of such studies, (compare, for example, the investigation of the process of communication and postulating relevant pedagogical implications in Halušková, 2007, p.53) can make both teachers and learners aware of the respective speech acts that are sequentially activated within a single speech-act-set.

Speech acts are universal in the general human need to express various communicative functions. They are, however, language manifestations of socio-cultural norms and values recognised in particular cultural communities which, as such, are projected into culture-specific configurations of communicative strategies, of which the overt language manifestations are relevant consequences.

The importance of sensitivity to the culture-bound setting of language use has recently been investigated in numerous studies focusing on various pragmatic aspects of communication, the interface between pragmatics and other linguistic disciplines, or the process of acquiring pragmatic competence, with the aim being to identify similarities giving rise to universals and differences based on various speakers’ perspectives (see previous issues of this journal for details).

Researchers have approached speech acts from various perspectives:

- individual speech acts (e.g. apologies, refusals, complaints, etc.) as reflected in particular languages (e.g. Olshtain and Blum-Kulka, 1985; Brown and Levinson, 1987);
- combinations of individual speech acts that comprise a complete speech act set in particular languages (e.g. Cohen and Olshtain, 1981; Murphy and Neu, 1996; Scolon and Scolon, 2001);
- comparison of native and non-native speakers’ production of speech act sets based on two homogeneous groups – that of native speakers and non-native speakers with a particular first language (e.g. Olshtain and Weinbach, 1987; Beebe, et al., 1990, Chen, 1996);
- comparison of native and non-native speakers’ production of speech act sets based on a group of native speakers and a group of non-native speakers with varying first language backgrounds (e.g. Tanck, 2004).

The recognition of speech acts contributed to a shift in linguistic thinking in the second half of the 20th century from a prevailing prescriptive to a significantly descriptive approach, based on authentic language data. This opened up space for new cross-language universalities but at the same time brought in a series of methodological problems concerning the applicability of speech act theory and the emergent task of how to develop a consistent and integrated approach on which to base systemic and functional data processing.

Linguists then came up with the idea of approaching speech acts as chains of smaller units (discrete speech acts) which, if produced together, contribute in a specific...
way to a global scenario representing a ‘sequentially’ emergent complete speech act (Murphy and Neu, 1996). Identifying the constants and variables in the patterns of realisations of various speech act sets seems to be the cornerstone of pragmatic instruction in foreign language teaching. Discovering and understanding discrepancies and more general patterns of pragmatic failure as produced either by a group of speakers of the same first language or a group of speakers from varying first language backgrounds can be helpful to educators in the field of second or foreign language teaching.

The results of various studies show that native and non-native speakers’ productions of various speech-act-sets differ, implying the transfer of pragmatic rules from the mother tongue. The differences are of various types: the order of components in the speech-act-set, the frequency of various components of speech-act-sets, and the conceptualisation and consequent lexical realisation of the discrete components (Olshtain and Weinbach, 1987; Beebe, et al., 1990; Chen, 1996; Murphy and Neu, 1996). Although some differences do not seem to play an important role in fulfilling the particular communicative purpose, there are instances which, in certain cultural contexts, can lead to what a native speaker would perceive as inappropriate language behaviour that could cause the interaction to break down.

2. Apologies: theoretical background

In the traditional taxonomy (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) apologies belong among those expressions by means of which locutors express their feelings. To Leech (1983, pp.104-105), the act of apologising is a “convivial speech act” and its goal is to restore harmony between locutors. In Searle (1969) apologies are perceived as compensation for the harm done by an offence, or more generally, by the violation of social norms. Unlike other “convivial acts” (e.g. congratulating or thanking), apologies primarily have a remedial function, i.e. to repair damage done to “face” (in Goffman’s sense of the word). In this respect they typically, though not exclusively, occur as post-event strategic manoeuvres. For the social functions of apologies, such as admitting responsibility, asking to be forgiven, showing good manners, and getting off the hook, see Norrick (1978, p.280). A relevant distinction has been proposed between heartfelt apologies and routine ones (Owen, 1983, p.119). For illustrative samples see Section 3 below.

Prototypical felicity conditions applicable to apologies, i.e. “the criteria which must be satisfied if the speech act is to achieve its purpose” (Crystal, 1994, p.135), have recently been reformulated by Ogiermann (2009, p.46) into the following four felicity conditions:

- Propositional content: past act A done by S(peaker). In my opinion this formulation needs extension by the possibility of the act being done in the future;
- Preparatory condition: S believes that A is an offence against H(earer);
- Sincerity condition: S regrets A;
- Essential condition: counts as an apology for an act A.

The speech-act-set of apology was described by Cohen and Olshtain (1981) as a sequential activation of the components of an apology, acknowledgment of responsibility, an offer to compensate and a promise of forbearance or an explanation. In 1989 Blum-Kulka et al. elaborated the pattern of an apology set comprising an illocutionary force indicating device (IFID), followed by an apologetic account, different strategies for expressing responsibility, offers of repair, and a promise of forbearance. The original model of the speech act set of apology by Cohen and Olshtain from 1981 was modified in 1990 into a five-item pattern. Two strategies, according to them, are general and not liable to contextual constraints, i.e. the explicit expression of an apology, i.e. an illocutionary force indicating device, and the expression of responsibility. The other three components are situation-dependent and much more limited in their usage (an explanation, an offer of repair, and a promise of forbearance). For details see Tärnyiková and Válková, 2000; Válková, 2004; Válková, 2013.

Examples of apologies that I excerpted from the book version of A Corpus of English Conversation show that various modifications of the above-mentioned patterns appear; some components are identical with the configurations given in the models, but there were also other components that the authors of the patterns did not take into consideration and whose presence suggests that the presupposed prototypical regularity may sometimes be broken. This fact, however, does not diminish the importance of research-based teaching materials which offer learners of foreign languages invaluable
guidance and act as a source of information about the target language. Although there can be different configurations within the set, as well as partly predictable and partly unpredictable reductions/extensions of the speech-act-set, the knowledge of the possible components enhances the chance that learners would be able to perceive and identify the respective speech acts and also use them appropriately.

3. Apologies: the English-Czech interface

As Edmondson (1981, p.274) put it, when dealing with apologies, we are in the domain of “empirically ascertainable norms of social behavior which operate for a particular community”. To illustrate the validity of his statement, we can compare language manifestations of the culture-bound etiquette involved in letting passengers know that a bus is out of service. In England, you can read *Sorry, I’m out of service*, while in the Czech Republic, *Mimo provoz* is the pragmatically expected counterpart. In Blum-Kulka’s terminology, we can say that while in the English wording, the institutional apology is worded as if it were a personal apology by the driver, followed by an “event/object of regret”, i.e.

\[
\text{IFID} \rightarrow \text{EVENT} \\
\text{Sorry} \quad \text{I’m out of service,}
\]

in Czech, an implicit and rather straightforward manifestation based on an “event-only” strategy, corresponds to a comparable socio-pragmatic situation in the English sample above, i.e.

\[
\text{IFID} \rightarrow \text{EVENT} \\
\text{Ø} \quad \text{Mimo provoz (Out of service)}
\]

Such implicit manifestations of apology are context-sensitive in their interpretation and difficult to count and hence beyond the scope of the present paper.

Let me follow Coulmas (1981, p.69) for his explicit wording of the danger associated with the cross-cultural comparison: “the risk is particularly high,” he argues, “that the foreign language user sticks to the underlying rules governing the usage of the corresponding phrases in his mother tongue.” To illustrate the English-Czech interface again, let us look for a functional equivalent of the prototypical role of *I’m sorry* in such instructions as *Say you are sorry*, by which children in particular are socialised into politeness etiquette. In Czech, though similar formulae are in existence, e.g. *Lituj (toho)/Je mi (to) lito*, the prototypical phrase to make somebody apologise is “say *Promiň/te*”. Thus, while the English prototype follows a speaker-centred strategy, the Czech one is hearer-oriented. According to Fraser (1981), apologising strategies can be classified in the following way:

- speaker-oriented (*I’m sorry*)
- both speaker- and hearer-oriented (*I would appreciate it if you would accept my apology*)
- hearer-oriented (*Pardon me for...*/ *Forgive me for...*)
- event-oriented (*That was my fault* )
- repair-oriented (*Please let me pay for the damage*).

Having compared the functional equivalents of *I’m sorry* in the Czech National Corpus – Parallel Corpus: InterCorp\(^2\), I found the following (the Czech examples are followed by working translations used to approximate the intended meaning):

**hearer-oriented:**

- *Nezlob/te se* (Do not be angry)
- *Promiň/te* (Pardon me)
- *Odpusť/te* (Forgive me)

**speaker-oriented:**

- *Lituji* (I am sorry)
- *Je mi (to) líto* (I am sorry)
- *Mrzí mě (to)* (I feel sorry)
- *Omlouvám se* (I apologise)

**event-oriented:**

- *To je škoda* (It is a pity)
- *Bohužel* (Unfortunately, sadly, unhappily, regrettably, sorry)

The last category of event-oriented apologies is peripheral in its function in comparison to speaker or hearer-oriented strategies of apologising, and is mostly implicit in form. As a result the process of relevant decoding requires a well-defined socio-pragmatic setting. The high frequency of their occurrence in our data proves their flexible multifunctional utilisation in current communicative situations, so they cannot count as safe guides to exclusively apologetic functions. To illustrate the case, the Czech expression *bohužel*, synonymous with the sentence adverbials *unfortunately, sadly, unhappily, and regrettably*, (Fronek, 2000, p.46) requires for its apologetic interpretation a well-defined context of
situation or, more frequently, an explicit lexical support, as in Omlouvám se, ale bohužel neznám jednací řád. (I apologise, but unfortunately I do not know the rules of the procedure.) Without this contextual anchoring, bohužel can be interpreted as a mere attitudinal particle, signalling the speaker’s evaluative stance (e.g. regret) to the whole propositional content, as in Bohužel se ještě nevratila. (Unfortunately, she has not come back yet.), or as a particle used to compensate for a negative reply to the previous question, as in Už se vrátila? Bohužel. (Has she already come back? Unfortunately = No.) Even here, however, the interpretation of bohužel can be ambiguous, i.e. open to both positive and negative interpretations. It would be of interest to consider the multifunctional nature of the sentence adverb/attitudinal particle/NEG-particle bohužel distributionally, i.e. in relation to various utterance positions (initial, medial, final), but this is beyond the scope of this rather sketchy paper.

Apart from dictionary equivalents, i.e. je mi líto, mrzí mě to, and promíte, I found some more examples of hearer- and speaker-oriented equivalents, as well as those which could be classified as event-oriented. The above list, however, represents only a sample of those equivalents that seemed to be the most frequent.

Although my primary aim was to show qualitatively the possibilities or tendencies in the usage of Czech equivalents offered by the parallel corpus, I decided to check the frequency of these expressions in the Czech National Corpus to see whether speaker-oriented or hearer-oriented words or phrases are more frequent. Both written (i.e. SYN 2010) and spoken (i.e. ORAL 2013) corpora were searched and I also checked the position of the illocutionary force indicating device (IFID), which I expected would be more frequent at the beginning of the sentence.

### Speaker-oriented:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position: initial non-initial</th>
<th>SYN 2010</th>
<th>ORAL 2013</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Je mi líto/ je mi to líto</td>
<td>720/216</td>
<td>0/0</td>
<td>936</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...je mi líto/ je mi to líto</td>
<td>414/86</td>
<td>6/3</td>
<td>509</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Je mi lito 720/216</td>
<td>0/0</td>
<td>936</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...je mi lito 414/86</td>
<td>6/3</td>
<td>509</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,445</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Hearer-oriented:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position: initial non-initial</th>
<th>SYN 2010</th>
<th>ORAL 2013</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nezlob se 160 0 160</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...nezlob se 64* 15 79</td>
<td>64*</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>239</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*From the original number of 122 occurrences 58 were excluded as they referred to the board game "Člověče, nezlob se" (in English known as Ludo).
The most frequent expression is the hearer-oriented equivalent that is also introduced in dictionaries, i.e. *promiň* and *promiňte* (for the second-person singular and plural), together representing 3,414 of the examples found. It tends to be more common in the utterance-initial position. In the medial position it is preceded by a name or expressions such as fakt, ježiš, já, no, no jo, tak, teda, totiž, etc. whose function is to emphasise or make the apology sound more genuine. In second place comes another dictionary equivalent; this time it is the genuine. In second place comes another expressions such as position it is preceded by a name or utterance-initial position. In the medial position it is preceded by e.g. a name, or expressions such as fakt, teda, totiž, etc. whose function is to emphasise or make the apology sound more genuine. In second place comes another dictionary equivalent; this time it is the genuine.

**Commentary**

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**Conclusion**

Apologies as a part of a remedial exchange occur almost in all types of discourse – from everyday encounters to scientific discourses. The fact that “a social man” can fail to fulfil social or personal expectations in the multiple social roles he is in makes him face the situations in which he is expected to apologise, partly not to lose his face, partly to diminish the effect of his bad behaviour from the point of view of the addressee. Apologies, though probably universal in the general human need to express regret over offensive acts (and perhaps also universal in the basic three discrete steps to be taken, i.e. an offence – apology – acceptance), are language manifestations of socio-cultural norms and values recognised in particular cultural communities, and, as such, are projected into culture-specific configurations of communicative strategies, of which language manifestations are relevant consequences. Apologising as a process seems to activate both the *paradigmatic axis of alternation rules*, resulting in language- and culture-specific varieties, whose preferences are determined by various factors that relate to the communicative situation (the social roles of the interactants, their age, sex; style differences; register differences, etc.), by which IFID can be linguistically manifested, i.e.
and the syntagmatic axis of co-occurrence rules resulting in various configurations within the speech act set of apology, i.e. IFID > apologetic account > expressing responsibility > offers of repair > promise of forbearance - but also in various simpler configurations (including IFID only, e.g. Sorry to compensate for the rest).

The overt language manifestations of apologies represent what Mathesius (1982) referred to as the potentiality of the phenomena of language: they are at the language user’s disposal, but need not necessarily be activated in fixed configurations. What seems, however, to be routinised is the language manifestation of IFID strategies. Here creativity finds a limited way of manifestation in language economy (Sorry) or extensions caused by the use of emotional, emphasising, intensifying or mitigating devices. The knowledge of these possibilities raises awareness and allows learners to identify the apology and make their apologies sound sincere and meaningful.

So the task for the ethnographers of communication, teachers as well as translators and interpreters, is to be sensitive to the adequate activation of both these axes, as well as to the culture-bound tradition of norms and values activated in their processing.

Notes
1 The term ‘speech-act-set’ is used here with hyphens to distinguish the term from speech act sets, which would represent sets of various (unrelated) speech acts.
2 InterCorp is a large parallel synchronic corpus covering a number of languages and, unlike other corpora, which are usually static (i.e. they do not change with time), InterCorp is incremental, with its size and the number of languages growing. The bulk of InterCorp consists of fiction in Czech and other languages and a selection of political commentaries published by the Project Syndicate and Presseurop.

Corpus
Available at: http://www.korpus.cz/

References


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