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APOLOGIES IN ENGLISH AND GREEK

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Abstract

The present study is an attempt to investigate socially the speech act of apologizing as it is realized in English and Greek. Although the general framework within which apologies are examined in Brown and Levinson's ([1978], 1987) politeness theory, our approach is different from that of the standard politeness theory. As is clear from the beginning of this work, we study apologies in terms of interaction, so Brown and Levinson's theory, where apologies are classified as negative politeness strategies employed to protect the negative face of the addressee, is not sufficient since more aspects of the speaker's and/or the addressee's face are affected as in the case of an apology. As apologizing can have both a positive and a negative politeness character, we propose an alternative approach to the study of apologies.

This double orientation of apologizing is further supported by the co-existence of its two semantic criteria, "responsibility" and "regret", which have been mentioned in studies having been conducted by Fraser (1981) and Olshtain and Cohen (1989). As far as these criteria are concerned, responsibility refers mostly to the negative, whereas regret to the positive aspect of face.

The double orientation of apologies also leads us to assume that the politeness system of a society influences the way in which the apologies are perceived and realized by the members of this society. This assumption is crucial for our study since Greek society has a positive and English society a negative politeness orientation (Sifianou 1992). Moreover, we consider a distinction between aspects of face affected by an apology and aspects of face affected by the offensive act triggering an apology. This distinction is necessary if one wants to study apologies as interactive acts. For this reason, we introduce the term apology situation" to refer to both the apology and the offensive act.

Our data come from a variety of sources, including questionnaires, English and Greek plays and natural discourse. For the study of the realization of apologies we expand on the strategies which have been proposed by Olshtain and Cohen (1983), but we view them in a different way, so they are divided into two categories according to the type of politeness each strategy reflects, and, therefore, the semantic criterion which is prevalent in each strategy. This distinction of apology strategies seems necessary as it accounts for the double politeness orientation of apologizing. It is also observed that in personal interaction Greek people show preference mostly for positive, whereas English people for negative politeness strategies. Finally, we attempt to show how multidirectionality is evident in all speech acts and can be useful in research in other

areas of study such as comparing and contrasting thanks and apologies, teaching apologies to EFL students and considering how different gender groups apologize.