A Cross-Cultural Study of Apologies in British English and Urdu

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

ABSTRACT

Cross cultural pragmatic research mainly focuses on realization of speech acts among native and non-native speakers of English language. However, the current study aims to compare realization of speech act of apology between two entirely different cultures (British & Kashmiri) with different languages (English & Urdu). The reason of under taking this research project is to flourish cultural understanding at international level because about 8 lack Kashmiris are currently living in foreign countries especially in Great Britain. Usually, apologies are investigated based on data collected through DCTs without any consideration to social offences that obligate to apologize. The current study is directed to investigate realization of speech act of apology; and the situations or offences that demand apologies among native speakers of British English and Urdu languages. Data is collected through naturally-occurring conversations in real-life and for analysis Deutschmann's (2003) taxonomy is used.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Results indicate that English and Kashmiri speakers though have similarities in realization of this speech act, they significantly differ in selection of apology strategies and their frequency.

- These two groups also differ with respect to apology rate to the same offence which manifests cultural difference.

- Perception of offence and its severity are culture specific notions

1. Introduction

Some linguists like Austin (1962), Searle (1969, 1975) and, Leech (19830) claim that speech acts operate under some universal pragmatic principles whereas according to another set of linguists (Green 1975, Wierzbicka 1985 etc.) their application varies from society to society and culture to culture thus are conceptualized and realized within the frame work of local social needs and customs. In line with this debate regarding language universals and culture specifications several

research studies have been done (e.g., Olshtain and Cohen (1983); Beebe and Cummins (1996); Kasper (2000); Rintell and Mitchel (1989) etc.).

A landmark in this context was the study conducted by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984). Their study i.e., Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Pattern (CCSARP) succeeded to maintain its spell even today as majority of the studies dealing with speech acts fall in its realm either by following its Discourse Completion Task (DCT) or taxonomy for categorization of apologies. This project studied two speech acts i.e., requests and apologies across eight different languages to find out their realization patterns by different speech communities. Results of the study endorsed universality in application of speech acts as says, Olshtain (1989: p[171]) there were no significant difference in realization of these speech acts among the investigated languages rather there were "surprising similarities in *IFID* [Illocutionary Force Indicating Device] and expression of responsibility preferences" (Olshtain 1989: p[171]). Following this project many research studies came into being comparing realization patterns of speech acts especially speech act of apology between native English speakers and speakers of other languages, for example, Hebrew (Cohen and Olshtain 1981, Olshtain 1989), Danish (Trosborg 1987, 1995), Japanese (Sugimoto 1997), Polish and Hungarian (Suszczyńska 1999), Arabic (Al-Zumor 2003), Jordanian Arabic (Bataineh and Bataineh 2008), and Chinese (Shih 2006).

All these (above stated) research studies typically examined western languages against western socio-cultural setting which according to Coulmas (1981) and Liebersohn, et al., (2004) might not be the generalized to other cultural contexts. In addition to it, in most of the research done to date, DCT or role plays are used for data collection leaving other tools like observations aside besides being most appropriate for such studies. Similarly, rarely have been investigated situations which qualify an apology. In compliance with these concerns, the current study is directed towards exploration of similarities and differences between native speakers of British English and Urdu (a non-western language which is national language of Kashmir - a part of Pakistan). It also examines nature of the situations which provoke speakers to apologize, in both the languages with primary focus on following questions:

- Are same offenses claim / demand apologies in both the languages i. e., English and Urdu?

- Do the speakers of both these languages apply same strategies to apologize? If no what are the differences?

- What is general aptitude of the speakers of both the languages towards explicit apologies?

Urdu is national language of Kashmir and According to Encyclopaedia Britannica[1] 60 to 70 million native speakers of this language are residing throughout the world. Over 800,000 Kashmiris (having Urdu as first language) are living in different foreign countries out of which majority is in United Kingdom. Thus, the study of speech act of apology with respect to speakers of this language is significant. This study is also significant because it is going to contribute some meaningful addition to the debate of language, culture and universality. Further, it is going to investigate an area of intercultural pragmatics which has yet not been sufficiently explored. Findings of this study will be helpful for speakers of both these languages and will help them understand cultural differences.

2. Methodology

Research into speech acts especially speech act of apology mostly is conducted on the basis of data collected through DCTs or role - plays (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984, Olshtain and Cohen 1983, Trosborg 1987). Though the benefits these data collection methods offer are obvious and cannot be overstated, in many cases these have many limitations as well. In many cases these planned role plays may not be representation of

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[1] *www.britannica.com/*

real behaviour, as says Bonikowska (1988), the participants of different studies are forcefully made to apologize in an assumed situation whereas in real life they may not apologize in similar situations. Further, Cohen and Olshtain (1993: p[47]) say, "role-play forces the subjects to take on a role they would not assume in real life, or they may not be good actors, then it elicits an unnatural behaviour". Thus, data collected through observations in natural setting seem to be true representative of natural linguistic behaviour and can lead to recognize the way people apologize in normal encounters if they need to (Holmes 1990; Rose 1994; Trosborg 1987).

2.1 Data Collection in Current Research - Materials and Methods

The current research study has been conducted based on two sets of data: set of data concerning apologies made in British English is taken from Deutschmann (2003. P[12]). According to him, apologies provided in his data file contain speeches of more than 4700 individuals engaged in different activities in varying conversational settings. Out of these, he has selected dialogues of those interlocutors whose personal information (gender, age, social class, profession etc.) were known. Such dialogues uttered by more than 1700 speakers contained 3070 examples of apologies. Out of those, the writer of the current study has selected 500 instances at random. Deutschmann (2003) delimited his study to investigation of explicit expressions of apologies covering "variants of the words afraid, apologize, apology, excuse, forgive, pardon, regret, and sorry" (p[50]). He has also provided contextual and situational details for each apology, e.g., type of the offence, power relations, formality level and social distance existing among the speakers, function of apologies etc. Correspond1ingly, Urdu data used in this study consists of 500 remedial utterances, collected with help of students of MA English who were assigned this task as course assignment. The students were from different districts of AJ&K and were 25 in total. They were asked to note 50 apologies they would encounter during next five months as soon and as accurately as possible. They were advised to jot down exact apology expressions uttered by the speakers in addition to contextual details including demographic detail (gender, age, education, and occupation) of interlocutors and contextual details, for example when, where, why, and who apologized to whom). Total apologies collected were 1250, out of which those 500 expressions were randomly selected which had an explicit apology expression due to focus of this study on explicit apology expressions.

This method of data collection, initially supported by Hymes (1962, 1964, 1972) has already been employedby many researchers (Manes and Wolfson (1981); Holmes (1990); Chamani& Zareipur (2010)). The data collected in this way corresponds to what Trosborg (1995: p[141]) claims as the ultimate aim of pragmatic research: "The ultimate goal in most pragmatically oriented research is the collection of ethnographic data, i.e., naturally occurring data, collected along with information about the age, sex, status, situation, culture, relationship, etc. of the interactants". As being ethnographic, it has not been possible to predict frequency of apologies in a particular time; random accidental sampling technique is used for data collection. The whole of the data is collected in natural settings like the homes, streets, workplaces, shops, schools, colleges, and universities without letting any clue to the interlocutors. People of different ages and gender having diverse familiarity levels and power relations have made these apologies at different times. As it was not possible to control different social variables like age, gender, profession, formality level, and relationship between the interlocutors etc., so all these considerations have been eliminated from consideration during random collection of data (500 apologies).

2.2 Coding scheme and analysis of Data

A large variety of taxonomies is available for classification of apology strategies, for example, Bergman and Kasper (1993); Fraser (1981); Olshtain and Cohen (1983); Owen (1983); Sugimoto (1997); and, Trosborg

(1987) etc. the constituents of these taxonomies mostly overlap. Current study utilizes Deutschmann's (2003: p[84]) taxonomy for coding data on the bases of the speakers "inclination to take on responsibility (explicitly or inexplicitly), or to reject responsibility for the offence (partly or totally)". The first category, "taking on responsibility", includes "e*xplicit acknowledgement* e.g. my fault! *Indirect acknowledgement* such as: i) *self-deprecation* e.g. I'm an idiot! Excuses ii) *offer of repair*; *promise of forbearance*. Whereas second category, "minimising / rejecting responsibility' includes, "*Explanations, Scapegoating Excuses Justifications Claiming lack of intent*'"p[84].

3. Results and discussion

As stated above, this is a comparative study based on a previously done research (Deutschmann, 2003). So, following the same pattern, firstly, different types of offences that obligate an apology among these two language groups are studied. Then, a detailed study of apology strategies used by the participants of both the studies is made by calculating their frequency of occurrence in both the data - English and Urdu followed by a comparison.

3.1 Offense types

Any action which demands apology is normally termed as offence. According to many linguists (Deutschmann (2003); Holmes (1990); Olshtain, (1989), Cohen and Olshtain (I98I) and Trosberg (1987) severity of offence directly corresponds to nature of apology. Two offences of different intensity may never claim an apology with same seriousness and even seriousness of an offence or apology expression may not be similar in different cultures. Speech act of apology varies from culture to culture in its perception and realization. Current study is based on categorization of offences as proposed by Deutschmann (2003: p[64]) who based his categorization on Holmes (1990) and Aijmer (1996). It includes, "1. *Accidents [emphasis mine]*: Damage to property, hurting someone unintentionally, bumping into a person, unintentionally being in the way 2. *Mistakes and misunderstandings*: Misunderstanding someone, mistakes 3. *Breach of expectations*: Declining offers, declining requests, forgetting agreements, not keeping agreements, inability to fulfill expectations, personal shortcomings 4. *Lack of consideration*: Interruptions, overlooking a person, not paying attention, forgetting a name, being late, leaving inappropriately, causing inconvenience, taking something without permission, taboo offenses, hurting someone's feelings unintentionally; 5. *Talk offenses*: Slips of the tongue, digressions, hesitations, corrections, being unclear, forgetting to mention something 6. *Social gaffes*: Coughing, burping, sneezing, clearing the throat, laughing loudly unintentionally, flatulence 7. *Requests*: Requests for attention, asking someone to do something or to move 8. *Hearing offenses*: Not hearing, not understanding, not believing one's ears 9. *Offenses involving breach of consensus*: Disagreeing or contradicting, reprimanding, refusing, denying, retaliating, insisting, challenging".

(Deutschmann, (2003: p[59]) marked four kinds of apologies extended in order to fix any offence or mistake, "prototypical or real apologies, formulaic apologies, formulaic apologies with added functions, face attack apologies". He adds (p[59]) first type covers, "real expressions of regret for non-trivial transgressions"; the second type is used when the offence is nominal and apologizing seems a matter of routine; third type is used when the offense is minimal and apology is addressed to meet some function other than repair; and finally, "face attack apologies" are used in cases where use of apologies as remedial tool seems inapt. Table (1) represents relative distribution of offences and apologies in British and Urdu (Kashmiri) corpora. Table (1) also gives a detail of offence types and in English and Urdu (Kashmiri community):

Offense types	British		Urdu (Kashmiri)	
	No	%	No	%
Accident	12	2.5	223	44.6
Breach of expectation	45	8.8	60	12
Mistake	45	8.9	0	0
Lack of consideration	77	15.5	149	29.8
Real	**179**	**35.8**	**432**	**86.4**
Gaffe	25	5	20	4
Talk	48	9.7	29	5.8
Hearing	158	31.6	8	1.6
Request	20	3.9	0	0
Formulaic	**251**	**50.2**	**57**	**11.4**
Consensus (**Face attack**)	50	9.9	0	0
Unidentified	20	4.1	11	2.2
Total	**500**	**100**	**500**	**100**

Table (1): *relative distribution of offences and apologies in British and Urdu corpora*

As this comparative study is primarily based on Deutschmann' work (2003) so, both the offence categories and taxonomy used for study of apologies in his work are followed in the current study. An analysis of data presented in table (1) demonstrates huge difference in apology ratio with respect to different offence types which hints upon perception of speakers of these two languages regarding severity of offences. According to the table, *hearing offences* have attracted highest ratio of apologies in English data whereas *accidents*- another offence category could accumulate least number of apologies. On the contrary, in Urdu data the offence category called, *accidents* gathered highest number of apologies (44.6%) whereas *hearing offences* could get lowest number of (1.6%) of the total apologies forwarded in response to different offence categories. *lack of consideration* has turned out to be second most frequently apology attracting offence among speakers of both the languages. On the other hand, three offence categories: "*hearing offenses, social gaffes, and talk offenses"* which have collectively gathered almost half of the total apologies forwarded in English data could not get more than 11% apologies in Urdu data, that too, in case of formal conversational setting as per detail elicited along with apologies documentation. Next to that, *breach of expectation* has come out as third main apology reason in Urdu data while *Consensus* enjoys similar status in English data.

The above analysis establishes that speakers of English language have to apologize for quite a wide range of offense as compared to Urdu speakers. Urdu speakers rarely apologize for many of the offence categories like "*gaffe, talk, hearing*, and *request*" during their everyday informal interaction as total data the researcher could get about their application belongs to formal conversational setting (class rooms, offices etc.). Such a tendency of apology attitude suggests that all these types are rarely perceived as offensive by speakers of this language, all that makes them apologized for is a result of official or formal conversational setting. Otherwise, in Kashmiri society, to ask someone to repeat his / her words because of being overheard, likewise, interruption, - even very forcefully saying "listen to me first" are common practices which nobody feels ill; and none ever thinks obligatory to apologize for coughing, sneezing or laughing even hundred times.

Thus, the analysis clearly demonstrates that speakers of these two languages do not conceive same actions as offence, and even if some action is treated offensive its intensity varies which is evident from different ratio of apologies extended in response to same offence (e.g., *mistakes* earned 9% apologies in English data whereas in Urdu data it could earn not a single apology. Similar is the case with *request* and *consensus*). It goes in line with

the findings of Wolfson, Marmor, and Jones (1989); and, Wierzbicka (1985) which relate notions of offence, obligation and apology to culture and claim them culture-specific. The current study also asserts that an offence which provokes apology in one language might not do so in another language; similarly, same situation or action may mean another way across different cultures.

3.2 Apology strategies

In line with Deutschmann's classification (2003, p[84]) discussed above (2.2), the current data is placed in four categories: A (includes explicit apology), AB (stands for explicit apology along with strategy called *minimizing responsibility*, for example, *explanations* and *justifications*), AC (explicit apology along with *taking on responsibility* for the offence explicitly and implicitly; and *promise of forbearance*), and Multiple (explicit apology with combined usage of strategies involving minimizing and *taking on responsibility*). *IFID*s don't appear in all the situations in Urdu data so, AB and BC and multiple categories there may be with or without *IFIDs* depending merely on the principle of categorization for Deutschmann's taxonomy (2003, p[84]) i.e., either to accept mistake or to reject it by the speaker. Distribution of apology strategies in both the languages (English and Urdu) is given in table (2).

Apology strategies	British		Urdu	
	No	%	No	%
A (explicit only)	405	81	0	0%
AB (Explicit +minimization)	70	14	283	56.6
AC (Explicit + accepting responsibility)	20	4	164	32.8
Multiple (combined usage)	5	1	53	10.6
Total	500	100	500	100

Table 2. *Frequency and percentage value of English (Deutschmann, (2003, P[89]) and Urdu data*

Table 2 manifests that the two language groups i.e., English and Urdu speakers have different inclination towards selection of strategies for apologizing in their daily interactions whenever they are obliged for. Though both the groups opted all the three mega types but there is significant difference in frequency of their application. For example, in most of the situations English speakers have applied single *IFID* (81%) as an apology strategy (Deutschmann, 2003: p[85]). However, there is not even a single occurrence of *IFIDs* as standalone strategy in Urdu data. Strategy *AB* has appeared in almost 14% of apologies uttered by English speakers whereas in Urdu data it is employed as the most recurrent apology strategy making more than half (56.6%) of the total apologies. As for as strategies termed as AC and Multiple strategies are concerned, their appearance in the English data is quite scanty collectively making almost 5% of total apologies while in Urdu data these strategies make 43% of the overall apologies. Out of which 33% of the strategies are employed to take on responsibility for the offence and 10% are a combination of multiple apology strategy simultaneously. Thus, distribution of apology strategies is strikingly different among speakers of these language groups. English apologies mainly revolve round *IFIDs* (81%) only which are totally absent from Urdu data as standalone strategy; and always appear in combination with other strategies. Likewise, there are significant differences in application of rest of the strategies. Of the remaining apologies, as stated above, *AB* was used in almost 14% of the situations, while the use of *AC* and 'Multiple Strategies' was also quite rare. It is interesting to note that similar offences have elicited different apologies among these two language groups. In Urdu data, highest number of apologies are extended towards *accidents* whereas in English data it is *hearing offences* which could not grab even a single apology in Urdu data but the offence category which has grasped second highest number of apologies in both the languages is same i.e., *lack of consideration*. It shows that "real apologies" (Deutschmann: 2003) in Urdu data are primarily forwarded to makeup serious situations / offences like *accidents* or to make up hurt feelings might be caused

because of *lack of consideration* etc., while many of the offence categories like *talk, gaffe, request* could not get even a single apology. Contrary to that, half of the apologies forwarded in English data are extended to mend nominal offences which merely deserved a single *IFID*.

3.2.1 Application of IFIDs

Table (2) states that in English data explicit expression or *IFID*s is the most recurrent apology strategy while in Urdu data it is not at all used as standalone apology strategy. During analysing, if there are found more than one applications of *IFID*s in an apology, only first appearance is marked. Table 3 gives a detail of *IFID*s, found in the data:

English			Urdu		
Expression	No	%	Expression	No	%
Sorry	292	58.4	*afsoos hona* (Sorry)	335	67
Pardon	123	24.6	*Mahzret chhana* (Pardon, Excuse)	93	18.6
Excuse	58	11.6	*Sharminda hona*	49	9.8
Afraid	16	3.2	*Mahfi chhana* (Requesting forgiveness, apologize)	23	4.6
Apologize	7	1.4			
Forgive	4	0.8	*Mahf kerna / Mahfi chahana*	0	0
Total	500	100		500	100

Table 3, IFID formulae and their frequency in English and Urdu data

As shown in table 3, both the languages have their own sets of *IFIDs* for expressing regret, asking forgiveness, and seeking apology. Some of the expressions used for explicit apologies stand like equivalent of English *IFID*s, for example, *afsoos hona* (Sorry); *Mahzret chhana* (Pardon, Excuse); *Mahfi chhana* (requesting forgiveness, apologize). It asserts that not only apology strategies but also their realization in two different languages cannot be mapped perfectly what remains common is existence of apology phenomenon in all the languages across the globe.

The current study however goes in line with the findings of many other researchers (Aijmer 1996; Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984; Deutschmann 2003; Holmes 1990; Bean and Johnstone 1994; Meier 1992; and Owen 1983) in describing *sorry* as the most favoured formulaic expression of apology. It is also interesting to state that English expression *sorry* has also appeared frequently in Urdu data. S*orry* and its Urdu equivalent called '*afsoos hona'* have appeared as the most frequent *IFID* expressions (67%) among speakers of this language. *Pardon* (25%), in English and its Urdu equivalent '*Mahzret chhana'* (18.6%) are second most frequently applied *IFID*s in both the languages. Like *sorry*, another *IFID* called *excuse* is also directly used in Urdu apologies. Researcher, being a member of Urdu speaking population, personally knows that *excuse* is usually used to draw attention of someone, or to apologize in case of minor offences. Direct and frequent application of these two *IFID*s can be termed as colonization of Urdu language due to rapid spread of English in the country. *Forgive*, is the least used *IFID* formula in English (0.8%). Similarly, its Urdu equivalent called *Mahfi chahana*/ *Mahf kerna* has made no

application in Urdu apologies. *Sharminda hona,* (feeling ashamed)- *an IFID* found in Urdu data which has earned third highest application rate does not exist in English data. However, Chamani and Zareipur (2010) report its presence in Persian apologies.

The meaning and connotations of many of the apology formulae are perceived differently in both the cultures. For example, *sorry* in English culture is applied to keep a distance and maintain privacy but examples of its application in Urdu data impart that it has been used in some situations to render deference instead of distance and privacy. For example, in the following example it has appeared along with "refusing responsibly" (when an officer gets angry with a subordinate for being absent from the meeting: Subordinate says,"*janab mein bht sharminda houn lykin mujy meeting k barey mein koi itlah nein thi*". [English translation] "I am sorry sir, but I was not informed about the meeting". Anglo-Saxon culture, as says Wierzbicka (1985), stresses individuality, privacy and autonomy and attempts to protect these private rights by maintain distance among the community members whereas Kashmir- the other society under study - is based largely on collectivism and individuals who prefer and strive to be known in relation to others. And, instead of maintaining distance, feelings of harmony, intimacy, and groupness are focussed, even in realization of apologies, which might be chief reason of applying *IFID*s in combination of other strategies to satisfy positive face needs of interlocutors instead of using them as standalone strategy.

4. Further Insights

Present research aims to draw a comparison in realization of speech act of apology between speakers of English and Urdu. Findings of the study have been discussed above but it seems interesting as well as valuable to mention that while following Deutschmann's taxonomy (2003) the researcher felt scarcity of strategies to fully embrace tactics / strategies used by Urdu speakers to encounter an unhappy or offensive situation. Many apology expressions / strategies exceeding Deutschmann's taxonomy (2003) have been found in Urdu data e.g., silence, laughter, bowing head silently, offering eatables; hug; use of exclamatory words etc. Further, many times they insist to settle the mood and be happy letting the offence go unreported. These strategies are found working with other strategies as well as separately as standalone strategies. Lack of knowledge regarding these differences in perception and realization of speech act of apology may cause cultural misunderstandings between English and Urdu speakers (9 lakh Kashmiri at present are settled in Europe). Likewise, if English speakers utter just *sorry* for a serious offence, s/he will sound inconsiderate to the Urdu speakers as there is not a single standalone application of *IFID*s in Urdu data (table 2) suggesting it insufficient to apologize.

5. Conclusion

This paper has studied speech act of apology and the situations that claim apologies in English and Urdu societies. As for as the first research question (section 1) is concerned, the analysis of current data brings out many differences regarding nature of offences which demand apology in both cultures. It establishes that in English data, *hearing offences* have grabbed maximum apologies (table 1) whereas this offence could get just 2% of apologies in Urdu, that too, entirely in formal / official setting. Maximum apologies (table 1) in Urdu are directed towards *accidents* (44.6%) which could extract merely 2% apologies in English data. Many of the offences proposed in Deutschmann (2003), for example mistake, gaffe and request, could get none or very insignificant number of apologies (table 1) which suggest different fabrication of social beliefs and values of these two societies. As for as second research question is concerned, English speakers preferred single *IFID*s (81%) as standalone apology strategy in their apologies whereas in Urdu apologies there was no instance of application of *IFID*s as standalone strategy which suggests *IFIDs* always come in combination with other

strategies. Both the groups have used all the strategies prescribed in Deutschmann's taxonomy (2003) but with sharp differences in their frequencies (table 2). However, this taxonomy is found too short to address all the apology formulae used in Urdu data. The results also indicate an extra *IFID- Sharminda hona,* (feeling ashamed)-is applied in Urdu apologies. Presence of many new strategies (section 4) in Urdu data endorses difference of attitude towards explicit apology expressions as majority of these newly found strategies are implicit in nature. The discrepancies may partly be ascribed to cultural differences as languages code what the societies decode. The findings of this study provide a general account of apologies and acts which claim them in English and Urdu speaking societies regardless of any correlation with social or situational variables. The present study clearly demonstrates that speech acts are deeply rooted in cultural, social and moral values of any society and are language dependent phenomenon.

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