

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 8 : 5 May 2008

ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

K. Karunakaran, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

The Role of Transfer In Thanking and Apologizing in English – A Study of ESL Speakers of Hindustani

Kausar Husain, Ph.D.

Rizwana Wahid, Ph.D. Candidate

The Role of Transfer in Thanking and Apologizing in English: A Study on ESL Speakers of Hindustani

Kausar Husain, Ph.D.

Rizwana Wahid, Ph.D. Candidate

Abstract

Thanking and apologizing are two of the most commonly used speech acts and have the element of indebtedness as their common feature. A small scale study comprising 30 ESL undergraduate students of A.M.U. was conducted to examine the role of L1 transfer on the performance of these two speech acts. The results revealed that Hindi/Urdu speaking ESL students do not face any serious problems in expressing their thanks and apologies in English. Whatever problems they face, mostly lie in their lack of adequate command on L2 vocabulary and structures.

Introduction

Performing speech acts appropriately and correctly is an important aspect of one's communicative ability and the teaching of speech acts to students should consequently be considered important in contemporary ESL pedagogy. Thanking and apologizing have one thing in common: the sense of indebtedness; and they are two most frequently used speech acts in social interaction. A number of contrastive studies have been conducted on these two speech acts. Since the existence of socio-cultural transfer in the performance of speech acts has been proved by previous research, a study was conducted to examine the role of transfer in the two speech acts of thanking and apologizing performed by Indian ESL students with a Hindi/Urdu L1 background.

Different studies have been reported on the use of thanking by Japanese students who associate thanking with a feeling of guilt as well as indebtedness, and produce expressions such as, "Sorry for your kindness." Some studies conducted on the thanking

speech act by Japanese students are by Coulmas (1981), Eisenstein & Bodman (1995), Ide (1998) and Miyake (1994).

Contrastive research on apologies on ESL learners of Japan and other speech communities was conducted by Olshtain & Blum-Kulka (1985), Holmes (1990), Kumagai (1993) and Maeshiba, Yoshinaga, Kasper & Ross (1996). All these studies indicate the existence of transfer from the L1 socio-cultural and socio-linguistic background and highlight the need for specific focus on the teaching of these speech acts.

There is a need to understand the use of these important speech acts by Indian ESL learners too, since none of the above-mentioned studies were conducted on Indian speakers. The present paper reports a humble attempt in this direction: a small scale study conducted on the undergraduate students of A.M.U., examining the role of transfer on the speech acts of thanking and apologizing.

Aim of the study

Investigating the role of transfer in the speech acts of thanking and apologizing performed by Indian ESL learners with a Hindi/Urdu linguistic background through a quantitative case study, the study attempted to find answers to the following questions:

1. Does transfer have a role in the speech acts of thanking and apologizing by ESL speakers of Hindustani?
2. If transfer does have a role, what are its positive and negative effects on the performance of ESL learners?
3. Should speech acts be made the focus of teaching in ESL pedagogy?

Subjects

The subjects were 30 undergraduate ESL students of A.M.U. coming from different streams such as science, arts, commerce and computer science, and belonged to the age group of 17-21. Their mother tongue was either Hindi or Urdu, which is regarded here as a single language named Hindustani.

Instruments

For collecting the data, the students were required to produce appropriate thanks and apologies in two formal situations and two informal situations, both in writing and in speech. While the written task on each speech act consisted of four questions to be answered in writing in the given sheets; the spoken task was in the form of an interview in which the students were asked to respond orally to the four situational questions with respect to the two speech acts of thanking and apologizing.

Procedure

For collecting data on the written task, undergraduate students from the classes of different disciplines were engaged. The sheets containing the questions were distributed to the students after some introductory remarks in which a brief explanation was given about the nature of the task at hand. The students were asked to write their responses in the given sheets.

For the spoken task, undergraduate students were interviewed and asked the predetermined questions on thanks and apologies. These interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed for analysis.

Classification of thanks

The theoretical background used here is derived mainly (with slight adaptations) from Eisenstein & Bodman (1986) who have attempted to classify thanks in terms of the various strategies used in thanking. An additional strategy type '**expressing obligation**' has been added to the list. These strategies have been listed below which manifest themselves usually in expressions preceding or following the thanks proper:

1) Complimenting/expressing appreciation for the benefactor or the favour/gift

Thanks a lot. You are wonderful!

Thank you so much. It's really the thing I wanted.

2) Expressing obligation

I am really grateful for what you have done for me. Thanks a lot.

3) Expressing a lack of necessity

Thanks a lot, but you took unnecessary trouble for me.

4) Promising to repay

I don't have words to thank you. I will pay you back as soon as I can.

5) Expressing surprise and delight

Wow! Wonderful! Thanks a lot!

6) Exaggerating

I really appreciate this. You're a lifesaver.

7) Expressing affection

Thank you so much, dear. I don't know what I would've done without you.

Analysis and discussion of thanks

The analysis of the data was done on the basis of the above-mentioned seven strategies. In order to compare and contrast the differences between thanking in the students' L1 and L2, two separate lists of possible L2 thanking forms and L1 thanking forms have been provided in the Appendix. While quoting students' responses to the questions, all their errors have been retained. The questions given to the students on the speech act of thanking were the following:

I. Interviews

A. *Informal situations*

How will you say thanks —

1. to a friend for lending you money for paying your fees?
2. to your parents on phone who sent you money for the college tour?

B. *Formal situations*

How will you say thanks —

1. to your teacher for his/her guidance in your studies?
2. to a stranger for saving you from an accident?

II. Written task

A. *Informal situations*

How would you express your thanks in writing —

1. to a friend for a book which he/she lent you, and which has changed your life?
2. to your neighbour who looked after your mother in your absence?

B. *Formal situations*

How would you express your thanks in writing —

1. to your teacher for his/her guidance in your studies?
2. to your provost for fee concession?

Spoken thanks

S.N.	Thanking forms	Total no.	Percentage
1.	Plain thanks with or without intensifiers	36	60%
2.	Thanks with additional strategies	24	40%
3.	Total no. of thanks	60	100%

Table 1

S.N.	Strategy type	Total no.	Percentage
1.	Complimenting the benefactor or appreciating the gift/favour	21	61.76%
2.	Expressing obligation	09	26.47%
3.	Expressing lack of necessity	0	0%
4.	Promising to repay	0	0%
5.	Expressing surprise & delight	03	08.82%
6.	Exaggerating	0	0%
7.	Expressing affection	01	02.94%
8.	Total no. of strategies	34	100%

Table 2

Written thanks

S.N.	Thanking forms	Total no.	Percentage
1.	Plain thanks with or without intensifiers	09	15%
2.	Thanks with additional strategies	51	85%
3.	Total no. of thanks	60	100%

Table 3

S.N.	Strategy type	Total no.	Percentage
1.	Complimenting the benefactor or appreciating the gift/favour	21	35.59%
2.	Expressing obligation	36	61.01%
3.	Expressing lack of necessity	0	0%
4.	Promising to repay	0	0%
5.	Expressing surprise & delight	0	0%
6.	Exaggerating	02	03.38%
7.	Expressing affection	0	0%
8.	Total no. of strategies	59	100%

Table 4

On analyzing the data it was found that in their oral production, a large number of Indian ESL students did not go beyond the plain formulaic expression of ‘Thank you’ or ‘Thanks’ without employing any strategy to enhance their expression of gratitude. In the 60 expressions of thanking orally in the interviews, the total number of strategies employed was 34. The number of responses which did not use any strategies in addition to saying a plain ‘Thanks’ or ‘Thank you’ was 36 in interviews. Similarly, in writing, in the 60 expressions of thanks, the total number of strategies employed was 59. Here the number of responses which did not use any strategies was 09. These findings show that students are generally more articulate and expressive in writing than in speech.

The most frequent strategy type in the interviews was that of **complimenting the benefactor or appreciating the gift or the favour** (61.76%). In written responses however, the number of this strategy was not so high (35.59%).

In the interviews, some of the complimenting expressions were the following:

I am so happy and excited for going on college tour and you have paid for me. Thank you. (I am happy because *you* paid.)

Thank you, sir. It was impossible to get success without your help. Your guidance is excellent.

Some of the examples from writing are the following:

Thank you madam for valuable guidance, because of you I got the highest marks in sessional test.

If you have not paid my fee, it would be impossible to get hall ticket. So thank you very much.

Expression of surprise and delight was only found in spoken responses (08.82%). The following is one of the examples:

I am so happy and excited for going on college tour and you have paid for me. Thank you.

However, the number of this strategy in the corpus does not reflect real-life, natural, oral interaction, in which speakers tend to show their surprise and delight freely while thanking. The lack of these expressions might be because of the artificial situation of the interview. **Expression of affection** was found only once in the spoken corpus and was nil in writing. **Exaggerating the favour** was 03.38% in the written corpus and nil in the interviews. **Expressing lack of necessity** and **promising to repay** were nil in both the written and oral responses. As far as the strategy of **promising to repay** is concerned, it must be noted that while expressions such as the following,

Thanks for lunch. Next time it's my treat.

might be common in the western culture, they are not so in the Indian culture, unless the relationship between the speaker and the hearer is very informal. In our culture, it is not the tradition to promise to repay after obtaining a favour from another person, unless it is a loan. People do not promise to repay an obligation verbally, though they might have it in their mind, and they accept a favour with humility. Indebtedness is not often shown in words especially in oral interaction, but cherished in the heart.

A significant finding of the study was that **expressing obligation and indebtedness** was the most frequent strategy type in writing. The number of this strategy

in oral responses was 26.47%, in contrast to 61.01% in writing. Some of the examples are the following:

I am highly thankful for your guidance. I would not be able to get success without your help. (In interview)

O dear fiend. I am so grateful to you for lending me such a nice book which has helped me in hitting my exam. (In writing)

Dear Aunty, thank you very much. I can't tell in words that how much I feel obliged to you. It was through your co-operation that my mother is back to routine work. Aunty thanks a lot. (In writing)

This also shows, as mentioned above, that ESL students are more articulate in the expression of their thanks in writing in which they make their thanking more extended and employ different kinds of strategies.

Classification of apologies

The classification of strategies used in apologies is derived mainly from the work by Cohen & Olshtain (1981) and Cohen, Olshtain and Rosenstein (1986), who identify five possible strategies in the making of an apology:

1) An expression of apology with or without an intensifier (very, really, etc.)

Such an expression uses some formulaic terms such as 'sorry', 'excuse', 'forgive' or apologize. For example,

Please, forgive me.

Excuse me.

I'm very sorry.

I apologize for my mistake.

2) An explanation for the offence

The offender may like to provide an explanation for the offence along with a ritualized expression:

Sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. I didn't know just how it happened.

Sorry, sir. I got late because my cycle got punctured.

3) **An offer of repair**

The offender may offer to make amends for the damage or wrongdoing. For example, Oh, I forgot to-day was your birthday! Don't get so angry with me. I'll take you out for a grand dinner to-morrow.

4) **A promise of non-recurrence**

Here the apologizer commits himself/herself to not making the mistake again. For example,

I'm really sorry ma'am. It won't be repeated again.

5) **Acknowledgement of responsibility**

The formulaic expressions of apologizing may be accompanied by a recognition of the offender's fault. For example,

I'm really sorry. Sure, it was my fault.

Please forgive me for having hurt you.

In the analysis used in the study, the first strategy mentioned by Cohen et al, that is, '**an expression of apology with or without an intensifier**' has been considered the apology proper— a plain apology without additional strategies. The other four strategies are considered here as additional strategies, which may come before or after the apology proper. **Interjectives** are also included in the analysis, because a simple interjective such as 'oh' itself can take the place of an apology.

Analysis and discussion of apologies

The analysis of the data was done on the basis of the above-mentioned four strategies. For comparing L1 and L2 apology forms, the lists given in the Appendix can be referred to. While quoting students' responses to the questions, all their errors have been retained. The questions given to students on the speech act of apologizing were the following:

I. Interviews

A. Informal situations

How would you apologize —

1. to a friend for not being able to attend his/her birthday party?
2. to your mother for misbehaving with her?

B. Formal situations

How would you apologize —

1. to your teacher for being late for the class?
2. to your warden for violating a rule of the hostel?

II. Written task

A. Informal situations

How will you apologize in writing —

1. to your friend when you have lost his/her book which s/he lent you?
2. to your mother when you have misbehaved with her?

B. Formal situations

How will you apologize in writing —

1. to your proctor after having beaten your friend?
2. to the publisher of a book for not having made the payment on time?

Spoken apologies

S.N.	Apology forms	Total no.	Percentage
1.	Plain apologies with or without intensifiers	15	25%
2.	Apologies with additional strategies	45	75%
3.	Total no. of apologies	60	100%

Table 5

S.N.	Strategy type	Total no.	Percentage
1.	Strategy of explanation	24	55.81%
2.	Offer of repair	0	0%
3.	Promise of non-recurrence	18	41.86%
4.	Acknowledgement of responsibility	01	02.32%
5.	Interjectives	0	0%
6.	Total no. of strategies	43	100%

Table 6

Written apologies

S.N.	Apology forms	Total no.	Percentage
1.	Plain apologies with or without intensifiers	27	45%
2.	Apologies with additional strategies	33	55%
3.	Total no. of apologies	60	100%

Table 7

S.N.	Strategy type	Total no.	Percentage
1.	Strategy of explanation	12	36.36%
2.	Offer of repair	03	09.09%
3.	Promise of non-recurrence	12	36.36%
4.	Acknowledgement of responsibility	06	18.18%
5.	Interjectives	0	0%
6.	Total no. of strategies	33	100%

Table 8

A considerable number of students produced **plain apologies without intensifiers** such as ‘I’m sorry’ or **with intensifiers** such as ‘I’m very sorry’ or ‘I’m really/so sorry’. The number of such apologies was 15 in interviews and 27 in the written task, out of the total number of 60 responses in each group.

A positive finding of the study was that a large number of students used additional strategies to complement their plain apologies such as **explanation, acknowledgement of responsibility** or **promise of non-recurrence**. The percentage of additional strategies was 75% in the interviews and 55% in writing. Of these additional strategies **acknowledgement of responsibility** occurred only once in the interviews (02.32%), and 6 times in writing (18.18%). Some examples are the following:

I am sorry. I should have kept in view the rules and regulations of the university.
(In writing)

Extremely sorry sir. It was my fault. I made my friend stay without your permission because she had no place in Aligarh. (In interview)

Explanation was found 55.81% in the interviews and 36.36% in writing. Some examples from the corpus are the following:

Sorry for being late and I did not get rickshaw. (In interview)

I am sorry for carelessness. I didn't have any intention of losing your book, but it got lost by mistake. Please forgive me. (In writing)

Offer of repair occurs seldom in the responses; that is, only 09.09% in writing and nil in oral production. The reason for the lack of this strategy might be found in the Indian socio-cultural background. In the Indian culture if someone does not attend the birthday party of a friend, s/he will not say something like,

How can I make it up to you– why don't I buy you lunch on Friday? (Quoted from Cohen, Olshtain & Rosenstein, 1986, p: 67)

However, in some special situations, sometimes Indian speakers may make an offer of repair, as in the following response in the written corpus of the study,

I am so sorry. I have lost your book due to my negligence. I will return it to you after purchasing a new book.

Promise of non-recurrence was often found in the elicited responses: 41.86% in the interviews and 36.36% in writing. For example,

Sorry mama, it would not be repeated again. (In interview)

Sorry sir, next time you will not get any time of complain from my side. (In writing)

Interjectives such as, 'Oh', 'Ah' which often accompany apologies were nil both in writing and interviews. It might be the result of the artificiality of the situations. In real life situations, exclamations are produced spontaneously.

Conclusion and pedagogical implications

As far as the questions posed at the beginning of the study are concerned, the question regarding the existence of L1 transfer in the speech acts of thanking and apologizing in English by ESL Indian speakers is answered in the affirmative in the light

of the results of the study. However, the transfer from L1 socio-cultural background manifests itself in a few limited areas only. In the case of thanking strategies, the respondents never used the strategy of 'promising to repay' because it goes against the Indian socio-cultural norms and not considered polite and humble. In the Indian socio-cultural context, humility and respect for elders are valued highly, which is not so in the western culture.

In the same manner, the 'offer of repair' for an offence in expressing an apology was also seldom found in the responses (only 09.09% in written responses and nil in interviews). The lack of this strategy can also be interpreted in relation to the Indian socio-cultural code of conduct. An 'offer of repair' for an offence is expressed only in special circumstances in the Indian community, because of the heightened sense of indebtedness. Similarly, the expression of obligation or indebtedness ranked high among the strategies of thanking in the elicited responses, especially in writing which again reflects our socio-cultural ethos.

The above-mentioned differences in the way of expressing thanks and apologies however, do not seriously hamper the Indian students' ability to perform these speech acts. Thus, the transfer from L1 background need not be seen as necessarily negative, because it does not result in unintelligibility or embarrassment. This provides the answer to the second question. However, it must be said that most of the expressions elicited were grammatically erroneous. Thus, as far as the performance of these speech acts are concerned, what the Indian ESL students' lack more is a proper command of the linguistic repertoire and an effort should be made to equip them with this.

In the end, the researchers wish to point out some of the limitations of the study. One of them was the limited number of corpus. With a larger corpus, the picture regarding the use of the speech acts might have emerged as clearer. Further, the study did not separate the use of the speech acts in formal and informal situations in its analysis. This might have been an improvement, had it been implemented. The use of role-plays in the place of interviews for eliciting oral responses might also have been an improvement.

References

- Cohen, A. D. & Olshtain, E. (1981). Developing a measure of socio-cultural competence: The case of apology. *Language Learning*, 31, 1: 113-134.
- Cohen, A. D., Olshtain, E. & Rosenstein, D.S. (1986). Advanced EFL apologies: what remains to be learned? *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 62: 51-74.
- Coulmas, F. (1981). "Poison to your soul": Thanks and apologies contrastively viewed. In F. Coulmas (Ed.), *Explorations in Standardized Communication Situations and Patterned Speech* (pp. 69-91). The Hague, the Netherlands: Mouton.
- Eisenstein, M. & Bodman, J. (1986). 'I very appreciate': Expressions of gratitude by native and non-native speakers. *Applied Linguistics*, 7: 167-185.
- Eisenstein, M. & Bodman, J. (1995). Expressing gratitude in American English. In G. Kasper and S. Blum-Kulka (Eds.), *Interlanguage Pragmatics* (pp: 64-81). NY: Oxford University Press.
- Harmer, J. & Arnold, J. (1978). *Advanced Speaking Skills*. Singapore: Longman.
- Holmes, J. (1990). Apologies in New Zealand English. *Language in Society*, 19, 2: 155-99.
- Ide, R. (1998). 'Sorry for your kindness': Japanese interactional ritual in public discourse. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 2: 509-529.
- Kumagai, T. (1993). Remedial interactions as face-management: The case of Japanese and Americans. In S. Y. T. Matsuda, M. Sakurai and A. Baba (Eds.), *In honor of Tokuchiro Matsuda: Papers contributed on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday* (pp: 278-300). Tokyo: Iwasaki Linguistic Circle.
- Maeshiba, N., Yoshinaga, N., Kasper, G. & Ross, S. (1996). Transfer and proficiency in interlanguage apologizing. In S. M. Gass and J. Neu (Eds.), *Speech Acts Across Cultures: Challenges to Communication in a Second Language* (pp: 155-187). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Miyake, K. (1994). "Wabi" igaide tsukawareru wabi hyogen: Sono tayoukatno jittaito uchi, soto, yosono kankei ('Formulaic apologies in non-apologetic situations: A data analysis and its relation with the concept of *uchi-soto-yoso*'). *Nihongo Kyouiku (Journal of Japanese Language Teaching)*, 82: 134-146.
- Olshtain, E., & Blum-Kulka, S. (1985). Degree of approximation: Nonnative reactions to native speech act behaviour. In S.M. Gass and C.G. Madden (Eds.), *Input in Second Language Acquisition* (pp: 303-25). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Rimmer, J. A. & Scott J. (1983) *English for Commercial Practice*. London: Bell and Hyman.

Schrago-Lorden, K. (1979). *English for Hotel Staff*. London: Evans.

Taylor, G. (1975). *English Conversation Practice*. New Delhi: Tata McGraw-Hill Inc.

Appendix

Lists of possible L2 thanking and apologizing forms

Lists of possible L2 thanking and apologizing forms have been provided here for ready reference from the following four native speaker sources:

1. Grant Taylor's '*English Conversation Practice*' (1975)
2. Jeremy Harmer and John Arnold's '*Advanced Speaking Skills*' (1978)
3. Kate Schrago-Lorden's '*English for Hotel Staff*' (1979)
4. J. A. Rimmer and J. Scott's '*English for Commercial Practice*' (1983)

L2 Thanks

S. N.	Grant Taylor	Jeremy Harmer and John Arnold	Kate Schrago-Lorden	J. A. Rimmer and J. Scott
1.	Thanks.	Thanks.	Thanks.	Thank you.
2.	Thanks very much.	Thank you.	Thank you.	That's right, thank you.
3.	Thanks a lot.	It's all right, thanks.	Okay/fine, thank you.	I thank you for....
4.	Thank you very much.	Yes, that would be marvellous. Thanks.	Oh, yes! Thank you.	
5.	Thank you.		Thanks anyway.	
6.	It is nice of you to help us this way.			

Table A1

L2 Apologies

S. N.	Grant Taylor	Jeremy Harmer and John Arnold	Kate Schrago-Lorden	J. A. Rimmer and J. Scott
1.	Sorry.	Sorry.	I'm terribly sorry.	I'm very sorry.
2.	I'm sorry.	I'm sorry.	I'm sorry.	I'm sorry.
3.	I beg your pardon.	I'm afraid it's not something I know very much about.	It would not be possible, sorry.	I'm sorry to trouble you.
4.	Excuse me.	I'm terribly/awfully/very sorry.		Excuse me.
5.		Sorry for being late.		
6.		I apologize for doing...		

Table B1

Lists of possible L1 thanking and apologizing forms

Lists of possible L1 thanking and apology forms have also been provided below on the basis of the researchers' knowledge of Hindi/Urdu as their L1.

L1 Thanks

1.	शुक्रिया ।
2.	धन्यवाद ।
3.	थैंक्यू ।
4.	थैंक्स ।
5.	आप की बहुत मेहरबानी हुई ।
6.	मैं आपका बहुत शुक्रगुजार हूँ ।
7.	मैं आपका एहसानमंद हूँ ।
8.	आपका आभारी हूँ ।
9.	आपका शुक्रिया ।

Table A2

L1 Apologies

1.	माफी चाहता हूँ।
2.	मुझे बहुत अफसोस है।
3.	मैं बहुत शर्मिन्दा हूँ।
4.	ऐसा दुबारा नहीं होगा।
5.	बराय मेहरबानी मुझे माफ कीजिए।
6.	प्लीज मुझे माफ करिए।
7.	सॉरी।
8.	मुझसे गलती हो गयी। आइन्दा ऐसा नहीं होगा।
9.	क्षमा चाहता हूँ।

Table B2

Kausar Husain, Ph.D.

Department of English

Aligarh Muslim University

Aligarh-202002

India

Email: kausar05_husain@yahoo.co.in

Rizwana Wahid, Ph.D. Candidate

Department of English

Aligarh Muslim University

Aligarh-202002

India

Email: rizu82_amu@yahoo.co.in