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Intensifiers in Persian Discourse: Apology and Compliment Speech Acts in Focus

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Abstract

Speech carries, in addition to its propositional meaning, the functional intentions of the speaker (illocution). Persian language is governed by norms the realization of which makes significant cross-cultural differences. This study is an attempt to investigate the proportion by which intensifiers are used in the two speech acts of apology and compliment. More specifically, it tries to investigate how using intensifiers ensures the desirable level of appropriateness for Persian speakers and, generally speaking, why they are used in that proportion. Moreover, it tries to find out whether gender tends to affect the differential degrees of use of intensifiers. To this end, Persian apologetic and compliment utterances were collected through interview as well as eliciting Discourse Completion Test (DCT) data. The findings of the analysis reveal that Persian speakers use intensifiers extensively in both apology and compliment speech acts. Significant differences are also observed in the type, frequency, and illocutionary effect of using intensifiers in apology and compliment speech acts. The interview data show that Persian participants believe they are concerned about the illocutionary effect of their speech acts in order to make sure that face has been sufficiently served in apology. In compliments, intensifiers are used in a typical sense to show the illocutionary force of the speaker's act. Intensifiers are also used differently across genders: female speakers show greater tendency to use intensifiers than male speakers.

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1. Introduction

While speech acts operate based on universal pragmatic principles (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969, 1975; Leech, 1983), there are some differences in their conceptualization and verbalization across cultures and languages (Green, 1975; Wierzbicka, 1985). If claims for these universal pragmatic principles are to approximate validity, extensive empirical investigation on various languages is required (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989).

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Apology is offered when someone causes harm or discomfort on someone else. In other words, apologizing is a strategy for restoring the relationship between participants (Leech, 1983). This strategy is mostly applied through some words. As another speech act, compliment explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed (Holmes, 1986). In these two frequently used speech acts speakers try to satisfy the listener in order to have a successful communication.

Intensifier is a linguistic term which refers to modifiers, like *very*, *really*, and *extremely*, which, in fact, intensify another word. Intensifiers contribute to maximizing the effect of apology and compliment speech acts.

2. Background

2.1. Apology

Apology is viewed as a remedial interchange which changes the meaning function given into an act, transforming an offensive statement into an acceptable one (Goffman, 1971). Whenever the speaker violates the social norms and hurts someone's face naturally there's a need for the speaker to apologize.

Studies in Israel (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983) and Wolfson, Marmor, and Johns' (1989) research on the performance of apologies across cultures provided an empirical basis for describing apologies. Austin (1962) and Searle (1969, 1975) believe that speech acts operate by universal pragmatic principles. Green (1975) and Wierzbicka (1985) claim for the existence of possible variations in verbalization and conceptualization across languages. Considering the fact that the majority of the related studies were concentrated on western cultures, Blum-kulka et al. (1989) mentioned the need for a movement from western languages to non-western languages and cultures.

Many studies on apology across various languages and cultures have been conducted, such as the following: In American English (Wolfson et al., 1989; Bean & Johnstone, 1994), New Zealand English (Holmes, 1989, 1990), British English (Aijmer, 1995, 1996; Deutschmann, 2003), German (Vollmer & Olshtain, 1989), Japanese (Ide, 1998), Jordanian (Bataneh & Bataneh, 2006), and Persian (Afghari, 2007; Shariati & Chamani, 2010).

Persian studies have mostly focused on apology strategies used by Persian speakers and their preferences for these strategies in different contexts. These studies show that Persian apologies were pragmatically formulaic as in English (Afghari, 2007; Shariati & Chamani, 2010).

In 1982 the project of Cross -Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP) was initiated (see Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) to analyze speech acts across different languages and cultures in order to investigate the existence of any possible pragmatic universals and their characteristics. According to CCSARP coding scheme, the act of apologizing can linguistically take the form of any of the five below strategies:

1. An expression of apology (IFID)
 - i. An expression of regret, e.g. I'm sorry
 - ii. An offer of apology, e.g. I apologize
 - iii. A request for forgiveness, e.g. forgive me
2. An explanation or account of the situation (EXPL), e.g. The bus was late
3. An acknowledgement of responsibility (RESP)
 - i. Accepting the blame, e.g. It was my fault.
 - ii. Expressing self-deficiency, e.g. I was confused.
 - iii. Recognizing the other person as deserving apology, e.g. you are right.
 - iv. Expressing lack of intent, e.g. I didn't mean to....
4. An offer of repair (REPR), e.g. I'll help you get up.
5. A promise of forbearance, e.g. It won't happen again.

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