The development of interlanguage pragmatics in L2 Arabic: The production of apology strategies

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated apology strategies in formal and informal situations of American university students learning Arabic as a foreign language (AFL) in the United States. Data were collected from spoken discourse completion tasks for 15 Arabic native speakers and 45 university students from three different proficiency levels. The findings show that there is a positive relationship between an increase in proficiency level and the production of apology strategies as well as between level of proficiency and approximation of native speakers' (NSs) apology strategy production norms. Learners in general used more statements of regret than the NS group did. Unlike what previous studies posit, the findings show that lower proficiency learners have the tendency to produce more explicit apologies than those at a higher proficiency. Results also demonstrate that verbosity was salient in oral production, which is at odds with previous claims that it tends to occur only in learners' written responses. In addition, findings show that the NS group tends to provide vague explanations when offering apologies, whereas the learners prefer to provide specific reasons for their offense. The study also discusses pedagogical implications for teaching apologies in L2 Arabic.

1. Introduction

Communicative competence requires more than knowing just grammar and lexis; one needs to know what to say, how to say it, when to say it and to whom (Hymes, 1971). In other words, in order to interact effectively and appropriately in a given context, speakers need to know linguistic forms and their functions as well as the social rules that allow them (i.e. speakers) to interpret and convey certain messages in a particular language. This knowledge, referred to as pragmatic competence (Kasper, 1992; Thomas, 1983), is a vital component not only of first language use but also of second/foreign language (L2) learning. Pragmatic competence, however, is often challenging for L2 learners because it requires mastery of two interdependent knowledge bases: the pragmalinguistic resources needed for conveying a particular speech act and the sociopragmatic use of the appropriate speech act in the appropriate context (Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983).

The field of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) focuses on "the study of nonnative speakers' use and acquisition of linguistic action patterns in [L2 contexts]" (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993, p. 3) in order to understand L2 learners' pragmatic competence. Therefore, a significant portion of L2 pragmatic research has been devoted to speech acts due to their presentation of

pragmatic competence through their reflection of form, function, and context of use (Taguchi, forthcoming). Apologies have been a topic of interest in the field of pragmatics, and a great deal of research on this speech act has been examined within monocultural pragmatics, cross-cultural pragmatics, and ILP (e.g., Chang, 2010; Jebahi, 2011; Lazare, 2005; Márquez Reiter, 2000; Sabaté i Sabatéi Dalmau & Curell i Gotor, 2007). To date, however, no studies in ILP have investigated apology strategies in the context of Arabic as a foreign language (AFL), which makes the current study among the first to explore American university-level AFL learners' spoken production of apology strategies.

2. Background

Like all speech acts, apologies have a crucial role in maintaining social relations (Wouk, 2006) and thus they are frequent in daily encounters, made to different interlocutors, and can be realized by different strategies that vary across languages and cultures. Therefore, apology strategies have been widely investigated in the literature on pragmatics. Research on apologies for the last three decades has contributed to a great deal of literature about apology strategies among both native speakers (NSs) and non-native speakers (NNSs). For L2 learners, this speech act is a crucial part of their pragmatic knowledge that helps them to be communicatively competent in daily interactions in the target language. This is mainly because apologies are expressive illocutionary acts that can be effective even when they are not sincere (Lazare, 2005). A great deal of research has shown the ubiquity of apologies and highlighted the number of strategies that are utilized on a regular basis in the apologies offered by native and non-native speakers (Shardakova, 2005).

Some influential scholars (e.g., Olshtain & Cohen, 1983; Trosborg, 1987, 1995) provide lists of strategies for apologies. For example, Olshtain and Cohen (1983) posit that there are six apology strategies (these are also called semantic formulae): Illocutionary force indicating device (also referred to as statement of remorse or regret); an expression of responsibility for the offense; an account of the reason for the offense; an offer of repair; a promise of forbearance; and an expression of concern for the offended party. Then, Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1987) went further to add that an apology can also be expressed through forms that minimize the offense or by forms that intensify the apology (e.g., adding the adverb 'so' in the apology 'I'm so sorry' intensifies the apology and makes it sound more sincere).

Because learning such strategies represents a crucial aspect of L2 learners' pragmatic competence, a significant number of studies in ILP has focused on exploring the apology strategies used by L2 learners (e.g., Beckwith & Dewaele, 2008; Flores Salgado, 2011; Sabaté i Sabatéi Dalmau & Curell i Gotor, 2007; Shardakova, 2005). For example, Sabaté i Sabatéi Dalmau and Curell i Gotor (2007) studied the strategies used by Catalan learners of English at three proficiency levels as compared to a British English NS control group. They found that increased proficiency level did not necessarily correlate with more NS-like apology constructions, suggesting that L2 learners even at higher proficiency levels engage in some degree of transfer from their L1 pragmatic systems and that advanced speakers tend to over-employ ILP strategies as compared to the NS group.

Similarly, a study conducted by Shardakova (2005) examined apology strategies for situations involving varying social distance in American L2 learners of Russian at low and high proficiency levels, some of whom had spent time abroad in Russia while others had not. Findings revealed that while both proficiency and time spent abroad were helpful in developing pragmatically appropriate apology skills for the learners, the group most successful at approximating the NS Russian control group's apologies was the low proficiency learners who had exposure to the target culture through study abroad. The group most likely to overuse apology strategies and to be seen as too polite were high-proficiency speakers who had low exposure to Russian culture. High-proficiency learners who had studied abroad displayed some divergence from Russian NS norms but they also had the ability to craft individualized responses to the prompts. Shardakova's findings are consistent with previous studies that showed that all speakers access the same basic toolkit for apologies, but that there are some culturally specific differences in how they are executed that learners must become aware of as they gain (pragma)linguistic proficiency and sociopragmatic competence (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983).

Beckwith and Dewaele (2008) compared the apology strategies of two groups of English-speaking L2 learners of Japanese: those with extended experience abroad (more than 8 months) and those without such experience. When compared to control groups of both monolingual English NSs and Japanese NSs, their findings indicate that the group with experience abroad more closely approximated the NS Japanese group regarding some of the apology strategies and markers studied than the learner group without significant experience abroad, indicating that study abroad can lead to progress in pragmatic development, but that this process does not necessarily occur in a linear fashion.

Finally, a limited number of studies have explored apologies in Arabic (e.g. Bataineh & Bataineh, 2008; Jebahi, 2011; Nureddeen, 2008). In their comparative study of apologies in English and Arabic by American and Jordanian undergraduates, respectively, Bataineh and Bataineh (2008) found significant differences in the way the two groups apologized. Jordanians, overall, as compared with Americans, tended to use more manifestations of explicit apology as well as a higher frequency of other apology and non-apology strategies. In addition, Jordanians were more likely to assign blame both to themselves and others while Americans tended to assign blame only to others. Jebahi (2011) conducted a written discourse completion task (WDCT) with speakers of Tunisian Arabic and found that the highest-frequency apology strategies were statements of remorse (regret) and accounts (e.g. an explanation of why an offense occurred). The participants used explicit apology strategies most often when they had either a close relationship with the offended party or when the offended party was in a position of authority. Kinship terms ('my brother'; 'my mother') were used as intensifiers more frequently as the relationships between interlocutors became closer. Explicit apologies were less common when the participants were in a position of authority over their interlocutors—for example, when apologizing to a taxi driver or to a child. Jebahi (2011)'s findings are