

SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS OF THANKS AND APOLOGIES IN ENGLISH DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

Speech acts of thanks and apologies are indispensable parts of discourse activity, be it a spontaneous conversation or a well-arranged public speech. Typically, these speech acts are not only internally structured, they are also elements of larger structures. They perform specific functions and are specifically lexicalized. Thus, grammatical, lexical and functional peculiarities of thanks and apologies are the subject-matter of the research. Its main aim is to reveal pragmatic and communicative mechanisms of discourse interaction, to consider the two kinds of highly recurrent and routinized speech acts, to show that a contrastive analysis can help to reveal typological relationships between them and to distinguish certain kinds of both thanks and apologies, as well as to prove that the values and norms of a given speech community have a bearing on whether or not they are to be considered as being related activities. A communicative and functional approach to the study aims at tracing analogies and divergences between the two speech acts - thanks and apologies - and at better understanding the ontology of these social and communicative politeness phenomena in language use.

Key words: semantics, pragmatics, thanks, apologies, discourse.

During the past 20 years it has been possible to observe an interesting development in the study of human language use, in particular in the art of conversing. As is known, conversation is a serious and necessary occupation. In pragmatic terms, it is a passport to social interaction that has its own rules with regard to the form and content.

Though the general account of these two kinds of speech acts is bound to remain fragmentary. Thanks and apologies as defined against the background of a given socio-cultural system are not the same thing as when seen in other cultural context. While thanks and apologies may exist as generic types of activities across cultures, it is obvious that the pragmatic considerations of their implementation are culturally defined. Among the linguistic tools of ready-made routine behaviours thanks and apologies occupy a prominent position. Under the ethic effect of indebtedness, communicants tend to equate gratitude with a feeling of guilt. Apology expressions seem to be the most appropriate means to meet the resultant requirements.

Many thanks and apology speech acts can function as self-contained discourse units. Thus thanks and apologies are typically delivered in the form of declarative sentences and belong to the class of positively charged statement whose illocutionary force is aimed at evoking, affirming or reinforcing solidarity relationships between interactants. Speech acts of thanks and apology have a highly conventionalized communicative pattern that does not necessarily call for a response.

Leaving the speech act of thanks or apology unanswered does not imply agreement with the

statement expressed therewith; that is, that the other party is being rude, or that something is deplorable, unpardonable, etc. If there is no real issue between the parties, apology expressions can pass unacknowledged. A major function of their usage is to make communication inoffensive. In other cases, however, a response is felt to be appropriate, and strategically viewed the most common strategy then is to deny the guilt implicit in the apology.

Semantic point of view formulaic utterances of thanks and apologies is not always perceived by interlocutors as hackneyed, stereotyped expressions lacking in any real content, as is often the case with other formulaic utterances. The use of routine formulae is not discrediting to the speaker, and apologies and thanks do not sound insincere if they follow conventionalized patterns. Indeed, linguistic etiquette requires that communicants should make extensive usage of routines, often leaving little room for variation. Pragmatically self-contained speech acts of thanks and apologies consist of locutions, illocutions and interactional acts or moves and are functionally closely interrelated. Socially both thanks and apologies share common pragmatic features, emphasize obligation and interpersonal commitment.

If we inspect the occurrence of gratitude expressions, a number of criteria suggest themselves for keeping different kinds of thanks distinct; that is, there are different kinds of properties that enable us to make distinctions. Let us return in this connection to the first position of the communicative pattern of verbal gratitude. Every verbalization of gratitude is directed to some action (or actions) of a "benefactor" or to a result of this action. This may be termed *the*

object of gratitude. The object of gratitude can differ in kind on a very wide scale. Among the dimensions in which thanks can differ from one another the following four seem to be particularly important:

- thanks *ex ante* (for a promise, offer, invitation)
- thanks *ex post* (for a favour, invitation (afterwards))
- thanks for material goods (gifts, services)
- thanks for immaterial goods (wishes, compliments, congratulations, information)
- thanks for some action initiated by the benefactor
- thanks for some action resulting from a request/ wish/ order by the beneficiary
- thanks that imply indebtedness
- thanks that do not imply indebtedness

Obviously, these four criteria do not define eight distinct classes of thanks, and they are certainly no definite taxonomy. Other criteria are conceivable, and the ones listed here are not mutually exclusive.

According to this quadrochotomy, the object of gratitude can be described in terms of different properties. It can be real vs. potential; material vs. immaterial; requested vs. not requested; indebted vs. not indebted. Obviously, the object of gratitude varies also on a scale of weightiness. Different objects of gratitude require different strategies for thanks and appropriate responders, as will be seen presently.

A further complication is that the nature of the object of gratitude is not the only factor that determines the choice of a gratitude expression. The quality of the interpersonal relation between the participants is equally important. Whether the interaction takes place between close friends, family members, strangers, or employer and employee, etc. in a way affects the assessment of the object of gratitude, and hence the choice of gratitude expression. Thus the social relation of the participants and the inherent properties of the object of gratitude work together to determine the degree of gratefulness that should be expressed in a given situation.

Let us now consider apologies apart from thanks. Scholars find similar conditions here [Coulmas 1999:239]. Like thanks, apologies are reactive. They make reference to the first element of the three-place apology pattern. As such they are directed towards some action or event or a consequence. This part of the course of events is considered negative and unwanted for the recipient of the apology. His interlocutor sees a reason for regret in it. Let us call it, then, *the object of regret*.

Again, the object of regret can differ in various dimensions from one apology to another. It can be described as a kind of damage, annoyance or inconvenience which is predictable vs. unpredictable;

indebting vs. not indebting. Accordingly, there are different kinds of apologies as well as responses.

Predictable intervention into the normal course of events calls for anticipatory apologies (*ex ante*) if conditions allow. Sometimes apology and object of regret occur simultaneously. If an interaction is initiated in a way or under conditions that the initiator knows or assumes to be undesired by his interlocutor he will often start off with an apology. The following words were what Patty Keen first said when she approached Mr. Hoover:

- (1) *Excuse me for calling you by name, Mr. Hoover, but I can't help knowing who you are with your picture in all your ads and everything*

(Vonnegut. *Breakfast of Champions*, p. 132).

Patty apologizes for what she is about to do and immediately offers a justification. Similarly, to intrude upon someone often is regarded as an object of regret. The problem here is that we cannot ask a person permission to intrude upon him without doing just that. Hence the derived usage of apology expressions as attention setters. There is always the possibility that someone we want to ask for directions does feel very much disturbed. To take account of this possibility, we therefore best begin with an apology. There are standards with regard to what can be requested and expected of others, and they are reflected in the nuances and kinds of apologies which are felt to be appropriate relative to a given case of intruding upon someone, invasion of privacy, etc.

The same is true of *ex post* apologies. It depends on the nature and gravity of the object of regret. What kind of formula we choose (*Sorry, I'm sorry, I'm awfully sorry, I'm really terribly sorry, I apologize, Please forgive me*, etc.); and whether or not our apologies will be accepted. *Sorry, I'm late* may be acceptable when someone comes late to a party, but not when someone makes somebody else miss his airplane.

It is a conspicuous feature of some apologies that they are produced in spite of the unavoidability of the object or regret of its being beyond the control of the speaker. These cases are particularly frequent in institutionalized context, e.g. if a representative of an organization has to apologize for a delay which he had means to prevent [Coulmas 1999:256]. Of course, he identifies with the organization and speaks on its behalf, but in addition he may also express his regret for an event which is unpleasant for his interlocutor.

Such an interaction does not allow a response that imposes responsibility on somebody who preferred the apology. Interestingly, the English and Americans do make apologies, on occasion, without

recognizing any real responsibility. The object of regret, in these cases, is not indebteding. The occurrence of apologies of this kind clearly shows that regret, not necessarily responsibility for an unwelcome change of the course of events, is the point of making apologies [Edmondson 1981:273].

Apologies with no responsibility for the object of regret on the part of the speaker have a strong resemblance to expressions of sympathy. Neither of them require or allow pardoning, and it is no coincidence that similar or identical linguistic means are used for either purpose. *I'm sorry* and many other variants can be employed to express regret about something that one has or has not occasioned. The object of regret does not have to be indebteding for the speaker. In other words, at one end, apologies border and gradually merge into expressions of sympathy.

At the other end of the total range of apologies, where responsibility is admitted, a number of similarities with certain kinds of thanks become visible. The latter emerge most patently if we consider the response strategies appropriate for thanks and apologies.

Some formulae were seen to serve as responders to apologies as well as thanks. The strategies underlying their usage are also the same. In principle, there are two opinions: recognizing the object of gratitude or regret and relieving the interlocutor of its burden, or, alternatively, denying the existence of such an object or playing it down. Which of those strategies is opted for in a given situation depends on the role relationship of the participants and on the nature of the object of gratitude or regret, respectively. Of particular importance is the degree to which the speaker who verbalizes gratitude or apology is responsible or held responsible for its coming into existence. Whether a benefit was asked for or voluntarily offered, whether or not one is involved or assumed to be involved in some mishap thus has a bearing on the way thanks and apologies are reciprocated.

For instance, *ex ante* thanks are, in a way, advance thanks directed towards a declaration of the intention to do something for the benefit of someone else. In response, we do not normally use phrases implying that we did perform an act for the benefit of our interlocutor, such as e.g. *not at all*. Formulae like this are more appropriate following *ex post* thanks, because by using them we implicitly recognize the existence of the object of gratitude.

The above mentioned general distinction between two kinds of response strategies is the following:

- recognizing the object of gratitude and indicating that whatever one has done to bring about its existence was gladly done (*you're welcome, that's*

quite all right, please, it's my pleasure, etc.);

- denying the existence of the object of gratitude or playing it down (*not at all, don't mention it*).

Recognizing the existence of the object of gratitude is not always permissible. If, for example, thanks are directed to an immaterial object of gratitude such as a compliment *you're welcome* is surely no appropriate reaction. The flatterer cannot admit flattery.

By the same token, wishes generally do not seem to count as objects of gratitude for which the speaker can implicitly claim credit. Consider the following episode:

(2) *Trout... sneezed.*

'God bless you', said the manager.

This was a fully automatic response many Americans had to hearing a person sneeze.

'Thank you', said Trout. Thus a temporary friendship was formed

(Vonnegut. *Breakfast of Champions*, p. 74).

Trout's *thank you* is a "fully automatic response" here too. There is not very much actually that the manager did to put Trout under an obligation to feel grateful. Hence *you're welcome* would be somewhat overbearing as a reply.

Actually, it would be a breach of conduct, because *God bless you - thank you* is a conventionalized two-place sequence. It is interesting to note how pointedly the author directs our attention to the super ordinate communicative function of the exchange on the interpersonal level: "Thus a temporary friendship was formed." Another reason why a responder that indicates the benefactor's satisfaction at having done something for the benefit of his interlocutor may be barred is that the occasion for the whole episode was unpleasant for the latter. Thus '*pleasure*' is rather an unseemingly response to thanks for consolation.

Similarly, responders of this kind are unlikely if the object of gratitude is not indebteding. An object of gratitude is not indebteding if it is being paid for. If we buy our groceries we may very well say *thank you* to the salesclerk, just as the cashier may say *thank you* upon receiving the money. But neither shopkeeper nor customers are likely to reply '*pleasure*'. This formula seems to presuppose free-decision of the benefactor. In the context of buying and selling, however, the course of events is largely pre-designed.

"*O'key*" is one of the responders for thanks and apologies. While its main function in contexts of verbal gratitude is to acknowledge receipt, the situation is slightly different with apologies. Here it conveys more of a sense of acceptance. *You're welcome* (with rising intonation) according to [Mir

1992:1-20] is an apt response to an introductory apology. It signals permission to intrude and at the same time a request for the intruder to disclose his desire. Notice that a negative response is quite unlikely in cases like this, because the apologetic tone places the addressee under a strong obligation to comply. Yet there are of course standards as to the circumstances under which we can legitimate our intruding upon others by means of an apologetic opener.

Similarly as with thanks, responders to apologies differ as regards the extent of recognition of the object of regret that they imply. If we say, "*for this time I'll forgive you*", we accept the apology while indicating that there *is* something to forgive. By contrast, *why, no, that's quite all right*, is more like playing down the existence of an object of regret or denying it altogether.

Not infrequently we make apologies that do not call for any reaction at all. For example, when leaving a restaurant table thus terminating or temporarily interrupting an interaction we 'excuse' ourselves:

- (3) '*Excuse us*', said Miss Baker,
"*We should be off now to relieve a
baby-sitter*"

(Fitzgerald. *The Great Gatsby*, p. 15).

The same device may also be used, in formal settings to ask for permissions or consent. If this is not the case, it is simply a polite way to inform our partner of our intentions. Obviously, the truck driver does not ask for permission:

- (4) "*Excuse me*," said the truck driver to
Trout, "*I've got to take a leak*"

(Vonnegut. *Breakfast of Champions*, p. 88).

The choice of apologetic formulae in contexts of this kind indicates that the situation is conventionally interpreted as a negative - negative for the addressee, that is - intervention in the course of events.

Thanks and apologies can be viewed in the light of many other distinctions. An investigation in terms of possible responders is important for two different reasons. One is that the responders provide an interpretation of object of regret and object of gratitude, which is a correlate of the interpretation of the course of events underlying verbal apology and gratitude respectively. The other is that the conditions of their application reveal a structural complementarity of thanks and apologies.

The problem of the cross-cultural comparability of thanks and apologies is of core importance. We adhere to apologies and thanks as strategic devices whose most important function is to balance politeness relations between interlocutors. It has been convincingly argued by R. Lakoff (1973) among

others [see Brown, Levinson 1978; Quirk 1972] that politeness is a universal linguistic phenomenon. According to these scholars, apologies and thanks seem to exist as generic speech acts in every speech community. Coulmas (1981) even ventured the hypothesis that language provides a stock of these conventionalized means for fulfilling politeness functions (Coulmas 1981:81). He mentions, however, that the way in which a cultural context imposes restrictions on a kind of linguistic activity can often be seen to vary in a specific way from one socio-cultural system to another.

The scholars, for instance, observed that British *thank you* is different from American *thank you*. While in American English it is mainly a formula for the expression of gratitude, British 'thank you' seems on its way to marking formally the segments of certain interactions with only residual attachment to 'thanking' in some cases. In Australian English *thank you* can also be used as a kind of verbalizing punctuation mark of interaction. It can thus occur three times in succession, if, for instance, a ticket is sold on a train:

- (5) *Conductor (handing over the ticket):
Thank you. Passenger: Thank you.*

Conductor: Thank you (Coulmas 1981:91).

From a study on verbalization of gratitude in South Asian Languages we know how differently gratitude expressions are used by Hindi speakers as compared to Europeans.

Gratitude and indebtedness are more closely linked. Indeed, there is no such thing as verbal gratitude that does not imply the speaker's indebtedness towards the listener. Hence in situations involving exchanges of goods, no verbalization of gratitude takes place. Neither the customer nor the shopkeeper will therefore exchange phrases equivalent to '*thank you*'. Similarly, to help each other among family members is only to comply with one's duties, and, therefore any verbalization of gratitude is considered taboo, and it is insulting or looked down upon when family members or close friends interact with each other. It follows then that we have to consult the values of a society in order to determine when verbal gratitude is considered proper payment for an action, accomplishment, or gift, and when it is not. The same holds true for apologies.

In a society which is so highly conscious of '*face*' as the Japanese it is not surprising to find many patterns of speech behaviour that provide participants with appropriate means to prevent embarrassing surprises. Among Japanese routine formulae apology expressions are a conspicuously large group.

There is a great variety of very general apology formulae whose range of application is not very

specific. They are used on occasions where European speakers may find it difficult to see any object of regret. Rather they are used to line other speech acts such as greetings, offers, thanks with an apologetic undertone.

Among Japanese students of English, it is a common mistake to make apologies where no such acts are expected or anticipated in the respective speech community. Correspondingly, a Western student experiences the extensive usage of apology expressions as a striking feature of everyday communication when he first comes to Japan. Even if he has learned the most common expressions of apology, he finds out very soon that he lacks the necessary knowledge of speech situations, which would allow him to predict and use them in an appropriate way. Apology expressions seem to be used much more frequently than in Western cultures, and, in many cases, the Western student will be unable to see any reason at all for apologizing (Coulmas 1981:82).

For instance, a Japanese formula *sumimasen* can be used as general conversation opener, attention – setter, leave taking formula, apology, and, notably, gratitude formula. Upon receiving a gift, Europeans would not normally say *excuse me or I'm sorry*. In such a situation *sumimasen* is, by contrast, quite appropriate.

It is quite apparent that the conception of object of gratitude and object of regret does not concur completely with its European counterpart. The speaker of *sumimasen* acknowledges his indebtedness toward his interlocutor.

The Japanese conception of gifts and favours focuses on the trouble they have caused the benefactor rather than the aspects, which are pleasing to the recipient. Leaving after a dinner invitation The British may say *thank you so much for the wonderful evening*. Under similar circumstances, one of the things the Japanese guest does say is *O'jama itashimashita* ('I have intruded on you'). Literally this formula means, 'disturbance have been done to you' or 'I caused you trouble'. A typical response of the host (hostess) to this is *iie, iie, do itashimashite* which means 'no, no, don't mention it'. *Lie* is the morphological unbound negative. While the speaker acknowledges the existence of some object of gratitude or regret and hence his indebtedness, the addressee denies it. A typical pattern in the use of Japanese gratitude and apology expressions.

Analogies can be drawn in cross-cultural comparison of English and Ukrainian thanks and apologies. Ukrainian and Japanese speech behaviour have much in common, Ukrainians also thank the host and hostess for the invitation to come to one's home, for

food and warm treating saying *"Дякуємо. Вибачте за турботу,"* to which a typical response is *"Вибачте нас",* or *"Вибачайте, якщо щось не так було. Заходьте ще."*

Such words would sound strange in English-speaking culture. Though there are more similarities than differences in English and Ukrainian cultures. For both cultures breach of conduct, violation of a social rule, etc. involve first of all loss of face. Face-conscious behaviour is characterized by two correlative attitudes: not embarrassing others and protecting one's own face. Maintenance of face is one of the central values governing interaction in the two cultures. For Japanese it is most important in the domain of ritual behaviour in a very wide sense, as defined by Lebra:

The ritual situation that elicits ritual behaviour ranges widely, from the extremely structured situation, such as a ceremony, to the undefined, accidental situation, such as an unexpected encounter with an acquaintance in the street, from play scenes to work scenes. What links them all is that Ego defines Alter or a third person (or both) as an outsider whose opinion he cares for [1976:120].

Apologies indicate the speaker's willingness to conform to conversational rules and social expectations. Not infrequently this seems to be their sole purpose.

Verbal apology in English and Ukrainian occurs even if there was no serious or real offence as a precaution against misconduct or unanticipated negative interpretation of one's performance. If a situation is actually impaired by a violation of a social rule blaming oneself for the violation is an essential part of the repair. One of the mechanisms for defending face is to use apologies not only as a part of repair work but also as a means to forestall the need for repair. Hence apology expressions are often used in English and Ukrainian. Most conspicuous in this regard are apologies that are performed in reaction to a favour. For instance:

- (6) *Suddenly I felt depressed, longing for something. I felt was forever beyond me. I got to my feet. "Thank you, Doctor," I said automatically. "Now you can return to your interrupted lunch. I'm... sorry I had to disturb you." "One of the hazards of my profession," he returned*
(Hughes. Nurse at Golden Water, p. 73).

- (7) *Ласкар устав з канапи й зібрався йти. На порозі ще глянув прихильно на Коляду і сказав: - Як тільки повернешся, зайді, аби я про все знав. Не шкодую, Диментію, що дав тобі державну посаду. Щасливої*

дороги! - Дякую, пане. Простіть за клопіт і прощайте

(Івасюк. Серце не камінь, с.252).

From these two examples we can judge that the reverse side of the benefit of a favour is the strain that it cost the benefactor to carry out. For this strain the one who benefited is held responsible, and thus an apology is appropriate.

Another example also testifies to this fact:

(8) *Ви бачите, Савето, не сам зайшов до вас. Ноги мої самі до вас довели. Вибачайте за солодкий відпочинок та страву, що мав у вас. Стільки клопоту завдав вам. Чим відплачу за все?*

(Івасюк. Серце не камінь, с. 18).

As it is seen from the example Ukrainian apology formula *Вибачайте* is used instead of the verbal gratitude. The interchangeable use of apology and gratitude formulae is specifically peculiar to Western Ukraine speech behaviour which obviously testifies to the existing differences in English and Ukrainian language use of thanks and apologies speech acts.

What is being expressed in examples (6), (7), (8) is not so much apology referring to any particular person, but rather recognition of a certain type of social relationship, where one party admits a general feeling of indebtedness to the other.

Apologies and thanks as used by Englishmen and Ukrainians as well as Russians are not expected to yield any significant information, they carry a major social theme. They set the tone of interaction between members of a hierarchically structured society adhering to ethics of indebtedness. The smallest favour makes the receiver a debtor. Social relations can be regarded, to a large extent, as forming a unity of mutual responsibilities and debts.

Not every favour can be repaid, and if circumstances do not allow proper repayment, communicants

tend to apologize. They acknowledge the burden of the debt and their own internal discomfort about it. Thanks and apologies used in innumerable circumstances, and serving a variety of functions beyond the imagination, are not merely clichés with no substantial message associated with them. Rather they serve to balance debt and credit between parties. They convey a sense of moral indebtedness so characteristic of social relationships in any community.

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