

A Study of Transfer in the Speech Act of Apologizing

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Abstract

One recent perspective on the process of transfer in second language acquisition is that second language learners' willingness to transfer rules from their first language is related to their perception of language-specificity and the distance between their first and second language (Kellerman 1978). Support for this perspective was found in Olshtain's 1981 study of the behavior of native speakers of English and Russian in the speech act of apologizing. The present study was undertaken to investigate the relationship between the transfer behavior of native speakers of Chinese in the speech act of apologizing and their intuitions about language-specificity and distance. 12 native speakers of Chinese were interviewed and asked to role-play their responses in both English and Chinese in 8 situations in which apologies were expected. Analysis of the collected data and comparison with Olshtain's data for native speakers of English indicate that there is a relationship between intuitions about language-specificity and language distance and transfer behavior.

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INTRODUCTION

As has been noted by Schmidt & Richards (1980) in their discussion of second language acquisition (SLA) literature on speech act theory, although the analyses of learning strategies such as inferencing, transfer and generalization in the areas of syntax and morphology are readily available, relatively little work has been done on how these strategies operate at the level of discourse rules to affect speech act and speech event realizations in second language performance. Such research as has been done suggests that language communities vary substantially in their rules of speech and that transfer may occur at various levels: in the use of opening formulae used to perform speech events, in the choice of topics and the directness of a speech act, and in the formulae used to perform speech acts. Little is known, however, about why transfer occurs, and there have been speculation about whether it is related to such factors as grammatical proficiency, misleading instructional materials, attitudes towards the second language, or the nature of the second language environment.

One recent perspective on the process of transfer in second language acquisition of syntax and vocabulary is Kellerman's theory (Kellerman 1978) that second language learners' willingness to transfer rules from their first language to their second language is systematic and related to the learners' perception of the markedness or language-specificity of the languages and the distance between them. If the new language is thought to be similar to the native language, then transfer is more

likely to occur. If, on the other hand, the new language is perceived to be very different from the native language, learners will be more reluctant to transfer their native language rules to the new situation.

Olshtain (1981) reported on a study focussing on how the notion of distance and markedness related to transfer in the sociocultural behavior of 12 native speakers of English and Russian in their performance of the speech act of apologizing. She used eight apology situations to elicit apologies from these subjects in their native language and in the target language, Hebrew. These apologies were assessed according to the intensity of the apologies as well as the frequencies with which each language group made use of a set of 5 semantic formulae thought to constitute the apology speech act set: an expression of apology/regret or request for forgiveness; an explanation or excuse; an acknowledgement or denial of responsibility; an offer of repair; and a promise of forbearance. Olshtain found that native speakers of English apologized much less frequently in Hebrew than in English, consistent with their perception of Hebrew as requiring fewer apology acts, while native speakers of Russian, consistent with their more universal perception of the apology act, tended to maintain their level of apologizing or to increase it, presumably to compensate for their lack of language skills.

While Olshtain's findings seem to offer support for Kellerman's theory of distance and markedness in transfer behavior, further research with different language groups would seem to be needed to provide further evidence of its predictive validity. This present study, therefore,

investigates how a group of native speakers of Chinese performs the speech act of apologizing in both their native language and in English, using data provided by Olshtain (1981) and Cohen & Olshtain (1981) for native speakers of English as the point of departure.

The research questions underlying this study will be:

1. How do speakers of Chinese deviate from English norms in their performance of the apology speech act?
2. Are the deviations related to learners' perceptions of language specificity or universality?

METHOD

The Instrument.

The instrument used to gather data for this study was modelled on that used in the Olshtain (1981) study. This consisted of a set of 8 apology situations to elicit apology responses. Four of these (insulting someone at a meeting, forgetting a meeting with the boss, forgetting a meeting with a friend and forgetting to take one's son shopping) were designed to test the learner's ability to use stylistically appropriate expressions according to the formality of the situation, while the other four (backing into someone's car, bumping into an elderly lady and hurting her, bumping into a lady and just shaking her up, and bumping unavoidably into a lady because she was in the way) were designed to test for the appropriate intensity of regret.

The Subjects.

12 native speakers of Chinese (NC) participated in this study. They ranged from 19 years to 38 years in age. 6 of these were high school students who had been placed into a SLEP (Students of Limited English Proficiency) program at the intermediate level. Of the other 6, 3 were housewives enrolled in an adult education program in ESL also at the intermediate level, while the other 3 were working people with a near-native command of English.

For comparison purposes, data for native English responses (NE) were taken from Olshtain's 1981 study as well as Cohen & Olshtain's 1981 study. The former provided data as to the frequency of use of semantic formulae in percentages, whereas the latter also provided information regarding stylistic features of apologies in native English speech.

Procedure

A description of each of the 8 apology situations was given to the subjects on a card both in English and in Chinese. After the subjects had read the descriptions, they were interviewed one by one. The investigator was assisted by a native speaker of Chinese (not one of the subjects in the study) in translating the instructions and descriptions into Chinese and in interviewing the subjects for the Chinese data. The responses of the subjects were tape-recorded. Following the elicitation of apologies in Chinese and in English, each subject was asked the two

questions suggested in Olshtain's 1981 study:

1. Do you think that the Chinese apologize more or less than Americans?
2. Do you think that Americans apologize in different ways from the Chinese?

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Learner Perceptions.

All 12 NC subjects claimed that native speakers of English apologize far more frequently than native speakers of Chinese. In the words of the subjects, apologies seem "very automatic" and "easy to mouth" to Americans. However, 9 of the subjects also claimed that Americans and the Chinese handle apologies in similar ways. This means that the group as a whole perceived language-specificity with regard to the expression of apology, but was divided about the specificity/universality of the use of the semantic formulae. Using Kellerman's theory of distance and markedness would then lead us to predict that the subjects would increase their frequency of expression of apology in English due to a perception of distance, but that the subjects would be more inclined to transfer the use of combinations of the semantic formulae used in their native speech because of a predominantly universal perception of apologies in this respect.

B. Use of Apology Formulae.

1. Situation 1. The relative frequencies of semantic formulae used are presented in Table 1. The figures show that only 3 semantic formulae were used by NC, as with the NE. NC tended to apologize much less frequently than NE (42% vs. 92%) in this situation and also accepted responsibility much less often (66% vs. 100%). Many of the subjects claimed that situation like this would not in fact occur in a Chinese-Chinese interaction since each participant would prefer to talk in hypothetical terms so as to avoid a face-threatening confrontation of this nature. Many of the responses elicited were therefore not categorizable according to the semantic formulae listed in Olshtain's 1981 study since they took the form of questions like "How have I offended you?" which are neither explanations nor outright denial of responsibility, and suggest that further interaction is called for in resolving the matter.

Table 1 about here

2. Situations 2, 3, & 4. In the data analysis for these three situations, while the NE do not show a significant difference (75%-67%) in their frequency of apology, the data for NC show a great range (92%-33%).

Table 2 about here

In interacting with the boss in situation 2, the tendency for NC is to express an apology, while in interacting with friends, interjections like "Aiyah!" or "Zao gao le!" (roughly translatable as bad luck! or darn!) may replace the expression of apology. In forgetting to take one's son shopping, the tendency was not to express an apology or even to give an explanation but to offer repair immediately and give assurance that the "offence" would not be repeated.

According to Olshtain's study (1981) , NE did not show much stylistic variation in these 3 situations. The more formal offer of apology ("I apologize") was used only once, in situation 2 and "Please forgive me" was also used once, in situation 3. There was also very little stylistic variation in the apologies used by the NC in this study, both in Chinese and in English. The more formal apology "Fei chang bao chien" (extremely regretful) was used only twice, in situation 2, and all other expressions of apology took the form of "Zen shi dui bu chi" (Really sorry). In English, the NC restricted themselves to the more common "I'm (so/very/terribly) sorry" and did not use any formal expressions.

There was a marked increase in the NC's level of apologies in English. While the range in Chinese was from 33% - 92%. the range in English was from 83% - 100%. There was also a significant overall increase in the frequency of explanations and acceptance of responsibility, but not much change in the offers of forbearance.

3. Situation 5. In this situation, the NC tended to express apology much more frequently than the NE (83% vs. 66%) . They also tended to accept responsibility more frequently (75% vs. 58%). They were less likely to offer an explanation (33% vs. 50%), but much more willing to offer repair (100% vs. 66%).

In apologizing in English in this situation, there was an increase in the frequency of apologies and explanations, but no change in the frequency of acceptance of responsibility, offers of repair and forbearance.

Table 3 about here

4. Situations 6, 7 & 8. Looking at the interactional pattern for NE in these three situations, it seems that there was a generally high frequency of apologies (75% -92%) but a relatively low frequency of explanations or acceptance of responsibility. The data for NC, however, show a great range in frequency of apologies (from 8% in situation 8 to 83% in situation 7). There was also very little attempt to either explain or accept responsibility. Some of subjects commented that they would be more concerned to pick things up or to send the lady to the doctor's rather than to explain since it was so obviously an accident while others explained that they would not want to risk getting a lot of verbal abuse by attempting to offer an explanation to an elderly lady. In interacting in English, the NC showed an increase in their frequency of apologies across 3 situations but little change in their use of other

semantic formulae.

Table 4 about here

According to Olshtain's study (1981), NE tended not to vary intensity of their apologies in these three situations but simply provided more explanations for situation 8 by blaming the lady in question. The NC in this study, however, showed an increase in intensity of apology for situation 6 both in Chinese and in English. In situation 8, 3 of the NC offered advice "Ni yao xiao xin yi dian" (You must be more careful), which also implied that the lady had been at fault.

The average frequencies of use of the five semantic formulae for NE and NC are shown in the table below:

Table 5 about here

The results presented in Tables 1 through 5 offer some preliminary answers to the first question raised at the beginning of this paper: how do NC differ from NE in their performance of the apology speech act? On the basis of the data from this study, it appears that NC are less inclined explicitly express an apology an NE. They are also less likely to offer explanations, either because the offence committed seemed obviously unintended (as in situations 6, 7 & 8) or because the repair offered is viewed as the really important remedial act (as in situations 4, 5, & 6).

The narrow range in the frequency of expressions of apology in NE speech in situations 2-4 and 6-8 provides an interesting contrast with the wide range of frequencies in NC speech and suggest that status, age, relationship between participants and perception of responsibility are more significant variables in Chinese interactional patterns than in English interactional patterns.

The second research question is whether learner perception of language specificity/universality affects learner performance in the second language. If it does, then we would expect that NC would not transfer their low frequencies of apologies to second language interactions since they perceived language specificity in this area. We would also expect that they would transfer their frequency of use of other semantic formulae because of a general perception of the apology speech act as being universal and performed in similar ways.

The data in Table 5 suggests that NC increase their frequency in the use of the expression of apology significantly when interacting in English (from 60% - 84%). The figures in Tables 1 - 4 indicate that the increased frequency is consistent and not restricted to one or two situations. This would seem to be evidence that a perception of distance/language specificity inhibits transfer of first language rules to the second language.

The data for the use of the other semantic formulae is more difficult to interpret. This is because NC tended to increase their level of explanations in the second language (average increase from 34% - 44%).

Furthermore, the increase was not consistent for all 8 situations, but seemed specially marked in situation 2 (from 66% - 92%). This may be an indication that learners' self-reports were not reliable, or that factors other than learner perceptions about language specificity/universality were affecting their performance in the second language. Aside from the increase in the level of explanations, however, the general trend is towards a transference of L1 frequencies to the L2, which is consistent with the predictions for this group of subjects and also seems to provide further support for the notion of distance/universality in language transfer.

CONCLUSION

The results and discussion of this study need to be interpreted cautiously because of several limitations. First, the instrument used to collect data suffers from many drawbacks. The most serious of these is that no specific pattern of interaction is built into it and this is unnatural, especially for a speech act like apology which is normally followed by an acknowledgement in real life. The absence of an acknowledgement is conspicuous and unsettling and most of the subjects commented that they would modify their responses according to what they can gauge about the victim's mood. It is thus possible that the low frequencies of offers of explanations and forbearance reflect a lack of interaction rather than the real behavioral patterns of the subjects. Another drawback is that the descriptions of the participants are really not specific enough, since terms like "friend" and "boss" can cover a

wide range of social distance and are not mutually exclusive. It seems, then, that each subject could have been operating under a different set of expectations.

Second, in attempting to account for learner performance in the second language the investigator used the method of prompting learners for explanations and intuitions about their first and second language. Although this can provide some valuable insights, these intuitions may be rationalizations and not really valid.

Finally, the number of subjects in the study is small, and the findings may not be generalizable to the larger speech community from which they were drawn.

These limitations notwithstanding, this study does seem to suggest that differences exist between the way native speakers of English and native speakers of Chinese handle remedial interchanges and offers support for the Kellerman hypothesis that learner perceptions of language specificity/universality are important factors affecting the process of transfer in second language performance.

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Frequency of Use of Semantic Formulae in Percentages

Situation 1	NE (Olshtain 1981)	NC	C in E
Apology	92	42	66
Explanation	42	33	33
Responsibility	100	66	83
Repair	0	0	0
Forbearance	0	0	0

NE = Native speakers of English. n=12.(All figures for NE from Olshtain 1981)

NC = Native speakers of Chinese. n=12

C in E = Chinese speakers interacting in English

Table 2: Frequency of Use of Semantic Formulae in Percentages

	NE (Olshtain 1981)	NC	C in E
Situation 2			
Apology	75	92	100
Explanation	100	66	92
Responsibility	50	100	100
Repair	42	42	33
Forbearance	25	16	16
Situation 3			
Apology	75	66	92
Explanation	100	66	75
Responsibility	75	83	83
Repair	33	25	16
Forbearance	0	8	16
Situation 4			
Apology	67	33	83
Explanation	92	33	50
Responsibility	33	42	66
Repair	92	100	100
Forbearance	42	66	75

Table 3: Frequency of Use of Semantic Formulae in Percentages

Situation 5	NE (Olshtain 1981)	NC	C in E
Apology	67	83	92
Explanation	50	42	59
Responsibility	58	75	75
Repair	66	100	100
Forbearance	0	0	0

Table 4: Frequency of Use of Semantic Formulae in Percentages

	NE (Olshstein 1981)	NC	C in E
Situation 6			
Apology	92	75	92
Explanation	16	8	16
Responsibility	33	25	25
Repair	100	100	100
Forbearance	8	0	0
Situation 7			
Apology	83	83	92
Explanation	25	0	0
Responsibility	58	33	42
Repair	25	0	0
Forbearance	8	0	0
Situation 8			
Apology	92	8	66
Explanation	42	25	25
Responsibility	8	0	0
Repair	8	0	0
Forbearance	0	0	0

Table 5: Average Frequencies of Use of Semantic Formulae in 8 Situations

	NE (Olshtain 1981)	NC	C in E
Apologies	80	60	84
Explanation	63	34	44
Responsibility	52	53	59
Repair	46	46	47
Forbearance	10	11	13

Apology Instrument

Instructions

You will be asked to read eight brief situations calling for an apology. In each case, the person who you owe the apology to will speak first. I will role-play this person. Respond as much as possible as you would in an actual situation. Your responses will be tape-recorded. Indicate when you've finished reading.

Situation 1

You are at a meeting and you say something that one of the participants interprets as a personal insult to him.

He: "I feel that your last remark was directed at me and I take offense."

You:

Situation 2

You completely forget a crucial meeting at the office with your boss. An hour later you call him to apologize. The problem is that this is the second time you've forgotten such a meeting. Your boss gets on the line and asks:

Boss: " What happened to you?:"

You:

Situation 3

You forget a get-together with a friend. You call him to apologize. This is already the second time you've forgotten such a meeting. Your friend asks over the phone:

Friend: "What happened?"

You:

Situation 4

You call from work to find out how things are at home and your son reminds you that you forgot to take him shopping, as you had promised, and this is the second time that this has happened. Your son says over the phone:

Son: "Oh, you forgot again and you promised!"

You:

Situation 5

Backing out of a parking place, you run into the side of another car. It was clearly your fault. You dent in the side door slightly. The driver gets out and comes over to you angrily.

Driver: "Can't you look where you're going? See what you've done!"

You:

Situation 6

You accidentally bump into a well-dressed elderly lady at an elegant department store, causing her to spill her packages all over the floor. You hurt her leg, too. It's clearly your fault and you want to apologize profusely.

She: "Ow! My goodness!"

You:

Situation 7

You bump into a well-dressed lady at a department store, shaking her up a bit. It's your fault, and you want to apologize.

She: "Hey, look out!"

You":

Situation 8

You bump into an elderly lady at a department store. You hardly could have avoided doing so because she was blocking the way. Still, you feel that some kind of apology is in order.

She: "Oh, my!"

You: