Akdeniz Language Studies Conference 2012

An investigation of giving condolences in English and Persian via short messages

Biook Behnam\textsuperscript{a}, Leila Ali Akbari Hamed\textsuperscript{b*}, Fatemeh Goharkhani Asli\textsuperscript{c}

\textsuperscript{a}Department of Literature and Foreign Languages, Tabriz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tabriz, 5157944533, Iran
\textsuperscript{b}Member of Scientific Association of English Language Teaching, Tabriz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tabriz, 5157944533, Iran
\textsuperscript{c}Faculty of Education, ELT Department, Ataturk University, Erzurum, 25240, Turkey

Abstract

Speech acts include a wide range of functional units such as apologies, requests, compliments, invitations and so on. It is believed that being able to say the right thing to the right person at the right time would be a great accomplishment. Giving condolences is one area which needs to be taken into consideration to see how people express their sympathy when they hear a bad news. Since the speech act of condolence has been investigated in a limited range of studies namely by Fenton-Smith (2007), Samavarchi and Allami (2012) and Lotfollahi and Eslami-Rasekh (2011), the objective of the present study is to investigate giving condolences across English and Persian via short messages. To this end, about 60 short messages were gathered, 30 Persian and 30 English, and coded. The analysis of the data indicated that there is a difference in the way people give their condolences and it is argued that Persian messages are more direct and short and signs of religious culture can be seen in them. However, English messages are mostly indirect, sympathetic, and apologetic.

Keywords: speech act; condolence; short messages

1. Introduction

Perhaps the most important function of communication technologies is to enable people to maintain connections with those from whom they are distanced physically. This function is most obviously achieved through the interpersonal messaging capabilities that these technologies support. On a daily basis individuals may use the phone to talk to friends and family, email colleagues about work and social

\*Corresponding author. Tel.: +98-914-408-3664; fax: +0-000-000-0000.
E-mail address: hamed_u81@yahoo.com

© 2012 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. Open access under \texttt{CC BY-NC-ND license}.
Selection and peer-review under responsibility of ALSC 2012

\texttt{doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.01.240}
activities, and use instant messaging to message people on their buddy lists (Nastri, Pena, and Hancock, 2006). While these technologies are used to achieve specific objectives, like arranging a meeting or coordinating a project, they are also used more generally to stay informed about friends and family—to be in the know about what they are doing, what they are thinking, and how they are feeling. Indeed, the social uses of technology play an explicit role in maintaining relationships and presenting oneself to others (Baym, 1995; Lea & Spears, 1995; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Walther, 1992). Communication technologies can also provide more implicit ways of maintaining social contact (Erickson & Kellogg, 2003). Short Message Service (SMS), for example, is one of the most common ways by which people can be in contact with each other. Short messages, although sometimes long, can serve different functions and can imply different meanings to the receiver. At the same time, they may lead to misunderstanding, since the sender and the receiver don’t see each other and may misinterpret the message. These messages can be in response to various situations, one of which can be receiving a message about a bad event like some body’s death. When a person hears the news of someone’s death, it is very common for that person to express his/her feelings about it. This feeling is in the form of a condolence which expresses the speaker’s sorrow. If the person who hear the death news does not show any reaction or does not express his/her feelings, in most cultures it is considered as a sign of impoliteness. However, the patterns and expressions used in these kinds of situations may vary in different contexts and different cultures. This expression of condolence falls into the category of speech act, the theory of which has been developed mainly by Austin and Searle (Austin, 1962). (Searle, 1969, 1979). The theory of speech acts starts from the assumption that the minimal unit of human communication is not a sentence or other expression, but rather the performance of certain kinds of language acts, such as requests and promises. E.g. the communication of a request by a speaker (S) to a hearer (H) is an attempt by S to get H to do something. This communication is called successful if H does perform the requested act. Speech act theory has been commented upon by many linguistic philosophers. One of them is Habermas (1981). He sees the importance of Searle's approach in that he considers language as a means for coordinating action. He criticizes Searle however for overlooking the orientation of the participants. In the example given, Searle does not distinguish between the situation in which H performs the requested act because he wants to evade sanctions, and the situation in which he does so because he accepts the validity of S's claims in a rational way. According to Habermas, communication succeeds only when H does what is requested because he considers the request to be valid.

According to Yule (1996), speech acts are speech functions that are realized by way of words. Yule claims that being able to say the right thing to the right person at the right time would be a great social accomplishment.

Searle (1979) divided speech acts into five different types: Assertives, Directives, Commissives, Expressives and Declarations. Of these, expressive speech acts reveal psychological states of mind and express personal attitudes and feelings. They deal with social and interpersonal relations. The list of expressives includes speech acts such as greetings, thanks, congratulations, condolences and apologies, and politeness considerations are among the main factors that determine the realizations of these speech acts. In the eighteenth century expressive speech acts received a great deal of attention and their linguistic manifestations received normative educational attention to the extent that they, with accompanying non-verbal signs of polished behavior, became distinguishing features of status in society.

The area of speech act has attracted the attention of many researchers especially in the domains of discourse and second language acquisition. Most of the studies conducted in this area have been cross-
linguistic and cross-cultural, the basis of which has been comparing two languages or two cultures in terms of expressing a special speech act. In a study, Eslami-Rasekh (1993) compared the patterns in the requests of native Persian speakers and native American speakers. The results showed that Persian speakers were much more direct than Americans in their requests.

Salmani Nodoushan and Allami (2011) in a study which was conducted in an Iranian context worked on supportive moves used in making requestive Speech Act by Persian speakers and found that Persian speakers employ internal and external discourse moves, the choice of which was determined by the important factor of Perceived Situational Seriousness.

The speech act of apologizing also has been studied and the results indicated that Persian apologies are formulaic in pragmatic structure (Afghari, 2007).

In case of expressing condolences, the diplomatic condolences sent by different nations on the death of the Palestinian President, Yasser Arafat, were studied and the results showed that “Language plays a subtle, but yet critical role in global restructuring” (Fenton-Smith, 2007).

Elwood (2004) also investigated the cross-cultural differences in expressing condolences between Americans and Japanese. She classified the responses to two condolence situations in her study and found five patterns for the given responses. She also found some responses which did not fit to any of the categories.

Since so far no paper has directly worked on the act of giving condolences in everyday conversations, especially in an Iranian context, and there is little written on the way Persian speakers express their condolences comparing English people, the purpose of the present study is to see how Persian condolences given through short messages are different from English one.
2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

This study used a sample population consisting of 75 English people and 75 Persian people, out of which 30 English and 30 Persian people responded to the discourse completion test, sent them via Email.

2.2. Data Collection

The present study was conducted in Tabriz, Iran. A discourse completion test in English along with its Persian version, consisting of 5 situations dealing with bad news and events, especially death news, was used. Because of the lack of access to native English people in Iran, the English version of the test was sent to nearly 75 English people through Email message, out of which 30 people have responded. The Persian version of the test was also given to 75 people in Iran, with the age range of 18-60 with different social classes. All the participants were asked to answer the questions in the test, imagining they have received them in the form of messages via their cells and try to respond them in the form of a short message. Then the gathered samples of condolence messages were encoded and analyzed.

2.3. Data Analysis

After collecting the data, considering the content of the messages they were coded. The coding was based on Elwood’s (2004) semantic formula with some modifications. The collected data was categorized as follows:

1) Expression of surprise along with interjections, e.g. “Oh”, “oh my God”, “oh no”
2) Religious expressions, e.g. “May God bless him/her”,
   2.1) Praying for God’s forgiveness, e.g. “May God give him/her a place in heaven”
   2.2) Religious-oriented sympathy, e.g. “Death is for everyone”, “Death is a part of human’s destiny”
3) Apologetic, e.g. “I’m really sorry”, “What a pity”, “it is really a great loss”
4) Offering assistance, e.g. “I’ll be happy if I can help you”, “In case of any help you can count on me”
5) Questions about the dead person, e.g. “What happened?”, “Did he/she have any kind of illness?”
6) Sympathizing, e.g. “Calm down and don’t worry”, “Are you OK now?”
7) Direct condolence, e.g. “I hope you accept my condolences”
8) Remarks about the future, e.g. “I hope this will be the last sorrow of your life.”, “You should be more tolerant”

The frequency of each of the messages along with their percentage, considering the above categorization was calculated and presented in the form of graphs (Figures1, 2, 3, 4).

3. Results and Discussion

The frequencies revealed how different Persian and English condolence messages were. As is clear from Figure 1, the mostly used Persian messages were “نسليت عرض من کنم”, which refer to the direct condolences, and religious expressions, respectively. On the other hand, most English messages
were apologetic and sympathetic like “I’m really sorry” or “Calm down and don’t worry” (Figure 2). The other frequent category among Persian messages was expression of surprise along with interjection, like “نگر رو خدا راست می کنی؟” or “کیو تی می‌دانی؟”. Offering help was among those categories which has somehow the same frequency in both Persian and English messages. Questions about the dead person was more common in Persian messages than in English ones, since knowing the reason of someone’s death is of interest for the hearer. On the other hand, remarks about the future were one of those message types which was used more often in English messages than in Persian ones (Figures 1 and 2). Comparison of the data showed that there are noticeable differences between the Persian messages and the English ones. Since Iranians are Muslims and some expressions are unique for a Muslim community, most of the Persian messages were religious ones in which the speaker tries to pacify the bereaved family by making use of their religious beliefs. That is to say, Persian messages in comparison to English ones are more direct and short with some signs of religion in them. The opposite is true for English messages, in which the speakers tend to be more indirect and make use of other strategies in expressing their condolences such as being more apologetic and sympathetic. The findings of the present study are in agreement with the result of the studies conducted by Samavarchi and Allami (2012) and to some extent with the findings of Lotfollahi and Eslami-rasekh (2011).
4. Conclusion

The present study tried to investigate the speech act of giving condolences in Persian and English via short messages and find out whether any difference exists in the way people express their feelings and sorrows about someone’s death. The results indicated a significant difference in how people exhibit their sorrows and regrets via sending a message. This difference can be somehow attributed to the culture in which people have brought up and lived and to some extent to their beliefs. In other words, Iranians as Muslims strongly believe in God and in every case try to convince themselves by their religious beliefs. They believe that everything is controlled by God and death is one of these issues, from which no one can escape. So, they just try to express their condolences in which signs of religious beliefs are visible. On the contrary, native English people think about the bereaved family more and when expressing their sorrows try to calm them down and sympathize them. They don’t directly condole and mostly use indirect strategies for expressing their regrets. However, due to the small size of the sample, making safe conclusions is doubtful. Larger samples may lead to more valid results. There is the need for further comparative studies to investigate different variables which may have an influence on the expression of condolences like cultural differences, sex, religion, etc.

References


