

Politeness Strategies: Apologizing in Mexico

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Abstract: Based upon a theoretical framework of politeness and face-threatening acts (FTAs), an ethnographic investigation of naturally occurring apologies and politeness strategies in Cuernavaca Spanish was accomplished. Using a modified version of Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project Coding Manual for Apologies and a corpus of (200) naturally occurring apology events, the basic strategies and sub-strategies used by members of the Cuernavaca speech community to apologize for a wide range of offenses were identified and discussed. Both positive- and negative-politeness strategies within the apology acts were noted. Finally, the findings from this sample were compared with the findings of previously conducted studies on apologizing and politeness in other varieties of Spanish. Results from this investigation dispel Brown and Levinson's claim that negative politeness is the universally preferred approach for doing facework, and it is advocated that additional investigations of (FTAs) and politeness using culturally-sensitive models of interaction be used.

Keywords: Politeness, face, refusals, speech acts, positive politeness, negative politeness

1. Introduction

The theoretical framework of the present investigation is comprised of many of the concepts and discussions presented in Brown and Levinson's (1978) original face-saving model of politeness and their subsequent (1987) revised version. Brown and Levinson's Politeness Model is founded on the notions of "face" offered by Goffman and 'conversational logic' proposed by Grice. "Face" refers to two basic wants of every individual: (1) to be approved of by others (positive face), and (2) to have his / her actions and thoughts unimpeded by others (negative face). The face-saving view of politeness places emphasis on the wants of the participants involved in a given interaction rather than on the interaction itself or the norms operating in society. Face is "something that is emotionally invested, and can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" (Brown & Levinson, 1978, p.

66, cited in Salmani Nodoushan, 2003; Salmani Nodoushan & Allami, 2011).

Brown and Levinson (1978) constructed their theory of politeness on the premise that many speech acts are intrinsically threatening to face. Speech acts are threatening in that they do not support the face wants of the speaker (S) and / or those of the addressee (A). Brown and Levinson (pp. 65-67) defined face-threatening acts (FTAs) according to two basic parameters: (1) Whose face is being threatened (the speaker's or the addressee's), and (2) Which type of face is being threatened (positive- or negative- face). Acts that threaten an addressee's positive face include those acts in which a speaker demonstrates that he/she does not approve of or support the addressee's positive face or self image (e.g., complaints, criticisms, accusations, mention of taboo topics, interruptions). Acts that threaten an addressee's negative face include instances in which the addressee is pressured to accept or to reject a future act of the speaker (e.g., offers, promises), or when the addressee has reason to believe that his/her goods are being coveted by the speaker. Examples of FTAs to the speaker's positive face include apologies, acceptance of a compliment, self-humiliations, and confessions. Some of the FTAs that are threatening to the speaker's negative face include expressing gratitude, accepting a thank-you, an apology or an offer, and making promises (cf., Capone 2005; 2010; 2012; Salmani Nodoushan, 2006a,b; 2007a,b; 2008; 2012; 2014; 2016).

While Brown and Levinson believed the notion of face to be universal, they explained "in any particular society we would expect [face] to be the subject of much cultural elaboration" (p. 13). Brown and Levinson's model assessed the seriousness of a FTA using the following factors: (1) The social distance (D) of speaker (S) and hearer (H); (2) The relative power (P) of (S) and (H); and (3) The absolute ranking (R) of imposition in the particular culture.

An apology is an attempt by the speaker to make up for a previous action that interfered with the addressee's face-wants (Brown & Levinson, 1978, p. 187). Thus, the aim of apologizing is to restore equilibrium between speaker and addressee (Leech, 1983, p. 125). As Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989, p.12) described, an apology is the acknowledgement by the speaker that a violation has been committed and an admission that he or she is at least partially involved in its cause. An apology may be considered a "post-event," for it signals that the event has already taken place. Apologies count as remedial work and have been traditionally regarded as hearer supportive, as they provide some benefit to the addressee at cost to the speaker (Fraser & Nolan, 1981; Goffman, 1972; Leech, 1983; Owen, 1983). Holmes (1995) extended the question of face benefit to the speaker as well, for she claims that apologies are face-supporting acts in general.

Brown and Levinson's Politeness Model regards apologies as "negative

politeness strategies” in that they convey respect, deference, and distance rather than friendliness and involvement. Negative politeness is an avoidance-based, on-record strategy of self-effacement and restraint. Evidence of negative politeness can be seen in both the apology strategies themselves (e.g., avoiding responsibility), as well as individual linguistic and extralinguistic elements which constitute these strategies (e.g., agent-less verbal constructs with *se* in Spanish, third-person verbal forms with the subject and its referent undefined (e.g., *me robaron el carro*, “They [no specific referent] stole my car”), and intonation.

In performing an apology, the speaker acknowledges the addressee’s face-want not to be offended. Apologizing is face threatening for the speaker and face-saving for the addressee. In contrast with negative politeness, positive politeness is an involvement-based approach made by the speaker to ratify, understand, approve of, and admire the positive image of the addressee. Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 75) referred to the function of positive politeness strategies as one of minimizing the potential threat of an FTA by assuring the address that the speaker (S) has a positive regard for him or her and wants at least some of the wants of the addressee. Holmes (1995) claimed that apologies can also function as positive politeness strategies for the addressee (A) since the S supports A’s need for positive feelings and affirmation from others. Examples of an apology act functioning as positive politeness are: (1) a speaker admitting that the addressee is right to feel offended by the infraction; (2) a speaker demonstrating his commitment to remedying the situation and appeasing the addressee through an offer of repair and (3) a speaker using deference markers such as titles or forms of address (Dr., Sir, Ma’am) or formal verb forms and corresponding pronouns (T-V forms). Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory assumes that negative politeness is the universally preferred approach to facework: “It is safer to assume that H (hearer) prefers his peace and self-determination more than he prefers your expressions of regard, unless you are certain to the contrary” (p. 74). In agreement with other scholars (Ho, 1994; Lavandera, 1988; Liao & Bresnahan, 1996; Márquez Reiter, 2000; Nwoye, 1992; Placencia, 1992; Ruzickova, 1998; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Takahashi & Beebe 1986; Vázquez-Orta, 1995), I do not support this as a valid assumption.

Many societies do not value negative-politeness over positive politeness, and may even have an overriding preference for avoidance-based, off-record verbal behavior or other means of addressing face. The present research study parts from the idea that universality may not be the most effective approach for investigating the relationship between face, politeness and face-threatening acts (FTAs). Instead, I believe a better understanding of apologies will result from analyzing the apology event as it is performed in its natural, immediate context. Such an approach encourages a deeper

contemplation of many important dynamic contextual factors excluded from Brown and Levinson's model (e.g., the interactional goal of apologizing, the level of responsibility the speaker feels for the infraction, the level and type of redress the speaker feels the addressee can reasonably expect from him or her).

Apologies have been investigated within numerous theoretical disciplines, ranging from the sociopragmatic domains of the current study, to those of psycholinguistics, information processing, communication, sociology and cultural anthropology. The brief review of literature offered here is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to provide the reader with a summary of findings from studies on politeness and the act of apologizing in cross-cultural pragmatics, specifically those investigations targeting Spanish-speaking populations. García (1989) compared apologies performed by non-native speakers of English from Venezuela with those of native speakers of English in open-ended role-plays. Findings from the analysis of these role-plays showed that when informants apologized to their host for not having attended his party, the Venezuelan informants used a positive-politeness approach, while the native English-speaking informants preferred a negative-politeness approach. The apologies offered by the Venezuelans included explanations for not attending, avoiding disagreement with the host, repetition of the host's words and in-group identity markers, while the apologies offered by the native American English speakers included paying deference to the host, self-effacing behavior, and devices to maintain social distance.

Mir's (1992) work focused on how native speakers of Spanish were found to increase the frequency with which they apologized in English (L2) as a reaction to what they perceived as a greater frequency of apologies on the part of native speakers of English. Mir found that native English speakers used more repair strategies than did their Spanish-speaking counterparts in both Spanish (L1) and English (L2). In her investigation of apologies in Cuban Spanish, Ruzickova (1998) found that Cubans overwhelmingly prefer to employ an IFID (89%) when apologizing. She also found that speakers of Cuban Spanish employ more positive-politeness devices than negative-politeness devices when apologizing.

Márquez Reiter (2000) cross-culturally investigated requests and apologies within the speech communities of Montevideo, Uruguay and London, England using open-ended role-plays. Each contained an infraction designed to elicit an apology, and were encoded with social and situational variables in the form of social distance and social power between participants, and the seriousness of the offense. Márquez Reiter found the principal variable in determining apology behavior in British English and Uruguayan Spanish to be related to the "severity of offence" in correlation with "social power." The

less social power the speaker had in relation to the addressee and the more severe the infraction, the more likely the speaker was to apologize (p. 178). Similarly, the more social power the speaker had in relation to the addressee and the lesser the infraction, the less likely the speaker was to apologize (p. 178). When the participants have equal social power, Márquez Reiter (2000, p. 179) found that the “severity of offence” variable gains importance and ultimately determines the performance and shape of an apology.

Márquez Reiter’s (2000) results on the use of specific apology strategies supported those findings of Blum-Kulka et al.: “IFIDs” (Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices) and “expression of responsibility” emerged as situationally independent apology strategies in that their use is documented across many different situations. In terms of other apology strategies, the data show that British used more explanations than did Uruguayans. Offers of repair were not frequently employed by either cultural group of participants and were used only when actual severe damage had occurred. However, the British informants chose this strategy more often than did their Uruguayan counterparts. Finally, the strategy “Promise of Forbearance” was rarely used by both target groups in this investigation. With respect to the incidence of positive- versus negative-politeness in the apology behavior of speakers of Uruguayan Spanish versus that of speakers of British English, Márquez Reiter (2000, p.180) found that Uruguayans did not seem to value negative-politeness as highly as do the British.

2. Method

The current research project was conducted in Cuernavaca, Mexico, the capital city of the state of Morelos. Located approximately one hour to the south of Mexico City, Cuernavaca is considered part of Central Mexico. Cuernavaca is a large metropolitan area with a population of approximately one million inhabitants <<http://www.giga.com/cuahua/cuernav.html.1996>> and <http://www.mexicorealty.com/cuernavaca.htm>. This community was selected as the target site for the current investigation because no previous study on apologies or politeness had been conducted there and my previous work experience in this community allowed for easy access.

A corpus of 200 apologies was collected from live encounters characterized by natural speech. These apologies were manually recorded in the exact language in which they occurred. Pertinent contextual information such as setting, the nature of the infraction triggering the apology, the gender of the participants, the known or perceived social relationship between the participants (family/friends/acquaintances [known] versus strangers [unknown]), as well as kinesics and intonational patterns were noted. Due to the difficulty in predicting the systematic occurrence of apologies across a wide range of contexts between different participants, I chose to ethnographically record instances of apologies using a tool traditionally

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associated with cultural anthropology: the notebook. While this technique may somewhat compromise validity, it yields a variety of situations in which apologies are made between individuals of varying social status and distance, and results in a large sample of tokens from natural speech.

Samples of naturally occurring speech were encoded using a modified version of the apology strategy typology outlined in the CCSARP Coding Manual for Apologies (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989, pp. 289-294). The modifications were made to capture several salient linguistic structures within the present corpus:

Table 1: Apology Strategy and Sub-Strategy Coding

Strategy/Substrategy	Example
1. Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID)	
a. direct IFIDs: Performatives	I apologize
b. Indirect IFIDs: Formulaic Expressions	I am sorry
2. Taking Responsibility (+agency)	
a. Explicit Self-Blame	It was my fault
b. Lack of intent	It wasn't my intention
c. Hearer justification	You have a right to be angry
d. Expression of Embarrassment	I'm so embarrassed
3. Explanation or account	There was a lot of traffic
4. Offer of Repair	I'll pay for it.
5. Promise of Forbearance	It won't happen again
6. No Taking Responsibility (-Agency)	
a. Unplanned occurrence (with se)	It fell > Se cayó
b. Speaker as victim (se + Indirect object pronoun)	It fell (on me) > Se me cayó
c. 3rd person plural form, - referent	They made me wait > Me hicieron esperar

The following coding scheme was used for positive- and negative politeness strategies:

Table 2: Positive- and Negative Politeness Strategies Coding

Positive Politeness Strategies
Conveying In-Group Membership
Showing Solidarity (T-form, inclusive "we")
Exaggeration of Concern for Addressee
Offer of Repair
Joking
Tags
Promise of Forbearance
Negative Politeness Strategies
Paying Deference (V-form, Formal Address Labels)
Use of se with Unplanned Occurrence
Use of Indirect Pronoun to Demonstrate Victimization with se
Third Person Plural, No Referent
Dismissal of Addressee's Wants as Unreasonable

The research questions I pose in the current investigation are: (1) What are the basic strategies and sub-strategies used by members of the Cuernavaca

speech community to apologize in naturally occurring speech and to what frequency are they employed?; (2) What type of politeness (positive or negative) is more prevalent in the apologies of these subjects; and (3) How do these findings compare with previous findings on apologizing in other varieties of Spanish and what implications do they hold for a language- or culture-specific theory of politeness?

Members of the Cuernavaca speech community preferred to use an IFID (47.4%) to any other strategy when apologizing, supporting the results of previously conducted research. The second most frequently employed strategy used by these subjects was “Explanation or Account” (23%). In third place, members of the Cuernavaca speech community preferred the strategy “No Responsibility.” If we are to accept the definition of an apology offered by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989, p. 12) in which the speaker must admit that he / she is at least partially to blame for the infraction, this strategy does not fulfil this criterion. In fact, by using this type of strategy, the speaker places blame on another person or circumstances beyond his/her control and may even portray him/herself as a victim. Consider the following exchange between two strangers involved in an auto accident:

S: (Backs into A’s car causing slight damage) (Gets out and looks at damage)
No lo vi...
 I didn’t see it...
 A: *No miró...*
 You (formal) didn’t look...
 S: *Es que me robaron el espejo y no...¿qué hacemos?*
 It’s just that they stole my mirror and (neg.)...What should we do?

Here, the speaker blames a third party (“they”) for stealing his mirror and portrays himself as a victim by including an indirect object pronoun (“me”). Without his mirror, his vision was impaired and he had an accident. The three remaining strategies, “Taking Responsibility,” “Offer of Repair,” and “Promise of Forbearance” were used very infrequently, with none of these strategies constituting more than 7% of the overall corpus of apologies collected.

Table 3: Frequency of Strategy / Substrategy Use

Strategy/Substrategy	Percentage %
1. Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID)	47.4
2. Taking Responsibility (speaker = +agency)	6.2
3. Explanation or account	23.0
4. Offer of Repair	6.0
5. Promise of Forbearance	1.8
6. No Taking Responsibility (Speaker , -Agency)	15.6

Upon careful examination of the data, it was interesting to note that “offers of repair” and “promises of forbearance” were only offered by subjects under

two conditions: (1) visible damage of high cost to the addressee had occurred as a result of the transgression, and (2) the relationship between the parties involved in the situation was one of friends or acquaintances. These observations suggest that the variables “severity of offence” and “social relationship between participants” influence the use of “offers of repair” and “promise of forbearance.” It may be the case that community members regard these two strategies as highly face-threatening for the speaker and thus choose to employ them to correct an infraction with visible damage that they have committed toward someone with whom they have much invested socially.

In terms of positive- and negative-politeness strategies, members of the Cuernavaca speech community preferred negative-politeness strategies (62%)

over positive-politeness strategies (38%). These results stand in contrast to Márquez Reiter’s findings for politeness preference type in Uruguayan Spanish and Ruzickova’s findings for politeness in Cuban Spanish. Although the research methodology and data collection techniques of these two investigations differ from those utilized in the current research project, the data suggested the absence of a one-to-one correspondence between language and politeness preference type when apologizing. While Uruguayans, Cubans and Mexicans are often grouped together as speakers of Latin American Spanish who embody Latin American Culture, these parameters of language and culture appear to be grossly inadequate for characterizing politeness.

Table 4: Positive- and Negative Politeness Strategies Used by Members of the Cuernavaca Speech Community

	Percentage
Positive Politeness Strategies	TOTAL 38%
Conveying In-Group Membership	2%
Showing Solidarity (T-form, inclusive “we”)	6%
Exaggeration of Concern for Addressee	10%
Offer of Repair	7%
Joking	2%
Tags	8%
Promise of Forbearance	3%
Negative Politeness Strategies	TOTAL 62%
Paying Deference (V-form, Formal Address Labels)	17%
Use of <i>se</i> with Unplanned Occurrence	18%
Use of Indirect Pronoun to Demonstrate Victimization with <i>se</i>	5%
Third Person Plural, No Referent	10%
Dismissal of Addressee’s Wants as Unreasonable	2%

3. Conclusion

In this investigation of naturally occurring apologies in Cuernavaca Spanish, I sought to discover which apology strategies and sub-strategies were used

most often by speech community members and what types of positive and negative politeness strategies they used to realize this speech act. Speakers of Cuernavaca Spanish, like their Cuban and Uruguayan counterparts, preferred to use an IFID to apologize. Also highly preferred was the strategy “explanation or account.” Cuernavaca speech community members differed from Uruguayan and Cuban speech community members in that their apologies included many instances of “no responsibility.” While the linguistic items used to form apology strategies of “no responsibility” are part of the Spanish Language, the Uruguayans and Cubans did not choose to use them with great frequency in their apologies. This difference may be part of an even bigger issue of blame and how it is dealt with in each culture. Next, I calculated the frequency with which positive- and negative-politeness strategies were employed in apologies. Speakers within the Cuernavaca speech community clearly preferred negative-politeness markers, while results from previously conducted research on Spanish speaking populations has shown the opposite to be true. At this point, one must ask if other the realization patterns of other types of speech acts reflect this politeness type preference, or if it is the interplay between apologies and the high cost of accepting blame in Mexican culture. Ideas for further investigation include addressing which factors are salient in determining what the strategy or strategies a speaker uses to apologize, discovering which types of FTAs are most threatening for the speaker and how this perception affects his/her strategy selection and speech act performance, and studying other speech acts to see if similar politeness preference types are discovered.

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