

ON APOLOGIZING IN NORWEGIAN

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ABSTRACT. This paper discusses selected points concerning the verbal realization of the speech act of apology in Norwegian. It sets out to establish prevailing tendencies in the choice of apology strategies applied by the native speakers of Norwegian. The present findings, which seem to indicate that Norwegian apology strategies are fairly routinized, ought to be perceived as preliminary as a more detailed analysis of apology formulae will be presented in an upcoming article.

1. APOLOGY AS A SPEECH ACT

In the analysis of politeness formulas, apologies occupy a central place. Goffman (1971) defines apologies as “gestures through which an individual splits himself into two parts, the part that is guilty of an offence and the part that dissociates itself from the delict and affirms a belief in the offended rule” (1971:143). Searle (1976) classifies the act of apology in his expressive category, stating “that the truth of the proposition is presupposed” (1976:12). Edmondson (1981) characterizes an apology as an illocution whose function in discourse “is that it counts as an attempt on the part of the speaker to cause the hearer to withdraw a preceding COMPLAIN: it is an attempt to restore social harmony” (Edmondson, 1981:280).

SPEAKER	X	Y	X
Interactional Move Illocutions	Proffer Complain	Contra Apology	Satisfy Forgive (<i>ibid.</i> , 1981:280)

X's second interactional move is a consequence of an apology expressed by Y. According to Edmondson, once an apology is uttered, the complaint is no longer valid, i.e., it is satisfied (the apology is accepted).

Remedial work of an apology, whose function is “to change the meaning that otherwise might be given to an act, transforming what could be seen as offensive into what can be seen as acceptable. This change seems to be accomplished, in our Western society at least, by striking in some way at the moral responsibility otherwise imputed to the offender” (Goffman, 1971:109). The remedial work, according to Goffman (1971), can be accomplished in human interaction by means of accounts, requests and apologies.

Fraser's (1981) characterization of an apology is two-dimensional; firstly, he perceives an apology in terms of what is assumed “to be the beliefs held by the person apologizing”; secondly, “what must actually be conveyed for an apology to come off” (1981:260).

An apology is “a type of speech act Austin (1962) claimed could be performed by invoking the appropriate formula under the appropriate circumstances” (ibid.:261).

2. FELICITY CONDITIONS FOR A SUCCESSFUL APOLOGY

Every illocutionary act, in order to be successful must be performed pursuant to conventions existing in a given speech community. To observe these conventions, certain criteria need to be satisfied. Searle (1969) refers to these criteria as ‘felicity conditions’ necessary for a successful performance of an illocutionary act. In standard communication, interactants follow felicity conditions automatically. Any departure from these necessary felicity conditions is acceptable when, for example, the illocutionary effect is meant as a joke.

Fraser (1981) writes that “an apology may be performed just in case two basic conditions are met: first, the speaker acknowledges responsibility for having performed some act; and second, the speaker conveys regret for the offence which came about as a result of the commission of the act” (Fraser, 1981:262). He also claims that “to apologize is to do two things: take responsibility for an offensive act, and express regret for the offense committed, though not necessarily for the act itself” (ibid.:262). Fraser further adds that the reason for a person to express an apology is that “the individual feels genuinely regretful for his actions and wants to set things right by taking responsibility and expressing regret” (ibid.:265).

3. GENUINE AND RITUAL APOLOGY

In the studies on the nature of the speech act of apology, two types of apology have been arrived at: genuine and ritual. Fraser (1981) writes “that it is very difficult to differentiate between the genuine and ritual apology in

many cases; in fact, an apology may often be motivated from both perspectives” (Fraser, 1981:266).

Bergman and Kasper (1993:83) add that “ritual apologies are sometimes distinguished from substantive ones by different formulae”.¹ As the results of the present study seem to indicate, Norwegians are most likely to use *unnskyld* (*meg*) ‘forgive me’ or *om forlatelse* ‘excuse me’, or even the English *sorry* when they wish to perform a ritual apology while more genuine, or as Bergman and Kasper (*ibid*) call it, a ‘substantive apology’ is most likely to be realized by means of *jeg beklager* ‘I apologize’ or *jeg er lei meg* ‘I’m sorry’.

4. APOLOGY STRATEGIES

Factors that determine the occurrence of different apology strategies are the following:

- the nature of offence;
- the situation of the interaction;
- the familiarity of the individuals involved;
- the sex and the age of the individuals involved.

The above strategies seem to be in concord with Goffman's (1959) ‘ceremonial idiom’, a term he coined to refer to sociocultural requirements that need to be fulfilled for a successful realization of a particular speech act. Apologies, just like any other speech act, may constitute a series of constraints on their successful employment and/or interpretation. Therefore, as Wolfson (1989b) contends speech acts ought to be investigated from an ethnographic perspective: i.e. information about sex, age, status, situation, culture, relationship, etc. of the conversants should be incorporated, all of which have been applied in the analysis of the data collected for the purpose of the present study.

5. PITFALLS OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

In the analysis of apology realizations in a given language, a series of factors ought to be taken into consideration to ensure that the speech act is realized according to the socio-linguistic rules governing a given speech community. In the analysis of the material collected in the present study, the following factors have been taken into consideration:

¹ See Bergman and Kasper (1993:83ff) for the discussion on the nature of ritualistic and substantive apology strategies in American English.

- correct interpretation of the sociolinguistic context, e.g., social distance, power relations, the level of imposition (Brown and Levinson, 1987);
- the nature of apology, e.g., whether it is ritual or genuine (Fraser, 1981);
- the necessity to apologize, i.e., whether the conversants recognize the situation as face-threatening, requiring some remedial moves;
- the notion of apology, e.g., whether apologies and obligations are culture-specific (Wolfson, Marmor and Jones, 1989);
- the output strategies, e.g., how the offence is perceived and how it is reflected in the selection of the strategy (Bergman and Kasper, 1993).

6. SPEECH ACT SET OF APOLOGY

Olshtain and Cohen (1983) distinguished five categories comprising the speech act set of apology, two of which are general and the remaining three situation specific. In the first group they include Searlean IFID (Illocutionary Force Indicating Device), which “contains the formulaic, routinized forms of apology (various apology verbs); and the expression of S's responsibility, which relates to the S's willingness to admit to fault” (Olshtain, 1989:157). According to Goffman, as cited by Owen (1983) and Olshtain (1989), the latter category contains subcategories which relate to “pleas for excusable lack of foresight, pleas for reduced competence and admissions of carelessness” (Owen, 1983:94, Olshtain, 1989:157). Olshtain (1989) writes that the IFID with or without the expression of S's responsibility can potentially realize an act of apology in any situation and can be used in all situations where an act of apology is called for. The situation specific categories: the explanation, the offer of repair, and the promise of forbearance, will “semantically reflect the content of the situation” (Olshtain, 1989:157). All the aforementioned categories can be modified, either to make the apology stronger - intensification, or to minimize the offence or the harm caused – downgrading. While analyzing the Norwegian-language material collected for the purpose of this article, an attempt will be made to identify the characteristic features of the Norwegian speech act set of apology. This will in turn allow the present author to make general assertions about the dominating type of politeness formulas used to perform the speech act of apology in Norwegian.

7. DATA COLLECTION AND METHOD

For the purpose of this article a questionnaire was distributed among a group of Norwegian college students. In total, 78 questionnaire forms were returned and after a preliminary selection 62 forms were used in the current study. In view of the specific language situation in Norway, where two written

standards co-exist, namely *bokmål* and *nynorsk*, only these questionnaire forms filled in the former variety have been selected for the present analysis. To elicit a representative sample of linguistic data an open Discourse Completion Test (DCT) has been used. From the available methods of data collection, DCT scenarios are most likely to yield fairly spontaneous responses which tend to bear resemblance to real life situations.

What is more, various types of DCTs have been successfully applied in earlier research projects on speech act realization (see Kasper, 2000 for a general overview of DCT types), by means of which representative corpora of comparable data in several languages have been assembled. As regards an open DCT, it usually contains brief descriptions of a certain number of situations, to which respondents are requested to react in a most natural way, providing in this way the desired speech act realization.

Also, an open DCT was deemed as the most appropriate type of a questionnaire since apologies tend to be realized by means of one turn; consequently, any issues related to features of discourse management could be easily overlooked in the method selected for the present data collection (see Ogiermann, 2009:81).

Taking all the above points into consideration, I prepared a questionnaire with five situations in which the speech act of apology ought to be applied. The situations were:

1. You are returning a book to a good friend of yours; your friend can see that the book is soiled and the cover is partly ripped off.
2. You are part of a study group working on a presentation. On the day your group is to present it in class you wake up with a high fever and decide to stay in bed. Call a member of this group and explain yourself away.
3. You are on a bus. You accidentally push a fellow passenger who loses balance and trips over.
4. Your professor agreed to meet you during her duty hours to discuss your project; you can't meet her yet because you have not even started working on it.
5. You're in a crowded club; as you walk towards the bar, you stumble over and knock over a drink which spills all over a girl sitting at a table.

Taking into account the selected group of informants, the situations selected for the current project were singled out on the basis of their potential occurrence in the everyday life of an average student. To elicit most varied strategies the situations differ both in terms of the social distance between the interlocutors, their age, the severity of the offence and the level of potential loss of face, with sex and social power being disregarded for the time being.

8. IFIDs AS APOLOGY STRATEGIES IN NORWEGIAN

The collected Norwegian-language data seem to indicate that IFIDs constitute the most frequently applied apology strategy (with a total of 83% of responses).

The collected data unquestionably imply that Norwegian IFID realizations are highly routinized and can be analyzed according to the primary illocutionary force of the stylistic criteria and their pragmatic categories. Perhaps not entirely surprisingly, basic IFID categories, which, as Olshtain and Cohen (1983) suggest, hardly exhaust the combinatory potential of apology strategies a given language has, are not found to be the most frequent apology formulae applied by the respondents in the conducted project:

NAME OF IFID CATEGORY	IFID REALIZATION	FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE
EXPRESSION OF REGRET	<i>Jeg er lei meg</i> ('I'm sorry')	9%
OFFER OF APOLOGY	<i>Jeg må unnskyld meg</i> (‘I must ask you to forgive me’)	5%
	<i>Jeg er nødt til å unnskyld meg</i> (‘I need to ask you to forgive me’)	8%
REQUEST FOR FORGIVENESS	<i>Unnskyld meg</i> ('forgive me')	23%
	<i>Du må unnskyld meg</i> (‘you must forgive me’)	8%
	<i>[Jeg må be deg] om forlatelse</i> (‘[I must ask you to] excuse me’)	6%

Table 1: Basic IFID categories and their realizations in the Norwegian-language data

As can be seen in Table 1, all basic IFID categories have a very low frequency of occurrence, with the highest score reaching only 23%. When analyzing the distribution of these strategies among the five situations, it transpires that the formulaic Request for Forgiveness realized by means of the phrase *unnskyld meg* ('forgive me') is most frequently applied in Situation 2 and 5. From the sociolinguistic point of view, Situation 2 and 5 seem most likely to be perceived as those where an apology can be ritual, while the remaining three contexts call for a more genuine apology. To prove the above observation, the distribution of *unnskyld meg* as an apology strategy in the replies elicited from the conducted survey has been broken down into individual situations:

- SITUATION 1 (Damaged Book) 8%
- SITUATION 2 (Study Group) 6%
- SITUATION 3 (On a Bus) 89%
- SITUATION 4 (Professor) 14%
- SITUATION 5 (In a Pub) 86%

The evidence from the tabulated data above leaves no doubt that the Norwegians reveal marked consistency in the way they perceive the

illocutionary force of the selected apology strategy; namely, in situations where the severity of offence was relatively low and the potential face loss seems minimal (Situation 3 and 5), the respondents have chosen a highly conventional form of ritual apology. At the same time, the informants should feel that the remaining three contexts require a more complex strategy, since both the severity of offence and potential face loss imply that the apology ought to be genuine and, possibly, devoid of highly formulaic forms.

Nevertheless, the language material elicited from the remaining three situations also reveals a high degree of routinization with a marked preference for a very limited number of phrases used as genuine apology strategies. Consequently, it is tempting to suggest that the native speakers of Norwegian show a marked tendency to 'idiomaticise' the speech of act apology, regardless of whether the situation calls for a mere ritual apology or a more sincere one. The above observation appears to be in concord with Fraser (1981:266), who points out that in many cases the distinction between a ritual and genuine apology can be vague.

In the table below, the distribution of basic IFID realizations for genuine apologies found in Situations 1, 2, and 4, together with their frequency of occurrence, have been presented²:

SITUATION 1 (Damaged Book)		
EXPRESSION OF REGRET	OFFER OF APOLOGY	REQUEST FOR FORGIVENESS
<i>Jeg er lei meg</i> (20%)	<i>Jeg må unnskyld meg</i> (20%)	<i>Unnskyld meg</i> (5%)
	<i>Jeg er nødt til å unnskyld meg</i> (22%)	<i>Du må unnskyld meg</i> (5%)
		<i>[Jeg må be deg]om forlatelse</i> (25%)
SITUATION 2 (Study Group)		
EXPRESSION OF REGRET	OFFER OF APOLOGY	REQUEST FOR FORGIVENESS
<i>Jeg er lei meg</i> (17%)	<i>Jeg må unnskyld meg</i> (21%)	<i>Unnskyld meg</i> (8%)
<i>Sorry, (folkens)</i> ³ (15%)	<i>Jeg er nødt til å unnskyld meg</i> (12%)	<i>Du må unnskyld meg</i> (13%)
		<i>[Jeg må be deg]om forlatelse</i> (14%)

² It needs to be stressed here that the examples in Table 2 by no means exhaust the list of all basic IFID realizations identified in the collected material; for the purpose of this article, however, only the realizations with the highest frequency of occurrence have been incorporated.

³ For the discussion on the use of the English loanword *sorry* see Point 10.

SITUATION 4 (Professor)		
EXPRESSION OF REGRET	OFFER OF APOLOGY	REQUEST FOR FORGIVENESS
<i>Jeg er lei meg</i> (34%)	<i>Jeg må unnskyld meg</i> (26%)	<i>Unnskyld meg</i> (2%)
	<i>Jeg er nødt til å unnskyld meg</i> (24%)	<i>Du må unnskyld meg</i> (17%)
		<i>[Jeg må be deg]om (15%) forlatelse</i>

Table 2: *Genuine apology strategies in the collected Norwegian-language data*

As has been argued above, the performance of genuine apologies in the collected Norwegian-language data tends to be realized by means of a strikingly low number of expressions. Despite the fact that the Norwegian language offers a considerably wider spectrum of forms by means of which an apology could be performed, the respondents demonstrate a pronounced tendency to opt for those shown in Table 2. In consequence, the argument about the idiomaticity of apology strategies in Norwegian does seem to be justified.

9. INADEQUACY OF THE ORIGINAL SET OF BASIC IFIDS IN THE ANALYSIS OF ELICITED APOLOGY STRATEGIES

The above findings clearly indicate that the original model of IFID realizations cannot be successfully applied in the analysis of apology formulae as the basic IFID categories fail to fully reflect the apology strategies used in Norwegian. What is more, only one category – Request for Forgiveness – has reached a total number of more than 30% of the total. This is in accordance with the findings of Suszczyńska (2005) and Ogiermann (2009), who also found Olshtain and Cohen's model (1983) as highly insufficient.

The above results raise another important question, namely, to what extent can the collected Norwegian IFID realizations indicate a tendency in this language to use negative politeness strategies, which aim at keeping the Speaker's face intact. This is because in the collected Norwegian-language data there is evidence to suggest that basic IFIDs tend to be realized by means of rather routinized apology strategies, which in turn may indicate that the speakers of Norwegian prefer to minimize their responsibility when they are at fault.

10. EXTENDED IFID CATEGORIES AND THEIR REALIZATION IN NORWEGIAN

To make the study on apology strategies more representative, new categories need to be added to account for other strategies applied by the subjects. Following the findings of Suszczyńska (1994; 1999; 2005) and Ogiermann (2009), the original model has been extended by four new categories, namely: Performative, Conciliatory Expressions, Softeners/Intensifiers and Foreign Word:

NAME OF IFID CATEGORY	IFID REALIZATION	FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE
PERFORMATIVE	<i>Jeg beklager</i> ('I apologize')	64%
CONCILIATORY EXPRESSIONS	<i>[Jeg] håper at du/dere ikke blir sint på meg</i> ('[I] hope you are not angry with me') <i>Du/Dere er vel ikke sint på meg, er du/dere det?/ du/dere er ikke sint på meg, vel?</i> ('you're not angry with me, are you?')	12% 8%
SOFTENERS/INTENSIFIERS	<i>Veldig</i> ('very') <i>Så</i> ('so') <i>Jeg er redd [at]...</i> ('I'm afraid')	56% 31% 8%
FOREGIN WORD	<i>Sorry</i>	22%

Table 3: *Extended IFID categories and their realizations in the Norwegian-language data.*

The replies elicited from the survey reveal that apologies in Norwegian appear to be most frequently realized by means of the performative *jeg beklager* ('I'm apologize'). Interestingly, the above findings make Norwegian apology formulae more similar to those found in Polish (Suszczyńska, 1999; Ogiermann, 2009) than in British English (House, 1989; Aijmer, 1996; Deutschmann, 2003; Ogiermann, 2009), where *I'm sorry*, as an expression of regret has the highest frequency of occurrence. The reason why the Norwegian equivalents of the English *I'm sorry* have a very low representation in the current study may be possibly explained in the following way. Unlike the English phrase, which can function both as an apology or a mere expression of regret (Coulmas, 1981a:76), or even as an expression of compassion (Lazare, 2004:25)⁴, the Norwegian expression *jeg er lei meg*, though equally ambiguous as its English counterpart, seems to be perceived as a considerably less successful apology formula in Norwegian. British English, in contrast, makes use of this ambiguity allowing a Speaker to minimize the potential loss of his/her face in case the act of apology is not accepted by the Hearer. This, in consequence, may lead us to assume that British English seems to be far more

⁴ See also Aijmer (1996), Cohen (1996), and Davis (2002)

dependent on negative politeness strategies in the case of an apology than it is the case in Norwegian (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

A fairly low representation of Conciliatory Expressions and their conspicuously formulaic character seem to imply that Norwegian native speakers, on performing the speech act of apology, are aware of the potential wrongdoing on their side. Therefore, to avoid confrontation or face loss, they refrain from seeking reconciliation explicitly just in case the Hearer should choose to reject their attempts to apologize, which in consequence would threaten the positive face of the Speaker. What is more, the paucity of Conciliatory Expressions in the collected Norwegian-language data could arguably serve as further evidence for the assertion that Norwegian also displays a natural tendency for negative politeness strategies in its realization of the speech act of apology. Nevertheless, the way in which negative politeness strategies are used in Norwegian seem to differ from those found in British English.

As can be seen in Table 3, the category of Softeners/Intensifiers comprises as few as three entries with *veldig* 'very' recording the highest score of 56% of the total⁵. The fact that Softeners/Intensifiers applied by the subjects do not show any great variety or ingenuity would, again, confirm the working thesis of this study about the routinized character of IFID realizations in Norwegian.

Another interesting trend that emerges from the analysis of the data concerns a relatively high frequency of occurrence of the English lexeme *sorry*, which appears quite often in the collected replies. A similar tendency in Polish, but interestingly not in Russian, was observed by Ogiermann (2009). This finding can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, the informants participating in both research projects were young people, who are more likely to use a direct loan from English; and secondly, the use of an English loanword may also function as an attempt to soften the severity of the offence, by means of which the Speaker may anticipate that his/her apology is immediately accepted by the Hearer.

11. CONCLUSIONS

Due to the limited scope of the present study, the author wishes to emphasize here that the conclusions drawn from it must only be treated as preliminary and a much more in-depth analysis, possibly on a larger sample of replies and speech act realizations, is urgently needed⁶.

⁵ in the collected material one can find additional examples of Softeners/Intensifiers, but since most of them are only used once or twice, I have decided not to include them in the analysis conducted for the purpose of this article

⁶ Findings following a more thorough analysis of apology realizations of individual situations used in the current project will be presented in an upcoming article

Notwithstanding the above, certain tendencies, if not consistent regularities may be observed. Firstly, Norwegian demonstrates a pronounced tendency to use IFIDs in the realization of an apology (as already stated above, 83% of apology realizations in the current study have been performed by means of this strategy). This seems to be in accordance with the previous studies on the speech act of apology across languages (Olshtain and Cohen, 1983; Ożóg, 1990; Marcjanik 1995; Aijmer, 1996; Suszczyńska, 1999; Ogiermann, 2009).

Secondly, the collected data seem to suggest that the apology strategies used by the respondents were rather formulaic, which, in consequence, bears testimony to the working thesis of this article about the high level of 'routinization' of apologies in Norwegian.

Thirdly, the findings also clearly indicate that Norwegian uses many negative politeness strategies in its realizations of the speech act of apology. Notwithstanding the above, strategies typical of positive politeness have are also present in the Norwegian-language data collected for the purpose of this article.

Interestingly, the strategies used by the respondents sometimes bear resemblance to those identified in the studies on British English (Aijmer, 1996; Cohen, 2002; Deutschmann, 2003), but also to those found in Polish (Suszczyńska, 1999; 2005, Ogiermann 2009), where the former shows a strong preference for negative politeness strategies while the latter tends to opt for positive politeness strategies.

The above observation may lead us to assume that the concept of positive and negative politeness cultures, though criticized by many researchers (Eelen, 2001; Mills, 2003; Watts, 2003) still ought to be given a substantial amount of attention as it can provide a deeper insight into the pragmalinguistic diversity of languages.

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