

Pragmatics for the Classroom and How to Teach Apologies

WRIGHT, Alex

Introduction

Pragmatics is a field of language instruction which is often neglected. When we talk about pragmatics, we are talking about how language is actually used to accomplish various tasks like requesting, apologizing or complaining, to name a few. The way native speakers actually perform these actions can sometimes differ quite a bit from even native speakers own intuitions as to how they perform them. While a native speaker might be able to flawlessly execute various speech acts like apologizing, requesting or complaining, they might have difficulty accurately explaining what they would do in these situations based on their intuitions. Some native speakers are not even capable of flawlessly, or even competently performing some of these speech acts at times. Given that the details of how to perform certain speech acts escape even native speakers intuition, it follows that performing these and other speech acts in an appropriate way does not come naturally to students simply from learning the applicable vocabulary and grammar. In fact, it is very possible to have grammatically appropriate speech which is wildly inappropriate from a pragmatic perspective.

Ex: I hereby request of you that you close the front door

Speech acts

Speech acts are actions performed via utterances. These include apologizing, complaining, complementing, inviting, promising, and requesting to name some of the most common speech acts. They are performed taking into account what is an appropriate level of politeness for the given situation. The head act which is the actual request, apology etc. is often accompanied by certain strategies to make the act more or sometimes less polite.

Ex: Turn of that music (head act)

I'm trying to sleep (accompanying strategy)

Politeness

One very important aspect of determining whether speech is appropriate, is the level of politeness used. For example, how formal a speaker should be is determined by the relative status of the people speaking to each other, as well as social distance and degree of imposition (Yule, 1996). While an understanding of how formal a situation is, may come naturally to most people, the appropriate vocabulary and phrases will not. While understanding of levels of formality is an intuitive social skill that speakers of all languages possess, it might be a good idea to raise students awareness of the importance of levels of formality. When speaking a foreign language considerations of formality might be lost because of the mental effort necessary to formulate grammatically correct sentences (or even sentences at all for that matter).

Additionally, students who already have a decent command of the language might fall into habits and neglect formality, using the register of formality they used in the context they learned the language. I once had a Japanese waiter who spoke good English, but talked to me like I was his teenage friend which was clearly linguistically inappropriate for the situation. He apparently spent a few years abroad and presumably he learned from his teenage English speaking friends.

In addition, if there is a cultural difference pertaining to the speech act which effects formality it will be important to bring that up if the teacher is aware of such a difference. One example of this is that in making requests, Japanese speakers tend to base how polite they are based on the relative status of the speakers more than on how big a request they are making (Mizutani 1985). Students should be aware that English speakers tend to base how polite they are more on the size of the request than the status of the speakers. Both the request severity, and status of speakers are taken into account in both languages but their weighting is different between these different cultures.

In presenting degrees of formality to students I think it is not necessary to go too far into the weeds explaining what determines the level of formality. Simply mentioning that factors like status and closeness help determine formality might be enough. It is important that students be aware while learning a speech act that a spectrum of formality exists and that various expressions can increase or decrease the level of formality. Also students should be aware that they should be aiming for an appropriate level of formality while practicing the speech act. One way to illustrate this is to draw a line on the board illustrating the spectrum of formality and then associate various expressions with the appropriate part of the line.

Polite		Casual
←----->		
I wonder if you wouldn't mind being quiet?	Could you be quiet?	Quiet please Shut up!

Another way is to present an obviously comically inappropriate use of pragmatics. For example in a very formal situation like apologizing for severely damaging someone's property.

A: (just breaks boss's priceless family heirloom at a dinner party)

A: Wooops! Sorry!

A: (walks away)

Another major issue in teaching pragmatics is presentation of strategies for performing a given speech act. For example when apologizing, in addition to saying sorry a speaker might want to offer to repay or repair the damage they have done to the listener.

Ex: I'm sorry I'm late. *I'll buy you a drink.*

Strategies for speech acts

Many speech acts have a number of strategies that can be employed to accomplish them which might not be readily obvious to the learner. These speech acts can enhance, or in some cases intentionally decrease, the level of politeness as well as potentially increasing the chance of the speech act achieving its desired result. These strategies are usually specific to the speech act being performed. Cataloging all of the strategies associated with all common speech acts is beyond the scope of this paper, but interested teachers can learn about them from the CARLA pragmatics website which has great information, including strategies associated with common speech acts.

Some of these strategies may differ significantly by culture so it is worth exploring them. One example is that in Hebrew when performing an apology to someone of a higher rank, one would usually refrain from saying what one would do to rectify the situation because it is the person of higher rank who will decide what happens next (Cohen et al., 1986)

Teaching strategies for speech acts

In order to teach strategies associated with specific speech acts you must first describe them to your students. For example one strategy associated with requesting something is to give a reason you are making a request.

Ex: *I forgot my pen today.* Can you lend me a pen?

Say what the strategy is and give a few examples so students can understand how to execute the strategy. These strategies sometimes have technical words associated with them. For example, another strategy associated with requesting is using a *cost minimizer*.

Ex: Can you help me? *It will only take a second.*

When describing the strategy it is best to cut out linguistic lingo like cost minimizer and simply explain what the strategy is in plain English. For example instead of cost minimizer you could say the strategy is to say something to make the request seem smaller.

Label strategy examples

Once the strategies have been presented and examples have been given, the next step is to label the strategies in a dialogue to consolidate students' understanding of these strategies.

Ex:

Strategy A: say something to make the request seem smaller

Strategy B: give reason

Oh no I forgot my phone! _____ (A or B)

Can I borrow yours?

It will only take a minute. _____ (A or B)

This is a very simplified example and more strategies and longer dialogues can and should be used where appropriate.

DCTs

Once the appropriate strategies have been taught and students are aware of how to complete a speech act in a more formal or casual way, the next step is to practice the speech act with Discourse completion tasks or DCT for short. DCTs are roleplays based on a prompt given by the teacher.

Example DCT:

Ask your boss for a raise

Ask your friend to drive you to the airport

Ask your younger brother to pass the salt

Students should be given a few DCTs which require varying levels of politeness and a variety of strategies. They can be asked to perform them with one or preferably multiple times with multiple partners.

Apologizing

I'm going to go over and talk about one speech act, apologizing, and examine the strategies associated with this speech act as well as offer an example activity that teachers could use to teach this speech act. To start with when we apologize we don't simply say "Sorry" in many cases of apologizing. This could in fact be wildly inappropriate.

A: You shot me

B: Sorry

As a simple strategy native speakers use to increase the strength of an apology, emphasizing words, like "so" and "really" are added to the expression.

I'm so sorry.

I'm really sorry.

This simple strategy can increase the strength and potentially the appropriateness of an apology. Students should also be aware that so is more casual than *really* when apologizing.

In teaching apologies it might be good to focus on apologies using the word sorry because

it is the most commonly used word in apologies (Blum-Kulka et al., 1984) even though there are many others. In order of commonality for English.

sorry

excuse

apologize

forgive

regret

pardon

Another strategy apologizers can use is to give a reason why they did what they did.

I'm so sorry I'm late, *the train was really late.*

A third strategy associated with apologizing is an offer to repay the listener in some way for the damage or offence caused, or making an offer to repair the damage in some way. A speaker could offer to pay the hearer to buy a new version of something they broke, offer to use their time to fix something they broke or simply offer to buy the listener a drink to make up for a minor offence.

A fourth strategy associated with apologizing is a promise of forbearance. The speaker can promise that they will not do whatever they did again or at least that they will make every effort to not repeat what they did.

A final strategy not featured in the handout is an expression of acceptance of responsibility. A speaker can fully blame themselves or in fact say something that puts responsibility on something or someone other than them. This strategy was not covered for the sake of making the lesson a bit simpler and avoiding information overload. It is more important that students can functionally apologize with an appropriate level of politeness than that they have an exhaustive knowledge of all the ins and outs of apologies.

Apologies handout

In addition to saying “I’m sorry” English speakers use several other strategies when apologizing.

Strategies

A. An expression to make the apology stronger

Oh, I’m so sorry.

I’m really sorry.

B. An explanation

I didn’t see you.

The bus was late.

C. Offer to repay or repair.

I’ll buy you dinner.

I’ll buy you a new one.

D. Promise that it won’t happen again.

It won’t happen again.

I’ll be more careful next time.

Situation: friend came 20 minutes late to meet her friend for lunch in Shibuya

Select the correct Strategy A. B. C. or D.

Woman:

I'm so sorry.

A.

The train was 15 minutes late because of an accident.

I'll buy you lunch to make up for it.

Situation: An employee just came to work 30 minutes late.

Employee:

I'm really sorry.

My alarm clock didn't go off this morning.

I'll try to make sure I come in on time from now on.

Situations for apology role-plays:

Situation 1: You just spilled coffee on stranger's shoes.

Situation 2: You just dropped and broke a nice glass in your friends house.

Situation 3: You are late turning in your final project for class.

Situation 4: You forgot to pick up the groceries your wife asked you to get on the way home.

Situation 5: You just bumped into someone at a bar and made them spill half of their drink.

Situation 6: You showed up 20 minutes late to meet your friend for lunch.

Conclusion

There are many reasons to teach pragmatics in the classroom. Students can benefit from learning the specific ways and strategies native speakers use to execute various speech acts. Teachers should educate themselves on the strategies and cultural differences associated with various speech acts. By presenting the strategies and then having students identify them and practice them with roleplays students can gain a greater command of these speech acts and are more likely to be able to perform them in a natural way.

References

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