

A CASE STUDY OF THE SPEECH ACT APOLOGY IN ROMANIAN

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1. INTRODUCTION

When societal norms are violated, the speech act *apology* plays a crucial role in maintaining interpersonal harmony and restoring social balance. This speech act contains a multitude of linguistic and social subtleties that highlight its importance within the fabric of communication. This article delves into the phrases, variations, and cultural implications of the speech act *apology* in the context of the Romanian languaculture. The purpose of this research is to shed light on the complexities of apologising in Romanian, contributing to a better understanding of the speech act under scrutiny and its manifestations.

In the sections that follow, I will present the theoretical background, the data collection methodology, the results of the case study, and the relevance of the findings for understanding the complexities of apologising in Romanian. The analysis seeks to elucidate the details that define the Romanian approach to apologising, highlighting potential differences in contrast to other language and cultural situations.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The speech act *apology* is a multidimensional language phenomenon that spans pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and sociocultural studies. It is an expressive speech act with great sociopragmatic weight, serving as a means to correct mistakes, show regret, and repair social relationships. Apologies, according to Leech (1983), serve the principal social role of maintaining harmony between the speaker and the hearer.

Apologies are a unique sociopragmatic activity that functions as a means for conflict resolution and social rehabilitation. Apologies' contextual diversity and cultural sedimentation are essential components of human communication, and need a thorough understanding of the culturally embedded norms that underpin

these interactions. Furthermore, the realisations of this speech act, alternating between formulaic utterances and unique formulations, show the dichotomy of linguistic creativity and pragmatic functionality.

The literature also highlights the relationship between apologies and cultural values, emphasising how these expressions could reflect deeper social conventions and attitudes. Apologies are intertwined with the intricate fabric of social norms and embody an inherent recognition of personal accountability while concurrently addressing the face needs of interlocutors by diffusing potential adversarial contexts.

Rooted in past actions, apologies inherently encapsulate a reactive stance. This means that an offender, i.e., an agent who takes responsibility for a real or perceived offence and displays some emotion such as ‘feeling guilty’, gives some form of redress to the victim (a beneficiary, i.e., an ‘offendee’) to restore ‘a moral and ritual equilibrium’ in the interaction (Goffman 1971: 138–148). Inherently fluid and evading rigid categorisation, apologies manifest as prototypes rather than prescriptive forms, a perspective highlighted by Aijmer (2019). The ostensibly ubiquitous expression of apology, (*I’m*) *sorry*, is characterized by Leech (2014) as a nuanced variable signal, neither invariably indicative of apology nor consistently aligned with politeness. This articulation of apologies unveils an intricate interplay between linguistic pragmatics, sociocultural norms, and the underlying nuances of human interaction.

From a formal point of view, it is difficult to define the speech act *apology* because of the multitude of structures that can be used. In Romanian, the following structures can be used as explicit Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs) for apologies: *Scuze* (Eng. *Sorry*), *Îmi cer scuze* (Eng. *I apologize*), *Îmi cer iertare* (Eng. *I ask for forgiveness*), *Îmi pare rău* (Eng. *I am sorry*), *Iartă-mă* (Eng. *Forgive me*). These structures may be accompanied by paralinguistic elements such as intonation and non-linguistic elements, contributing to the speaker’s intention to apologise.

From a structural point of view, it is impossible to define the speech act *apology* because of the diversity of structures that can be regarded as apologies, which is why for many researchers the functional criterion has been the basis for defining this particular speech act.

In defining the speech act *apology*, Goffman (1971) starts from the formal criterion, focusing on the lexical units that indicate the realization of the act, and Leech (1983) from the functional criterion, the latter emphasizing the functions and effects of the apology on the interlocutors. Goffman (1971) defined 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” (p. 143). Thus, using an apology, the guilty party acknowledges that they have broken a rule and promises not to repeat it.

The function of the apology is to strengthen relations between the interlocutors, although this is often considered to be a purely compensatory action. Goffman (1971) points to the following elements as components of an apology:

1. Expression of embarrassment and sorrow;
2. Clarification that the offender knows what behaviour was expected and that he/she understands and regrets the negative sanction;
3. Verbal rejection, repudiation, and refusal to acknowledge wrong behaviour, along with self-deprecation for such behaviour;
4. Advocating correct behaviour and promising to follow it in the future;
5. Remorse and a voluntary desire to make restitution.

Following an offence, an apology is designed to restore the balance between speakers. Goffman (1971) regards the apology as a critical component of the 'remedial interchange' because it strives to restore balance between speakers following an offence. In this approach, the term 'remedial' emphasises the apology's important purpose of restoring social balance between interlocutors. If the offender does not want his/her behaviour to harm the connection with the interlocutor, he/she will strive to rectify the situation through a remedial interchange. The transgression can be removed either verbally or non-verbally. Verbal involves apologising and nonverbal entails engaging in some remedial activity. For example, if someone inadvertently hits another person and the person trips and drops everything on the floor, then verbally one apologises and non-verbally one bends down and picks everything up off the floor. Using non-verbal remedial activity alone is not enough to restore the imbalance created as a result of the offence; it must be always accompanied by verbal activity.

Goffman (1971) classifies apologies according to the seriousness of the offence. He distinguishes *substantive* apologies from *ritualistic* apologies, the former being motivated by the offender's (genuine) sense of regret and the latter aiming to comply with certain social rules. For these two types, the condition of sincerity is not similar and may even be completely absent in the case of ritual apologies. Even in everyday speech, it is often the case that a speaker says "Sorry!" without having any regrets.

Fraser (1981) argues that – when the offender admits violation of social norms – "the individual feels genuinely regretful for his actions and wants to set things right by taking responsibility and expressing regret" (p. 265). In this way, the offender relieves him/herself, if not entirely, of the burden of moral responsibility, at least part of it.

According to Leech (1983), an apology expresses regret for an offence done to the receiver by the speaker and implies a transaction since it is an offer to restore balance in the relationship between the interlocutors. An apology can be interpreted both as an act of attempting to restore balance and as an act of acknowledging the imbalance in the interlocutors' relationship.

Gill (2000: 14) proposes the following felicity conditions for the speech act *apology*:

- (a) At least one of the parties must admit that the incident occurred;
- (b) At least one of the parties must admit that what happened is unwelcome.

If the person making the apology believes that nothing out of the ordinary has happened, then they must accept that their interlocutor had reason to consider themselves offended;

(c) Someone must take responsibility for the offence committed: either the apologising party takes responsibility, or there is a relationship between the offender and the apologisee such that the apology can be justified;

(d) The apologisee must regret his/her offending behaviour and express feelings of remorse for the victim's suffering;

(e) The person to whom the apology is made must believe that the offender intends to refrain from similar offences in the future.

By apologising, the offender is announcing that he/she is aware that the victim did not deserve the offence. The apology positively influences both the offender and the victim; it acts on the offender by bringing some psychological peace of mind by simply admitting guilt.

Opinions on apology as a speech act seem to be contradictory. In Brown and Levinson's (1978) theory, an apology is a face-threatening act, while Leech (1983) sees it as inherently polite. Brown and Levinson consider apology as a strategy of negative politeness, while Leech includes the apology within the expressives as a way of conveying positive politeness. I contend that this particular speech act can be considered both a strategy of negative politeness because it highlights a certain distance between interlocutors, and, at the same time, a strategy of positive politeness because it plays an important role in restoring interpersonal relationships.

Ogierman (2009) analyses how the four faces – one positive and one negative for the receiver, one positive and one negative for the speaker – are presented in the act of apologising. She argues that the apology interferes with the positive face of the speaker but does not damage it in any way but only restores it. According to the author, it is the offence that damages the speaker's face, not the apology itself. Ogierman also dwells on how the apology influences the positive and negative face of the receiver. Even though most researchers agree that the apology is meant to restore the receiver's face, it is not indicated whether it refers to the positive or the negative face. Ogierman believes that this can also be explained simply by the type of offence, as some offences affect the positive face of the receiver and others the negative face. For example, in closer relationships, it is the positive face of the receiver that is restored and in more distant relationships it is the negative face.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The core endeavour of this case study involves an examination of how native Romanian speakers enact apologies in various situations. The research questions that guide this research are: (1) What are the expressions native Romanian speakers use in apology situations?, (2) Are there any particularities in the way Romanian speakers use apologies?

To answer these, a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was administered during Contemporary Romanian seminars between October 2018 and January 2020. The subjects were 100 undergraduate third-year students, aged 21–23, from the Faculty of Letters, Transilvania University of Braşov. The test was applied

during the usual class hours by the students' course teacher who instructed them to write the first thing that came into their minds regarding the situation they were in and the person they were interacting with. The test encompassed 10 distinct apology scenarios (e.g., in the library, at the supermarket, in a park, etc.), each involving various types of offences referring to place/person, object/possession or time management. As for social distance, 5 interactions take place between friends/acquaintances (closeness); 4 interactions take place between strangers (distance) and one interaction takes place between a student and the coordinator of the bachelor's thesis (medium distance). The variable 'power' is equal when interactions take place among friends and between interlocutors with the same social status. In situations where there is social distance, the degree of power differs, i.e., the speaker has a lower status than the hearer and hence is more prone to apologise. There are no situations in which the speaker has a higher status than the hearer because all those who answered the questionnaire were students who do not have a dominant social position. The test was used to get answers as close as possible to natural, everyday speech. Therefore, in the selected situations, the students did not need to take another role, other than the one they have in real life.

4. ANALYSIS

In the analysis of the data, I start from Olshtain and Cohen's (1983) apology speech act set which includes 5 strategies as follows:

1. An expression of apology
 - a. an expression of regret
 - b. an offer of apology
 - c. a request for forgiveness
2. An offer of repair
3. An explanation of an account
4. Acknowledging responsibility for the offence
5. A promise of forbearance

Within the context of the case study focusing on the speech act of *apology* in Romanian, the examination of the data reveals the intricate ways in which apologies are expressed. Romanian, as a language with distinct familiar (F) and polite (P) second-person pronouns and verb forms, exhibits variations in the use of V(erb) P(hrase)s and N(oun) P(hrase)s that encompass direct and indirect achievement of apologies. Direct apologies in Romanian are achieved through a variety of linguistic forms, each carrying a unique degree of politeness and formality.

Speakers employ performative verbs and noun phrases to directly apologise. These can be imperative, present tense, or hedged performative expressions. The table below includes the total occurrences of performative verbs ("a (se) scuza" Eng. *to excuse (oneself)*, "a ierta" Eng. *to forgive*, "a cere iertare" Eng. *to ask for forgiveness*) and noun phrases ("scuze", "scuzele mele" Eng. *(my) apologies*).

SITUATION	<i>Scuze</i> Apologies	<i>Îmi cer scuze</i> I excuse myself	<i>Mă scuzi/ Mă scuzați</i> (you F-SG/ P-SG/PL) Excuse me	<i>Scuzele mele</i> My apologies	<i>Te/Vă rog să mă scuzi/scuzați</i> Please (you F-SG/ P- SG/PL) excuse me	<i>Scuză-mă/ Scuzați-mă</i> (you F-SG/ P-SG/PL) Excuse me!	TOTAL
Classmates in the library	21	1	1	2	2	3	30
Madam librarian	2	10	8	0	3	4	27
Phone call	1	11	5	0	2	4	23
At the supermarket	4	14	3	0	2	4	27
In the park	2	5	8	0	5	7	27
The book from the library	12	3	10	0	2	6	33
The phone	18	3	2	0	5	5	33
Coordinator of the bachelor's thesis	6	2	3	3	4	4	22
The exam	5	6	5	2	2	6	26
Meeting a friend	4	8	0	0	6	5	23
TOTAL	75 (28%)	63	45	7	33	48	271

Imperative forms, such as “Scuză-mă/Scuzați-mă!” (Eng. (you F-SG/ P-SG/PL) *Excuse me!*) and “Iartă-mă/Iertați-mă!” (Eng. (you F-SG/ P-SG/PL) *Forgive me!*), encapsulate a direct approach to seeking forgiveness. Present tense forms, such as “Mă scuzi/scuzați...” (Eng. (you F-SG/ P-SG/PL) *Excuse me...*) and “Mă ierți/iertați...” (Eng. (you F-SG/ P-SG/PL) *Forgive me...*), provide a real-time acknowledgement of the offence. Hedged performatives (e.g., “Te rog să mă scuzi/să mă ierți” Eng. *Please (you F-SG) excuse/forgive me*, “Vă rog să mă scuzați/să mă iertați” Eng. *Please (you P-SG/PL) excuse/forgive me*) convey an indirect but sincere apology, while nouns like “Scuze!” (Eng. *Apologies!*) and “Iertare!” (Eng. *Forgiveness!*) succinctly express the intention to make amends. Indirect apologies, on the other hand, eschew explicit performative verbs or noun phrases.

Some answers in the questionnaire contain two or more (sometimes different) expressions of a direct apology, which are accompanied by *intensifiers* (e.g., “mii de...” Eng. *thousands*, “mult” Eng. *much*, “foarte” Eng. *very*) in the offender’s turn.

- (1) a. *Îmi cer scuze, nu am vrut. Vă ajut să strângeți lucrurile și îmi cer **mii de** scuze că s-a întâmplat.*
 I apologise, I didn’t mean it. I’m helping you _{P-SG} pack things up and I apologise a thousand times for what happened.
- b. *Îmi cer scuze, nu am făcut-o intenționat! Imediat le adun! Vă rog **mult** să mă iertați.*
 I apologise, I didn’t do it on purpose! I’ll collect them immediately! I would very much like you _{P-SG} to forgive me.
- c. *Îmi cer iertare, permiteți-mi să vă ajut, sunt foarte neîndemânatică, **mii de** scuze.*
 I apologise, let me help you _{P-SG}, I am very clumsy, thousands of apologies.
- d. *Îmi cer iertare. Îmi permiteți să vă ajut? Din nou **mii de** scuze.*
 I apologise. Can I help you _{P-SG}? Thousands of apologies again.
- e. *Vă rog **frumos** să mă scuzați. Îmi pare **foarte** rău, nu am făcut-o intenționat, îmi cer **mii de** scuze.*
 I kindly ask you _{P-SG} to excuse me. I’m very sorry, I didn’t do it on purpose, I apologise a thousand times.

Another strategy identified in the data is *giving an explanation of an account*. This may accompany the direct apology, but it can do the repair without it. If explanations are used together with a direct apology, the speaker does it to emphasize he/she did not intend to commit the offence. This strategy is particularly prevalent when addressing friends, classmates, colleagues, and co-workers. Explanations can either accompany a direct apology or stand alone as a remedial interchange, without explicitly apologising.

Taking responsibility for the offence is an important feature of the speech act *apology*, as it communicates to the receiver that the speaker realises that social norms have been violated and acknowledges that he/she is responsible for what happened. Acknowledging responsibility is necessary to restore the social balance between the interlocutors. The *accountability strategy* (Olshtain and Cohen 1983) includes various subcategories like acknowledging responsibility, offering repair, promising forbearance, engaging in self-criticism (admitting lack of carefulness), and asserting a lack of intention. These subcategories were observed in the questionnaire responses:

- (2) a. *Este vina mea, te ajut acum.*
 It’s my fault, I’ll help you _{F-SG} right away.
- b. *Îmi pare foarte rău. Am fost neatentă.*
 I’m really sorry. I was careless.
- c. *Aveți dreptate să vă supărați, dar nu se va mai repeta, îmi pare nespus de rău.*
 You _{P-SG/PL} are right to be angry, but it will not happen again, I am terribly sorry.

d. *Îmi cer scuze de întârziere, nu am făcut-o intenționat, din cauza transportului nu am putut ajunge la timp.*

I apologise for being late, I did not do it on purpose, because of the transport I could not arrive on time.

Acknowledging responsibility for the offence conveys the message that the relationship with the receiver is very important to the speaker. The use of this strategy suggests that speakers are more concerned with restoring the interlocutor's image than with their own.

Another element proposed by Olshtain and Cohen is an *offer of repair*. This is closely related to the reparative function of the apology. The offer of repair implies the speaker's attempt to restore the balance lost as a result of the offence, the offender expressing the desire to make things right. For example, *Îmi pare rău, dacă nu se poate repara, voi cumpăra altul* (Eng. I'm sorry. If it can't be repaired, I'll buy another one); *Îmi cer iertare. Cât trebuie să plătesc pentru pagubă?* (Eng. I apologise. How much do I have to pay for the damage?).

In some situations, the sense of responsibility and guilt is so great that the offender promises that the offending act will not be repeated. By making the promise, the speaker communicates to the interlocutor that he/she admits that he/she has violated a social norm and will endeavour to respect it in the future.

Interestingly, there are instances where speakers choose not to perform the apology. They might deny responsibility for the offence (*Nu este vina mea, nici nu am văzut pata*. Eng. It's not my fault, I didn't even see the stain.) or even shift the blame onto someone else (*Sora mea mai mică a umblat cu ea*. Eng. My younger sister handled it.).

The results of the questionnaire show that direct apologies are more frequently intensified when the social distance between the interlocutors is high, and less often when the distance is low. In other words, relationships between friends can be "repaired" more easily, while distant ones require more effort on the part of the offender.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Further investigation into the complexities of apologies, in particular, presents interesting prospects for deeper exploration and understanding. A comprehensive examination of speech acts, as recommended by Taavitsainen and Jucker (2008: 6), benefits from placing them within a multidimensional illocutionary space, where variations may be discovered and analysed. In this context, it is critical to investigate the paraverbal and non-verbal aspects that precede the speech act *apology*, since these factors significantly contribute to the overall communicative intent. The paraverbal and non-verbal components of an apology, such as tone, facial expressions, gestures, and body language, are also

relevant for research. These channels frequently give critical contextual indications that determine how the apology is received and interpreted. Understanding how these aspects interact with the language content may provide a more complete picture of the speech act *apology*.

Another aspect worth investigating is the use of apologies in non-sincere circumstances such as banter and irony. While the fundamental goal of an apology is to show regret and restore social balance, it is worth noting that apologies may also be employed deliberately for humour or playful interaction. This intriguing dichotomy needs a thorough consideration of how the same linguistic elements can acquire distinct illocutionary forces depending on the situational context and the relationship among participants.

Furthermore, it is important to understand the role of the sequence of actions within the dialogic action game of apology. An apology is not a stand-alone act; it is part of a complex interplay of dialogic actions and reactions (see Weigand 2010). The hearer's reaction to the apology becomes an important aspect in determining its genuineness. Because it is not always clear if an apology is genuine or not, the analysis must take into consideration the cognitive processes involved in determining the speaker's purpose. In the instance of an apology regarded as banter or irony, the hearer's response reflects their comprehension and perception of the non-serious meaning.

The examination of the speech act *apology* in the context of Romanian languaculture has revealed several notable elements. This specific speech act presents itself in several ways in Romanian, each customised to the details of the offence and the social dynamics at play. The act of apologising is a complex endeavour that reflects the speaker's strategic choices in mitigating the offence, whether stated through the succinct ritual apology in the form of a noun ("scuze" Eng. *sorry*) or expanded upon with an extended narrative.

Direct apologies serve to unambiguously address the harm done and are enhanced supported by the speaker's sincerity. As for indirect apologies, intentions and effects appear to be multifaceted. The observed link between the motivation for indirect apologies and their influence on re-establishing interpersonal balance highlights the subtleties that govern the remedial interchange.

When confronted with serious transgressions, it appears that Romanian speakers use a vast repertoire of verbal resources to effectively bridge the gap caused by the offence. In circumstances of major violations, there may be a cultural predisposition towards making apologies, where the use of intensifiers emphasises the speaker's dedication to repairing the breached social norm.

The accountability strategy is central to the Romanian apologies. This case study reveals that speakers tend to acknowledge full responsibility for the offence at hand. This denotes self-awareness and a strong sense of ownership. In essence, the analysis of the Romanian speech act *apology* reveals the interaction between direct and indirect forms, the gravity-dependent use of language resources, and the intrinsic commitment to accountability.

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UN STUDIU DE CAZ AL ACTULUI DE VORBIRE CERERE DE SCUZE ÎN LIMBA ROMÂNĂ

Rezumat

Acest studiu de caz urmărește identificarea strategiilor lingvistice folosite de vorbitorii nativi de limba română pentru a-și cere scuze. Studiul are la bază răspunsurile la un chestionar distribuit unui număr de 100 de studenți de la studii universitare de licență în perioada 2018–2020. Analiza relevă faptul că exprimarea directă a scuzelor implică diverse forme lingvistice cu diferite niveluri de politețe, în timp ce exprimarea indirectă reflectă intenții diverse și are efecte variate. În cazul unor abateri grave, vorbitorii români folosesc strategii pentru a restabili echilibrul social, punând accentul pe asumarea răspunderii. Studiul subliniază, de asemenea, relația dintre realizările directe și indirecte, dependența contextuală a utilizării anumitor strategii și importanța asumării răspunderii.

A CASE STUDY OF THE SPEECH ACT APOLOGY IN ROMANIAN

Abstract

This case study focuses on the linguistic strategies used by native Romanian speakers to express apologies. The study evaluates the responses of 100 undergraduate students between 2018 and 2020 using a Discourse Completion Test. The analysis reveals that Romanian speakers employ direct apologies with different politeness levels, whereas indirect apologies have multifaceted intentions and effects. In cases of serious transgressions, Romanian speakers use a variety of techniques to restore social balance, emphasizing accountability and ownership. The study also emphasizes the interaction between direct and indirect apology forms, context-dependent language use, and the importance of accountability in Romanian apologies.