CHAPTER 4

Speech Act Behavior Across Languages

Elie Olshtain
Department of Linguistics
Tel-Aviv University

Andrew D. Cohen
School of Education
Hebrew University

INTRODUCTION

One morning, Mrs. G., a native speaker of English now living in Israel, was doing her daily shopping at the local supermarket. As she was pushing her shopping cart she unintentionally bumped into Mr. Y., a native Israeli. Her natural reaction was to say, "I'm sorry" (in Hebrew). Mr. Y. turned to her and said, "Lady you could at least apologize."

On another occasion the very same Mr. Y. arrived late for a meeting conducted by Mr. W. (a native speaker of English) in English. As he walked into the room he said, "The bus was late," and sat down. Mr. W., obviously annoyed, muttered to himself, "These Israelis, why don't they ever apologize?"

What had actually happened in these two cases? These are obviously examples of communicative failure. Both Mrs. G. and Mr. Y. intended to express an apology but their speech acts were not accepted as such by the addressees who were native speakers of another language. The speakers in these two cases had employed conversational norms perfectly acceptable in their respective L1s but which did not bring about the same results in L2. In both cases, however, the utterances were produced in faultless grammatical form.

One of the most important tasks in acquiring communicative competence in a second language is learning the rules of appropriateness or, in other words, learning to "use" the language in an acceptable manner. Recent speech act research may provide insights as to the types of L2 rules that learners need to
acquire over and above those of grammatical competence in order to ensure that they actually convey their intended meaning.

**SPEECH ACT STUDIES: SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Cross-cultural comparative studies of discourse (e.g., Blum-Kulka, 1982; Blum-Kulka & Olshatkin, 1984, 1986; Cohen & Olshatkin, 1981; Gumperz & Tannen, 1979; Olshatkin, 1983; Tannen, 1982) have shown that rules of appropriateness vary across cultures. Thus, for learners to become truly effective communicators in a second language, they need to acquire these rules of appropriateness in addition to what we have come to call linguistic competence. Modern language courses are increasingly regarding as their ultimate goal that of affording their learners a sense of "communicative competence" (Hymes, 1964), that is, providing them with knowledge about and experience in using the sociocultural rules of the new language. This instructional emphasis has underscored the importance of cross-cultural speech act studies. At present, such studies are just beginning to appear.

One of the major concerns of discourse studies across languages is that of setting up comparable units of analysis within the various languages being studied. Speech acts represent a highly complex mapping of meaning onto form. Hence, comparative studies are faced with a number of theoretical and methodological problems. Some of these problems will be discussed in this chapter, with the aid of empirical data drawn from the act of apologizing in different languages.

**ESTABLISHING THE SPEECH ACT SET**

As a cross-language unit of analysis, we have proposed the notion of a "speech act set" (Olshatkin & Cohen, 1983). A speech act set consists of all the major linguistic and/or pragmatic strategies, any one of which would suffice as a minimal element to represent the particular speech act. Such a unit provides us with a framework for defining the relationship between illocutionary intent and linguistic repertoire. Such a framework is necessary because a speech act can be performed in a number of ways, for instance, by using the relevant performative verb (e.g., "I hereby apologize"), by using the direct act (e.g., "I'm sorry"), or by using an indirect one (e.g., "I didn't mean it") (Searle, 1975). The speech act set aims at encompassing the maximal potential set of strategies available to the speaker for each speech act.

Although we would expect variation in the performing of speech act sets according to the specific language and culture, the given situation, and the personality of the speaker, we would encourage research aimed at describing the universal speech act set. This speech act set would consist of universal strategies for the performance of the particular speech act, and could then be adapted and adjusted to the specific language(s) being studied.

For example, the apology speech act set has, in fact, been developed and refined through cross-cultural and cross-language research (Cohen & Olshatkin, 1981; Olshatkin, 1983; Olshatkin & Cohen, 1983). The act of apology is called for when there is some behavior that violates social norms. When an action or an utterance (or the lack of either) results in the fact that one or more persons perceive themselves as deserving an apology, the culpable person(s) is (are) expected to apologize. According to Searle (1979, p. 4) a person who apologizes for doing A expresses regret at having done A. Thus, the apology act takes place only if the speaker believes that some act A has been performed prior to the time of speaking and that this act A has resulted in an infraction which affected another person who is now deserving of an apology. Furthermore, the apologist believes that he or she was at least partly responsible for the offense (Fraser, 1980).

The semantic criteria that need to be met by the apology act are an expression of regret and an acknowledgment of responsibility on the part of the offender. Accordingly, the apology speech act set must include formulas or strategies that meet such semantic criteria. We have reason to believe that these criteria hold true across cultures, but cultures may allocate the need to apologize and the degree of apology differently in different situations. As Coultasm (1979, p. 245) points out, "even if a social situation under consideration is of universal nature, this should not lead to the premature conclusion that, in these cases, functionally fully equivalent formulae can be found." Thus, in one culture "coming late to a meeting" might be considered a much greater offense than in another and therefore the type of apology used in each culture might be quite different. Furthermore, cultures may attach different degrees of status to the participants interacting in the situation. By the same token, while in one culture choice of strategies may vary according to the age or sex of the person to whom one apologizes, in another this may carry little significance.

Languages tend to conventionalize the use of some of the specific or performative verbs. Thus in English, for instance, the verb "apologize" (e.g., "I apologize for having done A") is used in more formal situations while "I'm sorry" is very frequent across situations. On the other hand, the Hebrew equivalent of "I'm sorry" (ami mishtadera), although frequently used, may also imply lack of interest or indifference on the part of the speaker—which would explain why Mr. Y. did not accept it as an apology in the supermarket incident recounted previously. Certain lexical or grammatical forms become conventionalized within the colloquial use of the language and these are then chosen by most native speakers as the most frequent and acceptable forms. Some of these become "routine formulae" in Coultasm's (1979) terms. The learner of the
language cannot simply look for the lexically equivalent utterance in the new language, since that particular form might not be the conventionalized one and would thus result in communicative failure or at least in deviance.

The apology speech act set (according to its development in Olshain, 1983, and in Olshain & Cohen, 1983) consists of five strategies:

1. An expression of an apology, whereby the speaker uses a word, expression, or sentence which contains a relevant performative verb such as "apologize," "forgive," "excuse," "be sorry." While all languages can be expected to have a number of such performative verbs, some of these verbs will have a more conventionalized use than others. An expression of an apology can be intensified whenever the apologizer feels the need to do so. Such intensification is usually brought about by adding suitable intensifiers (e.g., "I'm really sorry," "I'm really very sorry"). The type of intensification chosen by a speaker is language- and situation-specific.

2. An explanation or account of the situation which indirectly caused the apologizer to commit the offense and which is used by the speaker as an indirect speech act of apologizing. The criteria for choosing the particular utterance is therefore semantic rather than formal. Given the context of the offense, the statement is intended to "set things right." In some cultures this may be a more acceptable way of apologizing than in others. Thus in an environment where people have great difficulty with transportation, coming late to a meeting and giving an explanation like "The bus was late" might be perfectly acceptable. In other cultures, however, where transportation is expected to be good and on a regular schedule, it is the person who is considered late and not the bus, and therefore perhaps the excuse is less acceptable as an apology. This is probably what happened in the case of Mr. W. who came late for the meeting conducted by Mr. W.

3. Acknowledgment of responsibility, whereby the offender recognizes his or her fault in causing the infraction. The intensity of such recognition on the part of the apologizer can be placed on a scale. The highest level of intensity is an acceptance of the blame: "It's my fault," or an expression of self-deficiency: "I was confused," "I didn't see," "You are right." A lower level of intensity in accepting responsibility is the expression of lack of intent: "I didn't mean to." Finally, the apologizer may not accept the blame at all, in which case we get a denial of responsibility, "It wasn't my fault."

4. An offer of repair, whereby the apologizer makes a bid to carry out an action or provide payment for some kind of damage which resulted from his or her infraction. This strategy is situation-specific and is only appropriate when actual damage has occurred.

5. A promise of forbearance, whereby the apologizer commits himself or herself to not having the offense happen again.

The five major semantic formulas which make up the apology speech act set are available to speakers across languages, yet the preference for any one of these or for a combination of them will be culture-dependent and situation-dependent. We propose that the speech act be used as the basis for comparability across languages, yet the preference for one semantic formula over another and the frequency of use of each have to be established for each language.

**Comparability Across Languages**

In order to compare speech act behavior across languages, we must begin by describing (for each language) the systematic relationships that hold between pragmatic preconditions necessary for the performance of an act and its linguistic realization. The linguistic realization is subject to language-specific constraints in grammatical and lexical usage, and appropriate conventions or formulaic patterns for use at different levels of formality. Hence, contrastive speech act analysis has to establish comparability at two levels: at the procedural level, that is, the contextual features of the situation; and at the level of linguistic realization, that is, the grammatical and lexical choices within conventionalized patterns.

At the procedural level, if we are comparing apologies across languages, we would want to compare similar situations with respect to types of participants, their social status and familiarity, and the content, namely, type and severity of infraction. When considering the act of apologizing, we need to know what behavior may bring about a violation of social norms in a given culture. We would identify behavior that results in such violations across cultures and behavior that is language-specific. We would then look at behavior (or the speech act) that intends to "set things right" following the violation, that is, the apology speech act. Our task is to determine the types of utterances that are conventionally used by the particular group of speakers when apologizing, and to identify the semantic strategies that each utterance reflects.

Theoretically, that which is considered "conventional" in speech is a reflection of the range of habitually used realizations of speech acts in given situations. In order to establish frequency of use of different conventions according to those constraints, we need to investigate the preference of native speakers across socially varied situations. For this, we need to develop controlled data-collection methods. Ethnographic research can, of course, study such preferences, using, for example, specialized playback techniques (Gumperz & Tannen, 1979). But since no two situations are ever really identical, such data need to be complemented or sometimes even replaced by elicitation techniques. Data-collection techniques often focus on the speaker's point of view. In this case, "native speakers' preferences" consist of the strategies used by most native speakers in a given situation. There is a further need for research focusing on the acceptable range of strategies from the hearer's point of view. Only by studying speech act...
realizations from both the speaker's and hearer's points of view can we hope to obtain a representative picture of speech act behavior among speakers of any speech community.

One of the situations we have used in our various cross-linguistic studies describes a young person accidentally bumping into an older woman in a store, hurting her a bit, and spilling some packages she was holding in her arms. Since we were focusing on the performance end, we asked the respondents to act as the young person apologizing to the older woman (who was acted out by the researcher). When such a data-collection technique is used with respondents who are native speakers of the same language, we may get a fairly good description of the frequency of usage of one or more strategies for this particular situation in language X. Next, the same situation can be used in collecting data from speakers of language Y, and then the two sets of data together would give us a basis for establishing a tentative speech act set. Furthermore, if we are interested in studying the interlanguage of learners learning either language X or Y, we can use the same situation and role-playing technique to collect learners' data. The three sets of data would then give us useful evidence for cross-linguistic features of the apology speech act in the particular situation described above.

The following are some of the responses we received, in English, for the aforementioned situation ("bumping a woman"), from Hebrew speakers learning English as a foreign language:

1. "Oh, I'm very, very sorry."
2. "Oh, excuse."
3. "I'm very sorry, what can we do?"
4. "Did something happen to you?"
5. "Lady, it was your fault but never mind. I'll forget it."

In the first response, we find the repetitive use of "very," which is a result of transfer from Hebrew, in which repetition is a common intensification technique. (Native English speakers would use something like "really very" as a way of intensifying "very." In (2), the speaker translated directly from Hebrew, resulting in an utterance lacking in cohesion ("excuse whom?"). Whereas the first part of (3) is an expression of apology, the second part ("what can we do?") serves to lessen the responsibility of the apologist—implying that such things can happen and that there is nothing we can do about it. Such responses seem to be common when the speech community is used to technical mishaps and miscommunications, and its members do not always expect things to work out well. In cultures in which the individual does not feel fully in control, there is this tendency not to take personal responsibility and to relate the cause of events to nature, God, or some superpower over which one has no control.

In (4), we find an utterance that may not be accepted as an apology and thus we have not included it in the speech act set, but it is clearly relevant to the situation. The speaker is investigating the degree of damage, since he or she is more concerned with the infraction than with the personal apology. Again, it is possible that in some cultures the need to be "matter-of-fact" and "efficient" is more valued than a ritualized show of emotion. The result would be less verbal apology and more concern with the actual violation. In (5), we see a complete rejection of the need to apologize. In fact, the apologist converts himself into the person deserving apology and offers "to forget about it." From the above examples we see that (1) and (2) are linguistically imperfect, but there is a good chance that native English speakers would accept them as intended apologies. Example (3) has an expression of apology in it, but from the point of view of the English speaker, it is considerably weakened by the lack of acceptance of responsibility which follows. Examples (4) and (5) would certainly not be accepted as apologies by native English speakers, and (5) might even be considered a rude or cynical response.

This set of examples illustrates many of the variables previously enumerated. We can see how complex this cross-cultural analysis becomes when we ask not only whether the speaker intended the utterance as an apology, but also whether the person being apologized to heard it as such. In the face of this complexity, our goal can best be characterized as a search for cultural trends to explain, if only partially, representative realizations of speech acts across cultures.

Brown and Levinson (1978) propose a politeness schema that might prove useful in cross-linguistic studies of such speech act realizations. The basis for their taxonomy of politeness is the claim that social interactions is motivated by two kinds of needs: (1) positive face, "the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some other"; and (2) negative face, "the want of every 'competent and adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others" (Brown and Levinson, 1978, p. 67). Thus, politeness strategies can be either positive-face or negative-face-oriented.

Positive politeness strategies, according to Brown and Levinson (1978), emphasize common ground between speaker and hearer, make use of in-group markers, presuppose cooperation, and are less concerned with minimizing imposition on the hearer. Negative politeness, on the other hand, reflects a desire to maintain social distance, unhindered freedom of action, and lack of imposition—and therefore cooperation is not assumed. As a result, negative politeness is more conventionally indirect, with more hedging and avoidance. According to Brown and Levinson, both types of politeness strategies interact in complicated ways according to the nature of the act and the status of the speaker and hearer.

The Brown and Levinson (1978) politeness taxonomy would appear to make a contribution to cross-linguistic studies by helping to characterize different cultures as well as subcultures within societies. For example, positive politeness cultures may show a tendency toward placing high value on directness, matter-
of-factness, friendly back-slapping, and the like. Negative politeness cultures, on the other hand, may value the maintenance of social distance and face-saving. Certain speech acts are intrinsically more face-threatening, such as requests in which directness will fall on the positive end of the politeness continuum (e.g., presupposing cooperation), while conventional indirectness will be on the negative end (e.g., desiring to minimize imposition).

Unlike requests, apologies are intrinsically negative-face acts since the emphasis is on the need for the speaker to respect the hearer's territory. Therefore, in this case, indirectness (e.g., an explanation of the cause that brought about the infraction) would be a positive-face act in that it requires the hearer to share the problem with the speaker. By the same token, a direct or performative expression of regret would be less face-threatening to the hearer since it is actually intended to provide "an instance of socially-sanctioned H[earer]-supportive behavior" (Edmonson, 1981, p. 280).

Through Brown and Levinson's (1978) politeness strategies, we might be able to explain the deviance of strategies (3), (4), and (5) in the sample set of apologies given above, where the speakers were Israeli learners of English. If we assume that the learners in that example come from a culture with more positive-face orientation than U.S. or British culture, then the lack of appropriateness of the strategies in (3), (4), and (5) might be a direct result of transfer of preference for positive politeness versus negative politeness. In English, where the negative type would be preferred, the more positive strategies appear inappropriate.

When comparing apologies across cultures, we may find that in cultures with a positive-politeness orientation, speakers tend to apologize less than in those with a negative-politeness orientation. As a result, in such cultures fewer of the situations under investigation may actually call for an apology. For example, if you are late to a meeting in a positive-oriented culture, you might say something like, "You know me. I'm never on time," and this would be considered as an apology. In a negative-oriented culture, you might say something more like, "I'm sorry I caused you so much inconvenience," because you would expect less accommodation from the hearer and would respect the hearer's need for an apology more. As a result, speakers coming from more positive-face-oriented cultures may sound rude in more negative-face-oriented ones if they choose the indirect explanation rather than the expressed apology.

**SOCIOLINGUISTIC TRANSFER**

The term "transfer" in second language acquisition refers to the learner's strategy of incorporating native language-based elements in target language production and behavior. As James (1980) states, the assumption underlying the notion of transfer is that L2 learners will tend to employ L1 forms in their L2 utterances when called upon to produce L2 forms not yet acquired. Kellerman (1977) characterizes the "strategy of transfer" in second language learning as the set of predictions made on the basis of L1 about L2. As a result of such predictions, the learner will tend to transfer L1 forms and features wherever he or she feels that these can be employed successfully in L2. Such transfer, according to Kellerman, is likely to occur for one or two reasons: (a) to fill a perceived gap in L2 knowledge and/or (b) because the learner believes that L1 and L2 are identical with respect to some language feature.

Various researchers are now calling attention to the fact that transfer occurs at the sociocultural level (e.g., Doubleday, 1981; Littlewood, 1982; Loveday, 1982; Richards, 1981; Richards & Sukwiwat, 1983; Riley, 1981; Schmidt & Richards, 1981). In this chapter, we would like to focus on how the strategy of transfer influences the way learners observe or violate sociolinguistic rules and cultural conventions for apologizing.

**COMMUNICATIVE FAILURE OR DEVIANCE CAUSED BY TRANSFER**

Communicative failure may result from lack of compatibility between speaker's intent and hearer's standards for acceptability. In the case of apology it happens when the speaker intends to apologize but the utterance is not perceived by the hearer as an apology. It is also possible that the message may sound deviant, consequently affecting the reaction of the hearer. For example, the addressee may get irritated or distracted away from the content of the message when hearing these deviant forms.

The L2 speaker is in a precarious situation since he or she makes choices concerning an intended speech act in the target language on the basis of previous knowledge and experience, mostly in L1 and only in a limited way in L2. Speech acts of L2 learners might therefore result in failure or deviation. We will now focus on the various areas in which such failure or deviation might occur.

**DEVIATION DUE TO THE SITUATION AND THE PARTICIPANTS**

As mentioned earlier, speakers may transfer their perceptions about how to perform in given situations from native language behavior to a second language situation. Such transfer could effect whether they would use a given speech act, and if so, how frequently, and how much prestige they afford other participants in the encounter. Thus, the same situation may call for an intensified apology in culture X but for no apology in culture Y. Here are three examples of such cases that we found in our studies:

1. In a situation in which the speaker forgot for the second time to take his or
her son shopping, Hebrew speakers were much less likely to apologize in L1 than were English speakers. The Hebrew speakers did not see shopping as such a "big thing," whereas it can be a major pastime in the United States.

2. In another situation in which the speaker is called upon to apologize for having insulted someone at a meeting, Russian speakers were less likely to apologize in L1 than were speakers of either English or Hebrew. The Russian-speaking respondents claimed that a person should not feel insulted as a result of open criticism at a meeting. They conceived of this as a healthy approach to discussion and exchange of opinions, and therefore did not regard it as a situation calling for an apology.

3. In a third situation, the speaker was asked to apologize for bumping into an old woman who was blocking the speaker's way in a department store. Hebrew speakers were much less likely to express an apology for doing so than were speakers of English.

Also with respect to situation, even if two language groups would both employ the same semantic formula for a given situation, the frequency with which that strategy is employed may differ. For example, when forgetting meetings with the boss, a friend, and their son, English speakers exhibited an overall higher tendency to accept responsibility (50%, 75%, and 33%, respectively) than did Hebrew speakers (16%, 50%, and 0%, respectively) (Cohen & Olsh Fain, 1981). Such differences are less likely to cause failure or deviation in communication, since each of the two languages has a wide range of variability. The variability among speakers within the same language group may well be a reflection of individual differences (e.g., personality differences).

Regarding participants, cultures differ in terms of the status that the participants are afforded in a given situation, and this affects the choice of speech act or of particular strategy for speech act realization. Thus, English speakers are more likely to "offer repair" when late for a meeting with the boss than are Hebrew speakers. In Cohen and Olsh Fain (1981), we found that while English speakers expressed an "offer of repair" 42% of the time (e.g., "I'll be in as soon as possible." "Is it possible for me to make another appointment?") Hebrew speakers never selected this strategy in the same situation.

DEVIATION DUE TO GRAMMATICAL AND LEXICAL FACTORS

It often happens that nonnative speakers are aware of the sociolinguistic need to apologize, yet because their linguistic competence is limited, they use erroneous language forms and produce speech acts that sound deviant or even create communication failure.

Overt Errors

In the Cohen and Olsh Fain (1981) study we found that L2 learners sometimes avoided using a semantic formula which had high frequency in their L1 and which would have allowed for positive transfer into L2, because they were lacking linguistic competence in L2. Furthermore, intensification or the use of "softeners" in L2 was often avoided, particularly by beginning and intermediate learners, who would tend to use more general and therefore safer forms rather than more specific ones.

In our findings we noticed a considerable number of cases in which the nonnative performance deviated from the most acceptable native utterances merely in linguistic form. The apology intent was obvious in the speech act performance but certain grammatical and lexical deviance may have caused the hearer to disregard the intent of the apology. The following are some such examples:

1. Situation: bumping into a woman in the way. "I'm very sorry but what I can do! It can't be stopped." The speakers meant to use the word "avoided," but did not know it and therefore chose "stopped," creating a deviant explanation.

2. Situation: insulting someone at a meeting. "Okay, I will speak when the meeting stopped." Here the tense as well as the choice of verbs was wrong and it is very possible that the hearer, being busy with interpreting the utterance verbatim, would miss the fact that the speaker was offering repair.

3. Situation: backing into someone else's car. "Oh, I'm very sorry. What can I do? I didn't see you." Here there are two verb tense problems, both the modal "can" and in the verb "saw" after the auxiliary. There is the distinct possibility that these errors could annoy or even infuriate the already perturbed recipient of damage.

4. Situation: bumping into a woman, hurting her, spilling packages. "I'm very sorry. Does it happen something?" The speaker here meant to inquire about the damage—"Did anything happen?"—but the linguistically deviant form would make it hard to recognize this as willingness to take responsibility.

5. Situation: insulting someone at a meeting. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you." Here the speaker mistakenly selected the noun form of the corresponding verb.

The question arises here as to how socioculturally acceptable natives would find utterances such as these, which attend to the sociocultural rules but which are linguistically erroneous. It would be valuable to conduct an acceptability study in which natives rate the effect of linguistic errors on the communicative worthiness of nonnative speech acts.

Nonovert Errors

Nonnative speech act behavior may sometimes contain utterances that are linguistically correct but that do not function appropriately in communication.
In our study, for the situation in which the speaker forgets a meeting with a friend, the following was a reaction from one of the Hebrew speakers:

I really very sorry. I just forgot. I fell asleep. Understand?

Here, the use of the form "Understand?" is a direct translation from Hebrew. When used with the question intonation, the form would call for cooperation, and would create a feeling of solidarity between speaker and hearer. In English the effect may be the exact opposite since this use of "Understand?" may sound impertinent.

In another situation, the one in which the speaker forgot a meeting with the boss, the following utterance—produced in reaction to the boss's inquiry about the reason for the speaker's being late—could be interpreted in English as insolent: "I'm sorry, I have nothing more to say." In fact the speaker sounds rude, again as a result of direct translation from Hebrew. Actually the speaker in this case meant to say, "I'm sorry. What can I say?" which would be quite acceptable in English and would imply accepting responsibility for the infraction.

In a third example—in the "bumping the woman" situation—the selection of the wrong item produced an expression of apology that sounded facetious: "I'm sorry I interrupted you. Go on." The speaker wanted to apologize for interfering with her progress, and "interfere" and "interrupt" are represented by the same verb in Hebrew (lehafrid).

**Faulty Realization of a Semantic Formula**

In some situations, faulty phrasing on the part of the nonnative speaker was seen to weaken the effect of having chosen the appropriate semantic formula. For example, one speaker wishing to offer repair to his boss for forgetting a meeting with him, said this: "I think I can make another meeting with you." Indicating willingness to meet another time with the boss may sound presumptuous to native English speakers since the boss (the hearer) would be the one to determine when or whether it would be possible to schedule another meeting. The employee would be expected only to request such a meeting.

In the same situation, an employee expressed some responsibility for forgetting the meeting but exclaimed, "We forgot the meeting here." This creates a problem in cohesion—namely, with respect to pronominal reference. The choice of pronoun ("we") suggests perhaps that the boss had some part in forgetting the meeting. Thus, the employee's attempt to indicate responsibility could well fail.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR SECOND-LANGUAGE TEACHING**

Pedagogical decisions concerning what and how to teach speech act behavior are quite different from such decisions concerning the teaching of linguistic structures. Speech acts reflect culturally dependent conventionality, that is, speakers' agreement on the overall need to use a given speech act and on its most acceptable or frequent realizations. The range of possible realizations is, however, quite wide. How then do we decide on priorities in teaching? Can we define specific goals in the area of speech act behavior?

It seems to us that the first step toward acquisition of sociocultural rules is a program aimed at sensitizing learners to cultural differences in speech act behavior across languages. Making the learner aware of overall patterns of behavior in the target culture and of available choices for speech act realization may well help learners become better users of input in L2.

At the present stage of analysis we know what major semantic formulas make up the English apology speech act set (those outlined in the beginning of this chapter). For the purpose of syllabus design, we would assume that the learner needs to know how to apologize in a variety of interactive discourse situations in the target language. However, which of these are the most likely to be encountered by a specific group of learners must be considered separately in each case. As a result of such considerations, syllabus designers would come up with a list.

Once we have developed a tentative list of apology situations relevant for a particular group of learners, we need to decide which of these are suitable for the early part of the course of study and which should be left for a later stage. Such sequencing decisions would depend mostly on the immediate needs of the learners, but course designers would also have to take into account the "spiral" reintroduction of the apology speech act throughout the entire course of study.

The next step in the syllabus design process would be to decide which and how many semantic formulas should be introduced at each point in the syllabus or textbook, in accordance with the situations that have been selected. Such decisions can be made only when good descriptions of speech act sets are available for both L1 and L2. In order to lead the learners to an ultimate level at which they will make their own choices, we need to expose them to patterns used most commonly by native speakers of the L2. Sociolinguistic research has already been of help in this respect. Manes and Wolfson (1980) emphasize the relative "lack of originality" expressed by native speakers in English compliments, for example. They point to the striking repetitiveness of linguistic forms in English compliments. From our own studies concerning apologies we can further reinforce this point. Within each of the five major semantic formulas of the apology speech act set, there is relatively little variation. The form "I am sorry" is by far the most widespread expression of apology.

It seems logical to us to incorporate the most commonly used linguistic forms that represent the major semantic formulas of a speech act set in the initial part of the course of study, while the various subformulas can be introduced gradually as part of the spiraling organization of the syllabus. Furthermore, considerations of intensification of the speech act need to be incorporated in the teaching materials since our findings (Cohen & Olstain, 1981; Cohen, Olstain, & Rosenstein, 1986; Olstain, 1983) show that at times nonnative speakers avoid intensification when they are not confident of the appropriate linguistics
form, while at other times they overelaborate their speech acts, hoping to create intensification.

Many of the modern language textbooks, especially those that have appeared in the last five or six years, have attempted to incorporate sociocultural information as an integral part of language functions. They have often suffered, however, from lack of theoretical descriptions and research evidence on which to base their selections. Some of these materials allot considerable attention to the use of performative verbs in realizing the speech act, when we know that in fact the use of such verbs in native speech is usually limited to very formal situations. It is necessary, therefore, for textbooks and teaching syllabuses to reflect the constantly widening scope of sociocultural research related to speech acts.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

This chapter has posited the notion of a speech act set and has suggested that the strategies for realizing a given speech act set, such as apology, may be universal. It was noted that cultures allocate the need to apologize and the intensity of the apology differently according to the social status and mutual familiarity of the participants, the nature of the given situation, and other factors. It was shown that within a given situation there is a range of acceptable speech act behavior. We indicated the importance of studying speech act realizations both from the speaker's and hearer's points of view since an intended apology, for example, may not be interpreted as such by the listener. We also applied a theory about positive-face and negative-face orientation to help explain the choice of speech act strategies in a given culture. Furthermore, we demonstrated ways in which nonnative utterances may be deviant. We illustrated how the choice of lexically equivalent utterances from L1 may not translate appropriately into L2 because of differing sociocultural patterns. We also saw how speech act realizations that deviate linguistically but not socioculturally may still distract the hearer away from the intended meaning of the communication.

We see as an important task that of continuing to describe speech act behavior across languages. We would especially encourage studies in the classroom dealing with overt teaching of such speech act behavior. In other words, we would want to know how effectively learners can be taught such behaviors so that they can use them successfully in actual communication situations. We recognize that empirical research on speech act sets is still in its early stages. We envision that a number of such studies will be conducted in the future. We welcome them, and look forward to learning from their findings.

**REFERENCES**


