

## DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE OF FUTUR TEACHERS OF ENGLISH: THE SPEECH ACT OF APOLOGY

*Viorica CEBOTAROȘ,  
Alecu Russo State University of Bălți*

**Rezumat:** Scopul primordial al predării unei limbi străine este dezvoltarea competenței comunicative. Un aspect important al competenței comunicative este abilitatea de a efectua acte de limbaj. Deoarece actele de limbaj sînt specifice culturii, realizarea lor corectă necesită o cunoaștere a normelor specifice culturii date. În articolul de față, sînt relevate unele particularități ale actului de limbaj „scuza” în cultura britanică.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** competență comunicativă, pragmatică, scuza, cultură.

**Abstract:** The central goal of teaching a foreign language is developing students' communicative competence. An important aspect of the communicative competence is the ability to perform speech acts. Since speech acts are culture specific, performing them appropriately requires knowledge of the norms peculiar to a particular cultural context. The present article focuses on apologies. It points out some peculiarities of performing this speech act in British culture.

**Key-words:** competence, speech act, apology, ability.

Developing communication skills is undoubtedly the main aim of teaching a foreign language. The graduates of the faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures are employed in various spheres, all of them requiring good communication skills. According to a survey made in 2008 by Archer and Davison, employers expect their employees to have good communication skills. These, together with team-working

skills, are the most important capabilities sought among new graduates. The results of the research mentioned above show that 86%, and respectively, 85% of employers regard these two skills as important.

This fact highlights the importance of developing students' communicative ability, which, in fact, has always been our main goal. Since we live in a highly competitive global market, the employees' ability to talk effectively is of paramount importance. Knowing the language is only the first step. Effective intercultural communication requires much more than knowledge of language as a system. As Anna Wierzbicka points out, „what matters most from the point of view of intercultural communication is not the form of one's utterances, but their meaning, including the hidden assumptions which reflect cultural values” [4, p. 51]. Many students find it difficult to communicate with native speakers of English although they have good knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary. What they lack is the necessary knowledge of English sociocultural norms, the ability to use language effectively in order to fulfill a certain goal and to understand language as it is used in context. For this reason in the process of learning a foreign language it is important for students to acquire, besides phonological and lexico-grammatical knowledge, pragmatic knowledge. Pragmatic knowledge represents a fundamental component of language ability. Without it communication between interlocutors may be completely blocked. Pragmatic errors are not always noticed in the surface structure of statements. They become clear when analyzing with the speaker what meaning he/she wanted to convey. Pragmatic mistakes affect both language production and language understanding. In a conversation with a foreigner, a native speaker of English will interpret what is being said following his/her own cultural norms and may think that his/her interlocutor is being rude if he/she does not act appropriately to the English linguistic community norms. Knowing the sociocultural norms seems to be as important as knowing the linguistic norms. In conversations between people belonging to different cultures every participant evaluates the behaviour of the others according to his/her cultural and communicative norms.

An important aspect of the communicative competence is the ability to perform speech acts. Since speech acts are culture specific, performing them appropriately requires knowledge of the norms specific to a particular cultural context. According to these norms, speakers use language differently, depending on the situation and on the interlocutor. Without changing the language use according to the situation, the learner of a foreign language may fail to make himself/herself understood, although he/she may have very good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. In fact, in cross-cultural communication speakers have to pay special attention to sociolinguistic rules of the target language in addition to structure rules. For that reason special attention should be paid to teaching the cultural norms of the target language. However, teaching students the rules of cultural appropriateness is much more difficult than teaching them how to use the correct linguistic form of the language. Thus, it is not so difficult for students to learn the structures the English people use when apologizing. It is more difficult to use these formulas appropriately.

Apologies play a crucial role in interpersonal communication since they help maintain and restore harmony between interlocutors. When it comes to intercultural communication, knowing when and how to apologize becomes even more important. Failure to utter an apology when perceived as necessary may cause breakdowns in communication. Some studies suggest that apologies can be considered a pragmatic universal. A study conducted by Olshtain as part of the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project proved that given the same social factors, the same contextual factors and the same levels of offence, different languages will realize apologies in very similar ways. However, others affirm that although the speech act of apology is universal, it is, at the same time, culture-specific. First of all, cultures differ in what they perceive as an offence. Secondly, the severity of the same offence may be regarded as different in two cultures. Thirdly, certain semantic formulas, i.e. verbal realizations of an apology, are given preference to over others. All these things should be taken into account when teaching students to apologize in English.

English culture differs greatly from Romanian culture in the use of reflex apology. In fact, the reflex-apology rule, as Kate Fox mentions, represents „a particularly striking example of English courtesy” [2, p. 148]. The word *sorry* is pronounced by both interlocutors automatically, no matter who is to blame. The reflex apology is, in English culture, an automatic response, not an admission of guilt. It is a „deeply ingrained rule” to say *sorry* whenever an undesired contact occurs [idem, 150]. In fact, any intrusion, no matter how slight it may be, requires an apology. In English any request or question is prefaced with an apology. Thus, *sorry* is a useful word, appropriate for any occasion or circumstance. As Kate Fox points out, „Englishness means *always* having to say you're sorry” [ibidem].

The reflex apology is not so often used in Romanian. Since students often transfer the norms and pragmatic behaviour from their culture into the target language, they are likely to make mistakes. Not using an apology in English when required may result in a negative interpretation. Thus, a native speaker of English may consider a Romanian student learning English impolite, and even rude sometimes, if an apology is not uttered as required in the English culture. The worst thing is that it may lead to forming ethnic stereotypes.

English people apologize more often than Romanian people. To a native speaker of Romanian, the frequent use of disarming apologies in English may seem insincere. On the other hand, the less frequent use of apologies in Romanian may seem impolite, or even rude, to a native speaker of English. Thus, if a native speaker of Romanian, does not apologize in the situations required by the English culture, but follows the norms of his/her native culture, he/she will sound rude.

Another thing that distinguishes English culture from Romanian culture is the use of mutual apologies. Mutual apologies are very frequent in English. Eva Ogiermann mentions that when two people bump into each other or get into each other's way in a crowd, the matter is dismissed by means of a mutual apology, sometimes even with the harmed party uttering „sorry” first [3, p. 263].

Romanian further differs from English in using routine formulas in situations where disarming apologies are used in English. Thus, A Romanian person intending to get off a crowded bus asks „Coboriți la următoarea stație?”, in answer to which the other passengers either proceed towards the door or step aside. English people use „Excuse me” in such situations.

From a cross-cultural perspective, it has been observed that speakers of English have a strong tendency to apologize in advance for a number of potential offences, such as a possible body contact in a crowded bus, etc. Speakers of Romanian would rather do so only after the unwanted offence has occurred (and only if they consider it an offence: in Romanian culture touching someone by accident may not be considered something worth apologizing for).

Such intercultural differences highlight the importance of teaching culture alongside with teaching all the other aspects of the foreign language.

#### References:

1. Archer, W., Davison, J. *Graduate Employability: the Views of the Employers*. London, the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE), 2008.
2. Fox, K. *Watching the English. The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour*, Hodder and Stoughton, 2005.
3. Ogiermann, E. *On Apologising in Negative and Positive Politeness Cultures*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2009.
4. Trosborg, A. *Pragmatics across Languages and Cultures*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin/New York, 2010.