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ФИЛОЛОГИЧЕСКИ
ЧЕТЕНИЯ
ЗА СТУДЕНТИ
И ДОКТОРАНТИ
В ЧЕСТ НА
СВЕТИТЕ БРАТЯ
Кирил и Методий

СБОРНИК ДОКЛАДИ
организирани и отпечатани
от Филологическия факултет



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За четиринадесета поредна година и за пръв път онлайн в Югозападния университет „Неофит Рилски“ се проведеха традиционните **Национални филологически четения за студенти и докторанти**. Научният форум бе открит с приветствие към участниците от Декана на Филологическия факултет – проф. д-р Магдалена Панайотова. Големият брой студенти и докторанти от български и чуждестранни висши училища се срещнаха чрез виртуална връзка с членовете на научното жури в две секции - „Литературознание“ и „Езикознание“.

В секция „Езикознание“ участие взеха общо шестнадесет студенти и докторанти от Югозападния университет „Неофит Рилски“, от Софийския университет „Св. Климент Охридски“ и от Университета ъф3за национално и световно стопанство и др. За пореден път на форума имаше и международно присъствие – от Университета „Мария Кюри-Склодовска в Люблин“, Република Полша.

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По време на литературната сесия журито с председател проф. д-р Цветан Раковски и членове доц. д-р Роман Хаджикосев, проф. д-р Амелия Личева и доц. д-р Йордан Ефтимов сподели впечатлението си от прочетените разработки

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CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY OF MODIFIERS USED IN THE SPEECH ACT OF COMPLAINING BY AMERICAN AND MACEDONIAN HIGH-SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT: The present study investigates the similarities and differences in the pragmatic structure of the speech act of complaining used by American and Macedonian high school students. The aim of the paper is to determine the pragmatic structure concerning the modifiers and herein to help EFL students in Macedonia to overcome the possible language barriers and future miscommunication. The study was carried out on an American English and Macedonian corpus gathered through an online Discourse completion task consisting of eight situations with different severity of offence (low, medium, high) and different vertical and horizontal distance between the interlocutors. The results showed the most common types of modifiers used in complaints in both languages.

KEYWORDS: speech acts, complaints, internal and external modifiers.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, cross-cultural communication is an inevitable part of our daily lives and this has encouraged the analysis of the relation between language and cultural conceptualizations from various aspects. All individuals have their own pragmatic norms based on their cultural background and those norms influence their communication with people from other cultures. The main supposition is that each cultural group conveys their cultural and pragmatic norms through communication and at the same time perceives their interlocutors through the same norms and beliefs, and this often results in misconceptions and miscommunication. Herein by cross-cultural studies we can raise speakers' awareness on the possible differences in language usage and also this can lead us to an improved cross-cultural communication.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 The speech act of complaining

The most effective way of studying everyday communication is by doing an analysis on speech acts, as they are highly present in every person's daily linguistic communication. Speech acts in English have been widely studied since the 1980s, especially as a result of the highly influential work of the CCSARP (Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project) by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989). However, in my native language (which is Macedonian) the cross-cultural research on speech acts is very scarce. One of the least analysed items is the speech act of complaining, which is the focus of my study.

The speech act of complaining is a face threatening act that belongs to the group of expressive speech acts. This means that it is a speech act used to express how a person feels. It expresses the speaker's approval or disapproval of the hearer's behaviour. Also, it is a face threatening act because it threatens both the positive and the negative face of the hearer in accordance with the Politeness theory of P. Brown and S. Levinson.

Trosborg (1995) defines the speech act of complaint as "an illocutionary act in which the speaker expresses disapproval or negative feelings toward the state of affairs described in the proposition and for which the hearer is held responsible either directly or indirectly" (Trosborg, 1995, p. 311). Trosborg also concludes that the speech act of complaining is "retrospective in its essence, because the speaker passes a moral judgment onto something, which he/she believes the complainer has already done, failed to do or is in the process of doing" (Trosborg, 1995, p. 311). Another definition that emphasizes this aspect of this speech act is the one of Leech (1983), who defines it as "a representative of the conflictive function, which includes acts of threatening, accusing, cursing and reprimanding" (p.105).

On the other hand, Olshtain and Weinbach (1993) note that a complaint occurs when a speaker reacts with displeasure or annoyance to an action that has affected the speaker unfavourably.

Undoubtedly, the speech act of complaint has a certain structure that needs to be followed in order to maintain successful communication. Moreover, it has to be used in the right context. This

means that it is essential for the speaker to know the cultural values and the socially acceptable responses in a particular language, and to be aware of the social variables.

In this paper I will focus on the modifiers that are used in the speech act of complaining. I will classify the modifiers and analyse their usage between speakers of American English and Macedonian.

2.2 Modification of the speech act of complaining

Modifiers are the words or statements used to modify or change the speech act. We can differentiate between external modifiers that precede or follow the speech act, and internal modifiers that usually appear in the head ac.

The **external modifiers** are supporting or additional statements used to carry out the desired action that in this case is the complaint. These modifiers are used to justify the complainers' right to place blame on the complainee or to provide face-saving arguments.

There are a few subgroups of external modifiers:

- Alerters that are used to get the interlocutor's attention.
- Preparators are short utterances used to break the ground or warn the complainee that a complaint follows.
- Grounders are supportive elements that provide explanation or justification for the speaker's complaint.

Disarmers serve to indicate the speaker's awareness of a potential offense.

The **internal modifiers** are used by speakers to make the complaint more effective, which can be achieved in two ways. One way is by mitigation devices that make complaints milder and show that the aim of the speaker is to make the hearer change his/her behaviour, but wants to avoid threatening the face of the hearer and prevent escalation of the conflict. This type of internal modifiers, which serve to mitigate the circumstances under which an offence was committed and consequently reduce the blame that is put on the complainee, are labelled downgraders.

Downgraders can be further classified into the following subgroups:

- Downtoners which are adverbial sentence modifiers or adverbials that express tentativeness.
- Understaters that underrepresent the state of affairs denoted in the complaint.
- Hedges which are adverbials used by the complainer to avoid precise propositional specification.
- Subjectivizers that characterize the proposition as the speaker's personal opinion or indicate the speaker's attitude towards the proposition.
- Appealers are elements used to elicit a response from the complainer by appealing to complainer's understanding.
- Cajole or elements used to restore harmony between the interlocutors.
- Questions that do not seek information, but are used to complain.
- Embedded questions
- Past tense.

The other way of achieving an effective complaint is by increasing the impact that the complaint is likely to have on the complainee by aggravating the complainable. This intensification of the complaint is done by using *upgraders*.

The subgroups of upgraders are the following:

- Intensifiers are adjectives that intensify part of the proposition.
- Commitment upgraders express special commitment toward the proposition.
- Expletives are intensifiers which explicitly express speaker's negative attitude.
- Overstaters are words that exaggerated the expressed complaint

3. Methods and procedure

The focus of my research was to define the form of the speech act of complaining and to determine its characteristics and uses in both Macedonian and English. The data was collected by a Discourse Completion task that contained eight different contexts with different power distance and social distance between the interlocutors, as well as a different severity of offence. The participants of

the study were native Macedonian speakers and American English speakers, and both groups were students at Public High-schools (aged 16 to 19).

4. Results

4.1 External modification

The data analysis on external modifiers has shown that the American speakers use external modifiers more often (169 modifiers) than the Macedonian speakers (131). In relation to the subtypes, American English speakers and Macedonian speakers share the two most frequently used external modifiers, which are the grounders and the alerters.

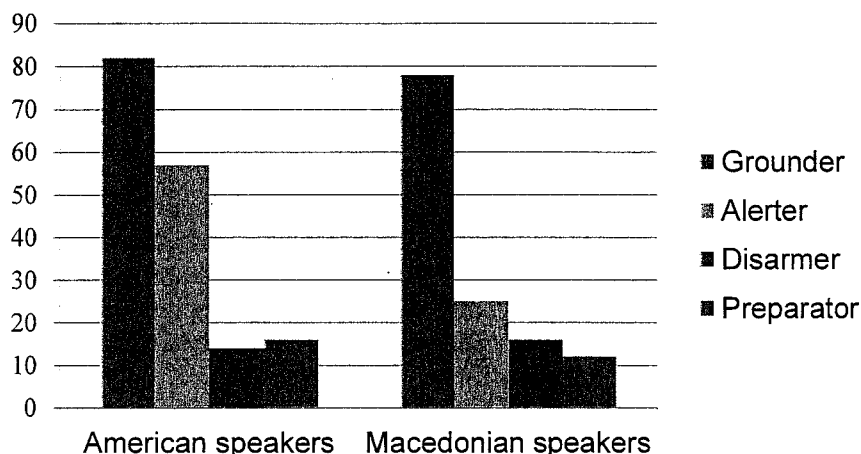


Figure 2: Use of external modifiers by American and Macedonian native speakers

4.2 Internal modification

The overall data analysis for internal modification has shown that American speakers applied more modifiers (268 modifiers) than the Macedonian speakers (168 modifiers).

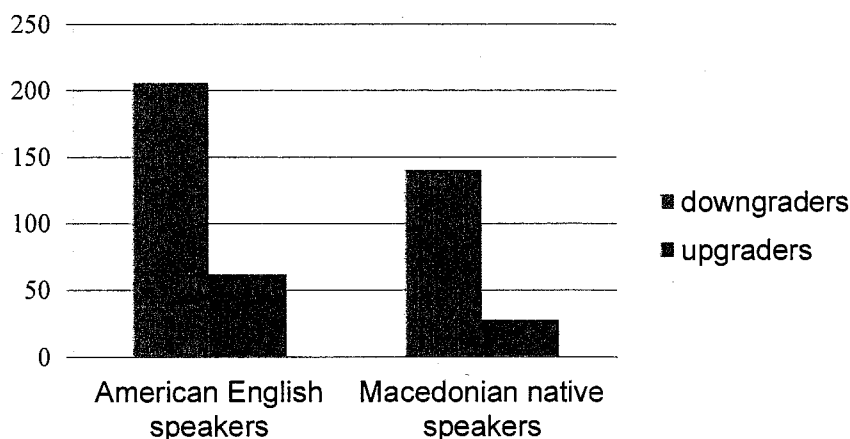


Figure 1: Use of internal modifiers by American and Macedonian native speakers

The further analysis has shown that questions were the most frequent downgraders used by both American and Macedonian speakers. The other highly frequent modifiers in American English were the subjectivizers that show the tendency of American speakers to express their attitude or opinion toward the proposition; and the past forms, that were mostly past modal verbs.

On the other hand, the internal modifiers most present in Macedonian speech were the downtoners and the embedded questions. An important notion is that the question and downtoners were present in all eight situations.

The analysis on upgraders has shown that Macedonian and American speakers employ the same upgrades. American speakers used mostly intensifiers, which were followed by lexical intensification

and expletives. On the other hand, Macedonian speakers used mostly expletives and then lexical intensification and intensifiers.

5. Discussion

5.1 Differences in the distribution of external modifiers

In the overall analysis we have noted that the usage of modifiers is the same in both languages and is in the following order: grounders, alerters, preparators and disarmers.

Generally speaking, the only notable difference in relation to the external modifiers is the higher tendency of American speakers for using twice more alerters in their complaints than Macedonian speakers, regardless of the other aspects of the complaint. The very low differentiation among the frequency of the used external modifiers does not seem to be related to the type of situation or any of its aspects, but I believe it appears solely because of the preference of the respondents. The results are very close in number, so further analysis is needed to determine the cause for this differentiation, if there is one.

5.2 Differences in the distribution of internal modifiers

The analysis of the internal modifiers has shown that both American and Macedonian speakers have the tendency to use more downgraders than upgraders, which means that they tend to downtone the circumstances under which an offence was committed and consequently reduce the blame that is put on the complaine. The only difference between the speakers of the two language communities is the high tendency of Americans to use internal modifiers.

The most frequent internal modifiers in both languages are questions, which were often followed by further complaining or an explanation.

The two other markers of the American speech were the subjectivizers, which rarely appeared in Macedonian speech, and the past forms that American speakers used in all situations, while Macedonian speakers, on the other hand, did not use them. This use of subjectivizers shows that, besides downtoning their speech, American speakers are also tend to indicate their personal opinion or their attitude, which was rarely seen in the speech of Macedonians. The usage of subjectivizers seems to be a cultural marker of American English speech as it was proposed by Kusevska (2012).

I believe that this slight difference is caused by the cultural characteristic of Americans as being direct and explicit when complaining. These characteristics are developed from childhood, by encouraging the child to speak up, be independent, and talk freely, openly and directly. On the other hand, Macedonian children are usually taught to behave, listen and follow their teachers or parents' orders, etc. This has caused a speech characterised solely with discourse elements that downtone their speech and appeal to the hearer's understanding.

Although we have mentioned that the use of upgraders was very low in both languages, it is clear that Americans have a higher tendency for intensifying the complaint with intensifiers, while the speech of Macedonian speakers is rich with swear words/phrases and directness.

In summary, the overall analysis of the internal modifiers shows that both American and Macedonian speakers share the preference for positive politeness. This means that both American English and Macedonian speech is considerate and courteous and it employs solidarity, approval, warmth and friendliness.

5.3 Distinctive features of the speech act of complaining

Although both cultures value individuality and independence, and emphasize the freedom to express one's individual thoughts, opinions and emotions, the above-mentioned differences that we have encountered in relation to the most frequent modifiers have helped us determine the key differences in the overall speech of Macedonian native speakers and English native speakers.

The most notable difference in complaining that emerged from our research concerns complaining in situations marked with high severity offence and power distance between the interlocutors. When Macedonian speakers are faced with high offence situations, they restrain from the natural and frequent complaining by showing annoyance and resort to directly blaming the hearer, often using swear words. Herein the awareness of the different communication styles in both languages for high severity offences can prepare the American speakers and change their view on the possible future complaining situations, and it can also help Macedonian speakers and especially Macedonian EFL

learners to be careful in intercultural communication and to adapt their speech in order not to be misunderstood.

One of the distinctive features of the American speech that emerged from our research is the correlation between the power distance and the internal modifiers used by American native speakers. We have already mentioned that usage of subjectivizers seems to be a cultural marker of American English speech as it was proposed by Kusevska (2012). However, the further analysis has also shown that the presence of subjectivizers is closely related to the vertical or the power distance between the interlocutors. The usage of this modifier is most frequent and with highest value only in the situations that include power distance between the interlocutors. This means that American speakers are direct, assertive, and openly state their opinions or complain toward hearers with different social power. On the other hand, the lack of this modifier in the Macedonian speech leads us to the conclusion that this cultural marker can also cause an intercultural misunderstanding.

6. Conclusion

The similar pragmatic structure of American and Macedonian complaints means that the possibility for discrepancies in the communication among these speakers is not very high. The most common form of a complaint in both languages is a complaint in which the speaker uses: questions to mitigate the circumstances under which the offence is committed, supportive elements that provide explanation or justification for the complaint, modifiers to get the interlocutor's attention, adjectives that intensify part of the proposition and intensifiers which explicitly express the speaker's negative attitude.

However, the complaining of both speakers is enriched with distinct features that act as markers of their cultural and social identities, which may consequently be the cause for miscommunication or even complete communication failure.

The Macedonian complaints feature: high use of elements to downtone the speech and to appeal to the hearer's understanding; use of adverbial sentences or modifiers that express tentativeness and high use of swear words and phrases. On the other hand, the distinct features of the American complaints are: the higher tendency (than Macedonian complaints) for employing internal modifiers as well as high and frequent use of subjectivizers, past forms and intensifiers.

All things considered, the only way toward a successful cross-cultural communication is by acknowledging our own communication style and of our interlocutor's communication style as well, so we can accommodate our language and avoid uncertainty and possible misunderstandings. The awareness of the different communication styles in both languages (especially in high severity offences) can prepare the American speakers and change their view on the possible future complaining situations, and it can also help Macedonian speakers and especially Macedonian EFL learners to be careful in intercultural communication and to adapt their speech in order not to be misunderstood.

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