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PRAGMATIC MODIFIERS ACROSS LANGUAGES: ENGLISH VERSUS MACEDONIAN APOLOGIES

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Abstract. Language is not only a system that conveys information but it is also a linguistic tool that performs actions. These utterances or acts were introduced by Austin in the foundations of Speech act theory, which were later developed by Searle and many other linguists. The focus of this paper is the speech act of apologizing or more specifically the pragmatic modifiers that interlocutors use to modify or shape the act for different purposes. The aim of the paper is to emphasize the role of pragmatic modifiers and their significant influence on the communication process itself. The comparison of two unrelated languages will help provide valuable insight into cross-cultural communication. Different languages and cultures employ similar speech acts, but vary in the type, frequency and distribution of the applied modifiers. These variations help determine broader sociocultural norms and interactional expectations. Hence the comparison of modifiers in American English and Macedonian will show how even subtle modifiers play a crucial role in shaping the appropriateness and politeness of an apology across two different speech communities. This research paper confirms that modifiers are pragmatically conditioned both by situational and socio-cultural context and highlights their significant influence over the appropriateness of the act of apologizing.

Key words: apology, pragmatic modifiers, speech acts.

1. Introduction

Apologizing is a social act present in many languages and cultures. It represents natural human behaviour and reaction in the daily communication process between interlocutors. It serves as a communication tool that establishes and maintains harmonious interpersonal relations, which consequently requires both cultural and linguistic competence that greatly help in preventing miscommunication. Although the main purpose and effect of apologies is shared across languages and cultures, the linguistic and cultural varieties among people are usually transferred through the elements used to modify these acts. Furthermore, it may also include an individual mark of the speaker on the final linguistic form of the speech act of apologizing that is derived not only from speaker's cultural background or language proficiency, but simply from personal preferences in his/her verbal

behaviour. Since these specific features that shape all types of speech acts are more prominent in the opening and closing part of a speech act, it is not that frequently analysed especially in a comparative view and with the inclusion of the Macedonian language. The focus of speech act studies is usually more on the strategies used to express the overall act and not much on the individual elements that modify it add a separate connotative meaning. However, this is especially important for learners of English as a foreign language since they usually tend to transfer the pragmatic knowledge from the native to the foreign language. Therefore, the object of this paper is to determine if native speakers of American English and native speakers of Macedonian use different types of modifiers in the act of apologizing. The analysis of authentic data in both languages enables to identify patterns that may pose a challenge for Macedonian learners of English and American learners of Macedonian. The comparative analysis of the pragmatic function of the used modifiers, as well as similarities and differences in their form and frequency, will contribute in developing learner's pragmatic competence and to achieving an appropriate and effective communication in future interaction. The study also emphasizes and confirms the importance of pragmatic competence alongside grammatical and lexical knowledge.

Apologies and Pragmatic Modifiers

Apologies are long recognized in literature as universal communicative acts, present across languages and cultures as a means of addressing social transgression and restoring interpersonal relations (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983; Trosborg, 1995). In accordance with speech act theory, apologizing is considered as an individual speech act type or i.e., a specific action performed through language use. Austin (1975) categorized the act of apologizing as a behavior due to its connection with behaviour and expressions of feelings toward the behaviour of others. On the other hand, apologies were also marked and categorized as expressive acts (Searle, 1979), whose purpose is to express a psychological state in relation to the main proposition of the act (Searle & Vanderveken, 1985). Hence, it is a speech act that "expresses perfunctorily if not genuinely, certain feelings toward the hearer" (Bach & Harnish, 1979, p.53).

The act of apologizing is usually applied as a response to a prior event or an interaction that has caused a certain offence, which makes it a post-event act. It is a speech act that re-establishes the damaged relationship between the interlocutors caused by an error, an offence or a violation (Smichkovska, 2014). The most frequently studied are the remedial apologies that represent reactions to an offence of social norms or an unsuccessful achievement of personal expectations (Fraser, 1981, p.259). The aim of each apology is to both acknowledge the speaker's responsibility for causing a certain offence and to restore the actual communication between the speaker and the hearer. Moreover, apologies are also specified as being real, which means apologies that express sincere regret for the offence; or ritual, which are apologies that simply fulfil social expectations (Goffman, 1967). Regardless of the specific aim, all apologies are successful only when the hearer is able to recognize the intent of the speaker to express regret. This notion highlights the complex structure of apologies as they often combine multiple communicative acts such as expressing regret, acknowledging responsibility, offering explanation etc. in one single speech act set. Therefore, an apology is also a multiple act or as Valkova (2013) emphasized "the speech act set status of apologies is more adequate for current communicative situations than a single speech act approach, leaving some space for culture-bound but also situation-bound variables" (p.49). Apologies also relate closely to politeness, as they constitute an act that may threaten the speaker's face while simultaneously attends to the hearer's needs (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In this regard, Ogiermann (2009) argues that "since apologies are used to restore and maintain

relationships, they presuppose a mutual interest in each other's wants, which is a central aspect of positive politeness" (p.260). Hence, learning to apologize appropriately is an important part of being communicatively competent within a speech community (Thijittang, 2010, p.43).

The speech act functions on a level that is separate from that of a sentence and cannot be equated with any single grammatical element nor a particular linguistic unit (Hymes, 2005). In fact, speech acts are rarely single acts; but typically consist of a primary communicative act (or central head act) that is frequently accompanied by additional utterances, which serve as either openings or closings. The central head act constitutes the core of the apology and carries its illocutionary force. The additions that serve as supportive moves appear before or after the head act in a form of explanations, expressions of empathy or responsibility. In addition, apologies also contain modifiers that do not introduce new actions nor information; but function as additional or overlay elements that adjust the tone, strength and the socio-pragmatic force of the apology. The modifiers have a great influence on how the hearer perceives the apology and can mitigate or intensify its effect. Consequently, modifiers are distinguished as internal and external (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) that both directly influence the pragmatic variation and the social interpretation of the apology or any other speech act. The internal modifiers appear inside the head act itself and modify the illocutionary force of the apology. They directly influence and shape the intensity and the tone of the apology, which is conducted by applying either upgraders or downgraders. Upgraders are internal modifiers that strengthen the apology and take the form of: intensifiers that heighten emotional force, commitment upgraders that express strong responsibility or future intent, expletives that express emotional emphasis and overstaters that exaggerate the severity of the regret. On the other hand, downgraders are used to reduce the force of the apology and take the form of either softeners to make the apology more polite or less direct, and fillers that ease the conversational flow and take the role as hesitation markers. Softeners include the following subtypes: downtoners that lessen intensity, understaters that minimize the offence, hedges that introduce vagueness or uncertainty. Fillers include the use of: appealers that seek the hearer's understanding, cajolers that persuade the hearer and subjectivizers that explicitly mark the speaker's personal stance or feelings.

In contrast, the external modifiers occur before or after the central head act, or i.e., as part of the opening and/or closing act; their role is to modify the context rather than the illocutionary force of the speech act. These include alerters that attract the hearer's attention, preparators that signal that an apology is forthcoming, grounders that provide an explanation or reasoning for the offence, disarmers that anticipate and attempt to mitigate possible negative reactions, and sweeteners that express friendliness or positive regard toward the hearer.

Research on cross-cultural realization of apologies, which includes the Macedonian language and context, points to considerable overlap with English-speaking norms. Smichkovska (2014) compared apology strategies used by native speakers of Australian English and speakers from North Macedonia and found no major differences in the apology realization patterns, but confirmed the influence of social parameters over the choice of strategies and modifiers in both languages. Furthermore, Smichkovska (2014) showed that apologies used by speakers in North Macedonia tend to strive toward positive politeness. Similarly, Todorovska (2018) showed that speakers' native language had limited impact on apologies produced in English as a foreign language, as both groups predominantly used acceptance of responsibility. Moreover, she concludes that "maybe the claims of differences between West cultures and our culture are a stereotype that this research disproves, at least in the given situations" (Todorovska, 2018, p. 52). Further evidence was provided by Donevska (2018), who demonstrated that native speakers and learners of English use similar apology strategies; however, Macedonian learners tend to produce longer apologies, which she attributes to pragmatic incompetence rather than a cultural difference. However, it is noticeable that the focus of the above-mentioned studies is mostly on the types of

strategies used to express the act, while little attention is paid on the actual modifiers used within the strategies. Even studies that focus only on English apologies (Botvinko-Botiuk & Koliada, 2018; Jucker , 2018; Ashraf Kaloi, Alli & Abbas, 2025) usually do not go into much detail about the types of apology modifiers.

Methodological framework

Research Design

The study employs a mixed-method analysis that combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the pragmatic behaviour in relation to the act of apologizing in Macedonian and American English. This design allows for systematic comparison of linguistic forms while also accounting for sociocultural factors and their influence on linguistic expression in apologetic situations.

Instrument

Data was collected using an anonymous open-ended Discourse Completion task that was made available through Google-forms. The DCT included three apology-eliciting scenarios designed to reflect a natural communicative situation involving different degrees of social distance and power relations. The three scenarios included: mistaking a stranger for a friend; breaking a friend's charger; and losing a book lent by a professor. Hence, the interpersonal relation varies from a stranger, then a friend to an authority figure; while the levels of imposition change from low to medium and high. Participants were asked to respond as naturally as possible to each situation.

Table 1: Description of the DCT

Speech act	Scenario	Social distance	Social status	Degree of imposition
	You mistake a stranger for your friend.	Distant	Neutral	Low severity
apology	You break your friend's mobile phone charger.	Close	Equal	Medium severity
	You lose a book that your professor lent.	Medium	unequal	High severity

Participants

The participants in the study were university students who were native speakers of the target languages. Therefore, one sample group included native speakers of Macedonian, while the other sample group included native speakers of American English. All participants shared a similar educational background, which helped control the variables related to age, academic status and language proficiency.

Data Categorization

The data collected through the DCT was analysed focusing on the applied modifiers in the apology strategies. The study does not rely on a single fixed typology, but it applies a categorization that is both theoretical and data-driven. In other words, the starting point were a few relevant categorization (House & Kasper, 1981; Holmes, 2013; Alcón Soler, Safont Jordà, & Martínez-Flor, 2001), but the conducted analysis was done using a mixed

typological framework developed mostly in relation to the empirical data. The modifiers were classified based on their structural form and pragmatic function, capturing both language-specific and culture specific patterns in Macedonian and American English. The quantitative analysis focused on the frequency and distribution of the larger categories of modifiers across the three scenarios and the two language groups. On the other hand, qualitative analysis examined how all subtypes of modifiers function pragmatically in each scenario. Finally, the combined analysis enabled to determine any correlation of statistical results with sociocultural features and offer a comprehensive account of the pragmatic behaviour in the two analysed languages.

Table 2: Classification of modifiers

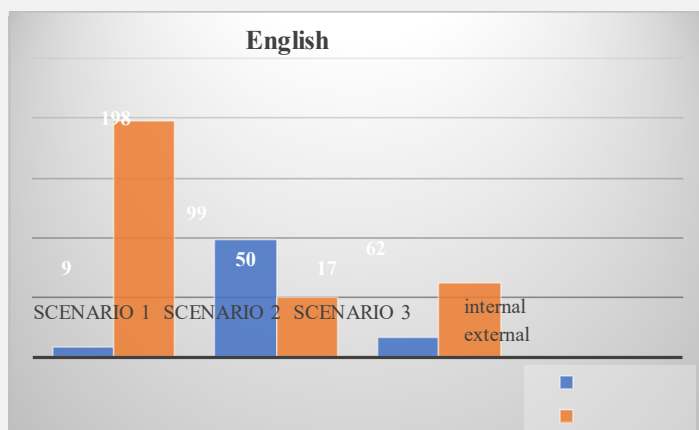
External modifiers	Internal modifiers		
Alerters	Upgraders	Downgraders	
Preparators	Intensifiers	Softeners	Fillers
Disarmers	Commitment upgraders	Downtoners	Appealers
Grounders	Expletives	Understaters	Cajole
Sweeteners	Overstaters	Hedges	Subjectivizers

Results & Analysis

The mixed-method analysis provided both overall and specific quantitative results for the preferences of speakers in using modifiers in the act of apologizing. The results indicate that both groups of speakers have a higher tendency for external modification. Moreover, the findings demonstrate that Macedonian speakers employed a higher number of modifiers than American English speakers. Specifically, Americans have used 310 external modifiers, while Macedonians have a slightly higher number of 376. In relation to the internal modifiers, Americans have almost an equal use of both subtypes of internal modifiers, while Macedonians are more prone to upgraders than downgraders in the act of apologising. However, this overall quantitative overview serves simply as an initial screening and it was followed by more in-depth analysis that correlates the speakers, the language and their patterns to the actual scenarios and their socio-contextual features.

The qualitative analysis helped define each type and subtype of modifiers applied, which were later also connected and studied in accordance with the features of each scenario situation individually. Hence, the analysis confirmed that the external modifiers in Macedonian most frequently come in the form of alerters or grounders, while in American English apologies there are most often alerters and disarmers.

Graph 1: Application of modifiers by American English speakers



Graph 1 clearly shows that the frequency and the type of modifiers change in each situation. The external modification is prevalent in scenario 1; then internal modification takes the lead in scenario 2; while the third scenario does not cause major modification of the apologies and shows a little use of external modifiers.

Examples from American respondents

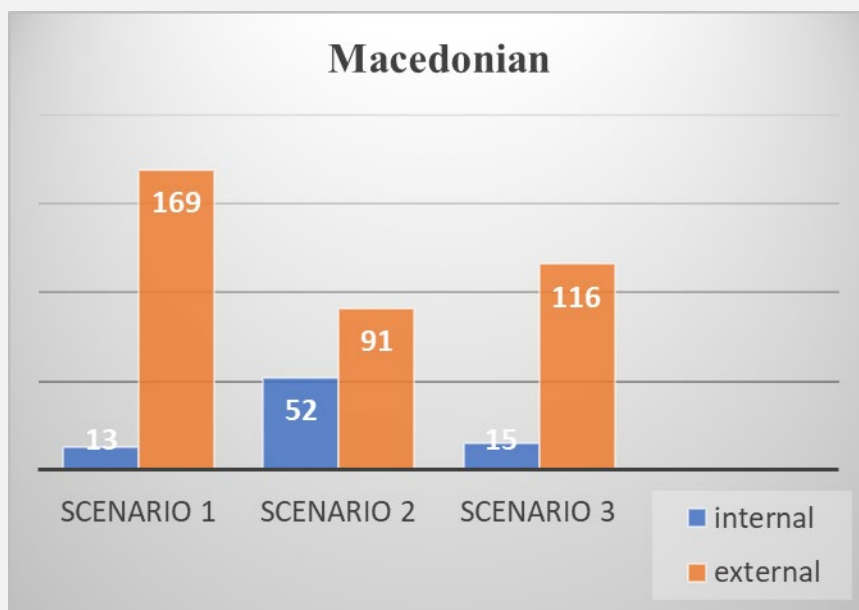
alerters: Oh; Hey; Professor; Hi; Hi, Professor...

disarmers: Sorry to bother; Oh sorry; Sorry.

softeners (downgraders): accidentally; unfortunately...

In the first scenario, American speakers display very limited use of internal modifiers, particularly softeners. In contrast, there was an extensive reliance on external modifiers that were most notably disarmers (92) instances and alerters (50 instances). This pattern suggests modification of apologies externally rather than modifying the illocutionary force of the apologetic expression itself. The second scenario shows a noticeable shift. There is an increase in the use of external modifiers with softeners (47) and understaters (47) that have equal frequency. Also, the use of disarmers decreases significantly (only 33 instances), which indicates a move toward more internal mitigation. In the third scenario, American respondents mostly employ alerters (42 instances), while other modifier types occur with minimal numbers. This suggests that the apology mostly relies on attention-getting devices rather than extensive modification.

Graph 2: Application of modifiers by native Macedonian speakers



Graph 2 presents the linguistic behaviour of Macedonian native speakers. Here it is visible that there is a significant external modification within all three situations, while internal modifiers with a slightly higher number can be noted mostly in scenario 2.

Examples from Macedonian respondents

alerters: Се извинувам; Извини; Еј; Здраво; Професоре...

[I apologize / Sorry / Hey / Hi / Professor]

grounders: Имав мала незгода; сум ја изгубил; мислев дека; грешка.

[I had a small accident / I've lost it / I thought that... / It's a mistake]

intensifiers (upgraders): Многу; премногу.

[a lot / too much]

downtoners (downgraders): Ненамерно; случајно; несакајќи;

[unintentionally / by accident / It wasn't on purpose]

Macedonian apologies are characterized by more diverse use of both internal and external modifiers mostly through intensifiers, downtoners, alerters and grounders. The first scenario shows a high frequency of alerters (92) and grounders (77), accompanied by very small number of intensifiers (6). The prominence of grounders indicates a strong tendency to provide explanations and justifications as part of the apology. Then, in the second scenario alerters remain frequent (75 instances), while downtoners and intensifiers (14 instances combined) were also present. Notably, there is a significant decline in the use of grounders (7) that suggests that this scenario requires less explicit explanation and allows more internal modification of the apology. In the third and final scenario, the Macedonian respondents rely heavily on alerters (68), grounders (38) and intensifiers (15). This pattern reflects a consistent preference for combining attention-getting and explanatory expression forms.

Discussion

The main aim of this research is to determine cross-cultural differences in the use of modifiers in apologies produced by native American English speakers and native Macedonian speakers. The findings reveal both shared pragmatic tendencies and culture-

specific preferences, which consequently confirms the influence of social and cultural features over the apologetic expression in different linguistic systems.

One of the most notable findings is the predominance of external modification or i.e., the tendency of both groups of respondents to employ external modifiers more frequently than internal modifiers across all three scenarios. This supports previous research indicating that apologies as face threatening acts, are often mitigated through supportive moves rather than direct modification of the illocutionary force (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Brown & Levinson, 1987). External modifiers allow the speaker to manage the interpersonal relations with the hearer by providing attention-getting devices, explanations or contextual framing before or after the central act of apologizing. However, the closer analysis showed that the frequency and subtype of modifiers varied depending on the social parameters and the cultural background of the interlocutors, which further highlights the importance of contextual factors in apologetic discourse.

The dominance of external modification was especially evident in the first scenario where the interlocutor is a stranger; therefore, there is a distant social relation and a neutral social status between the interlocutors, while the degree of imposition is low. Despite the shared preference for external modifiers, qualitative differences were discovered in the modifier subtypes. American respondents rely primarily on disarmers, whereas Macedonian respondents preferred grounders. This divergence reflects a difference in cultural approach toward face management. The use of disarmers shows awareness of potential negative reactions and aligns with negative politeness, which is characteristic of more individualistic cultures such as American culture (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Hofstede, 2001). On the other hand, disarmers were completely absent from the Macedonian responses. They showed a high preference for grounders, which suggest stronger orientation toward providing contextual explanation for the offence. Moreover, grounders emphasize explanation and justification, as well as accountability and involvement that is consistent with more collectivist and relationally oriented cultures like the Macedonian culture.

The second scenario further demonstrates that modifiers are not static, but highly sensitive to situational context. In this scenario with reduced social distance and equal status, both groups exhibit a clear shift toward internal modification mostly through downgrading modifiers. American respondents favoured understaters, while Macedonian respondents applied downtoners. This shift toward internal modification suggests that social closeness plays a crucial role in shaping apologies. This convergence suggests that when the social context allows for greater familiarity or reduced threat, speakers from both languages and cultures prefer to soften the apology internally rather than to rely on extensive external justification. Moreover, this was the only scenario in which the American respondents used internal modifiers more frequently than external ones. This finding is also very significant, as it is in contrast with the dominant pattern observed in the other scenarios, and also it is in a direct opposition to continuing preference of Macedonian respondents toward external modification. Overall, the modifiers in this scenario reflect the effort of the interlocutors to minimize the perceived severity of the offence, while also maintaining interpersonal harmony. From a sociocultural aspect, the determined divergence in this scenario can be explained through differing politeness orientations. Macedonian respondents belong to a culture that favours positive politeness and hence, directness is interpreted as a marker of both closeness and politeness, which consequently reduces the need for internal downtoning or softening of the apology. In contrast, American respondents belong to an individualistic culture and therefore maintain the use of politeness markers regardless of the social proximity.

The third scenario, which includes medium social distance, unequal social status and high imposition, shows another shift of the pattern that is again toward external modification.

The dominance of external modifiers is presented through alerters by American respondents, and a combination of alerters and grounders by Macedonian respondents. This pattern aligns with the tendency of Macedonian native speakers to provide explanation and justification when addressing interlocutors of higher or unknown social status that correlates with the results from the first scenario. Hence, the notions indicate that the increased social distance or formality reactivates the need for explicit hearer orientation and contextual explanation, particularly for Macedonian respondents.

Overall, the findings reveal that both cultural groups share broad structural preferences in apology modification, but they respond differently to changes in social parameters.

Social distance emerged as the most influential factor, especially in shaping the balance between internal and external modifiers. American English speakers represent a more individualistic culture and tend to prioritize the interlocutor's autonomy. Their apologies are frequently externally modified to alert the hearer and internally modified to downtone the apology, specifically in communication with friends. This linguistic pattern minimizes the imposition and avoids excessive emotional involvement, which aligns with negative politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In contrast, the Macedonian apologies are characterized by preference for external modification that simultaneously alerts the hearer and justifies the offence, particularly through extensive use of grounders. This is especially prominent in interactions with strangers, where explanations and justifications serve to establish trust and reaffirm social norms. This behaviour reflects a collectivist orientation, where maintaining group harmony and demonstrating responsibility take precedence over minimizing imposition (Hofstede, 2001).

Furthermore, grounders were confirmed as a distinctive feature of Macedonian apologetic expression. The tendency to provide reasons or explanations positions the speaker as an accountable member of the social group that correlates with the positive politeness strategies that emphasize involvement and solidarity (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Hence, the frequency of grounders also suggests a communicative style that values directness, transparency and relational engagement. In addition, Macedonian respondents also show higher tolerance for directness, which further differentiates their apology style from the one of the American respondents. This finding is consistent with cross-cultural research (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) that shows how speakers from collectivist high-context cultures often favour explicit contextualization over minimalistic mitigation.

Limitations

The study has certain limitations. The reliance on elicited data may not fully capture spontaneous apology behaviour, and the number of analysed situations restricts the generalizability of the findings. Future research can incorporate naturally occurring discourse and expand the social variables, in order to further explore the interrelations between sociocultural norms and pragmatic choices of interlocutors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings indicate that both American and North Macedonian respondents share a general preference for external modification in the act of apologizing, but they also differ in their typical patterns of use. Americans tend to rely more on modifiers that mitigate negative reactions, while North Macedonians more frequently use modifiers that provide explanation and contextual support. These tendencies highlight the underlying cultural influence on pragmatic behaviour, particularly in relation to face management and social distance. Although the differences were not statistically significant, the consistent

qualitative patterns across different situations suggest meaningful cross-cultural variation in the realization of apologies.

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