

# Contrastive Studies as Methodology: An example with the pragmatics of apology and thanks

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## Abstract

Contrastive studies can be said to be one of the important methodologies to discover the universality and unique of languages and or language education. Nevertheless, if the objects of comparison are not chosen carefully, the exercise will just simply become a list of similarities and differences. This paper introduces examples of typological classification at the pragmatics level, and argues for contrastive methodology in contrastive studies that analyze speech acts set of apology and thanking.

## Key words

Pragmatics, Apology, Thanking, Speech Acts, Contrastive Analysis

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## 1. Challenges of contrastive studies

The application of contrastive studies in linguistics to language education is said to have started in the 17<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>. Contrasting the learner's mother tongue and the target language as a means of predicting language transfer and difficulties in language acquisition, and analyzing materials and pedagogy plays an important role till today. Furthermore, contrastive studies is also a useful methodology not only as a goal of foreign language education based on the mother tongues, but also as a goal of unraveling the universality and uniqueness of the language.

However, many contrastive studies are mere listings of the similarities and differences between languages. Inoue (2002:3) explains that such studies "only look at the descriptions of similarities and differences between languages, and does not evaluate fairly the true significance of comparing languages. ... even the significance of contrastive studies in language education is purely evaluated from the perspective of being the source of information about similarities and differences".

Furthermore, it is also difficult to decide what to compare, at the word or sentence level, or language patterns. Just as a word in a particular language may not

have an exactly similar word in another language, some aspects of a particular expression or linguistic behavior in a target language may be more or sometimes less than the original expression. In fact, those aspects that exceed the original expression are important to understand the differences in social and cultural customs that make up the linguistic background and often express the features of the society and culture, and not knowing them may lead to conflicts and other serious problems.

For example, in contrastive studies in pragmatics and Japanese language education, discourse completion tasks and role plays are often used as a method of collecting data. Usually, when setting task items and situations, one language is set as the standard for the comparison. For the language not set as the standard, there is a possibility of missing out on certain phenomena or features in other situations. Such risks are similarly found in role plays. In contrastive studies for language education, empirical studies matching actual situations of target language contribute somewhat to language education, but can only be said to be a reference for language education. When doing contrastive studies for the purpose of discovering the universality and uniqueness of a language, it is

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to Kumagai (2002:21) and Krzeszowski (1990).

important to analyze the features of words, expressions and areas in both languages before choosing the objects to be contrasted.

This paper will first chronologically analyze the discourse act “apology”, a concept widely examined in pragmatics, then combine the discourse analyses in “apology” and “thanks” and introduce an example of contrastive studies for pragmatics-based typological categorization.

## 2. Overview of apology studies

Apologizing to someone for one’s action is something that we do regularly on a daily basis, and has been the focus of research in various fields. It has been researched as a concept of reciprocity in anthropology by M. Sahlins’ (1984 (1972)), and as a face and communication strategy in social psychology<sup>2</sup>.

In linguistics, apology was seen as one of the speech acts in Searle’s (1969)<sup>3</sup> Theory of Speech Acts, paving the way for the development of apology studies in the western languages. The Theory of Speech Acts conceptualizes apology and makes it universal, and by regulating the conditions whereby a speech act is suitably carried out, characterizes each speech act and shows the conditions for apology and thanks. The following are the appropriate conditions for apology:

{Apologizing}

1. Propositional act : S expresses regret for a past act A of S.
2. Preparatory condition : S believes that A was not in H’s best interest.
3. Sincerity condition : Speaker regrets act A.
4. Essential condition : Counts as an apology for act A.

Subsequently, situations of apology, expressions, strategies, apology discourse, linguistic behavior of apology, etc. came to be researched in the fields of discourse studies, sociolinguistics, and so on. Representatives of such research are Blum-Kulka and Kasper (1989). In Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory, apology act is classified as negative politeness.

Thanking has also been seen as a speech act and researched independently from apology. The appropriate conditions for thanking are as follows:

{Thanking}

1. Propositional act : P is a past action by X.
2. Preparatory condition : X believes that the act was in Y’s best interest.
3. Sincerity condition : X feels grateful for Y’s act.
4. Essential condition : X expresses his/her emotion for Y’s act.

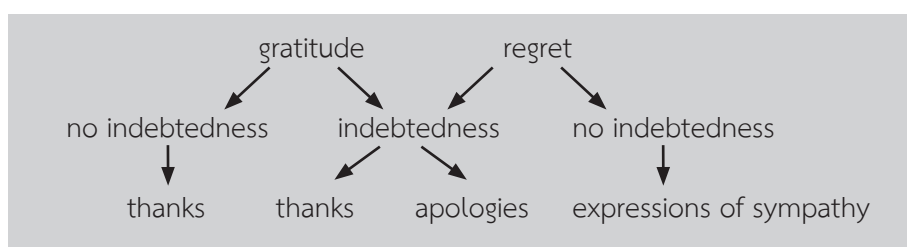
<sup>2</sup> Sueda (1993) et al.

<sup>3</sup> Refer to Searle (1969) for more on the Theory of Speech Acts.

The Theory of Speech Acts is developed for the English language. In English, the act of apologizing to someone for one's action and the act of thanking someone for someone's action are seen to be separate linguistic behavior with different expressions and situations, and have been researched by different researchers.

### 3. Combining research on apology and thanks

Coulmas (1981) linked research on apology and thanks and proposed the following model for whether an act of apology or thanks is carried out based on the presence of indebtedness:



Based on this model, the separation of expressions of apology and thanks in Japanese situations of showing appreciation can be explained.

Set phrase expressions for expressions of apology and thanks have been categorized by Sakuma (1983), Okutsu & Numata (1985), Kindaichi (1987) and Moriyama (1999) etc. in Japanese studies.

Based on the conditions in the Theory of Speech Acts, Yamanashi (1986) points out that for apology and thanks, whether the subject in question is the speaker or the listener, and what emotional state the speaker has toward the act and how he/she expresses it, are acts to contrast. It is clear

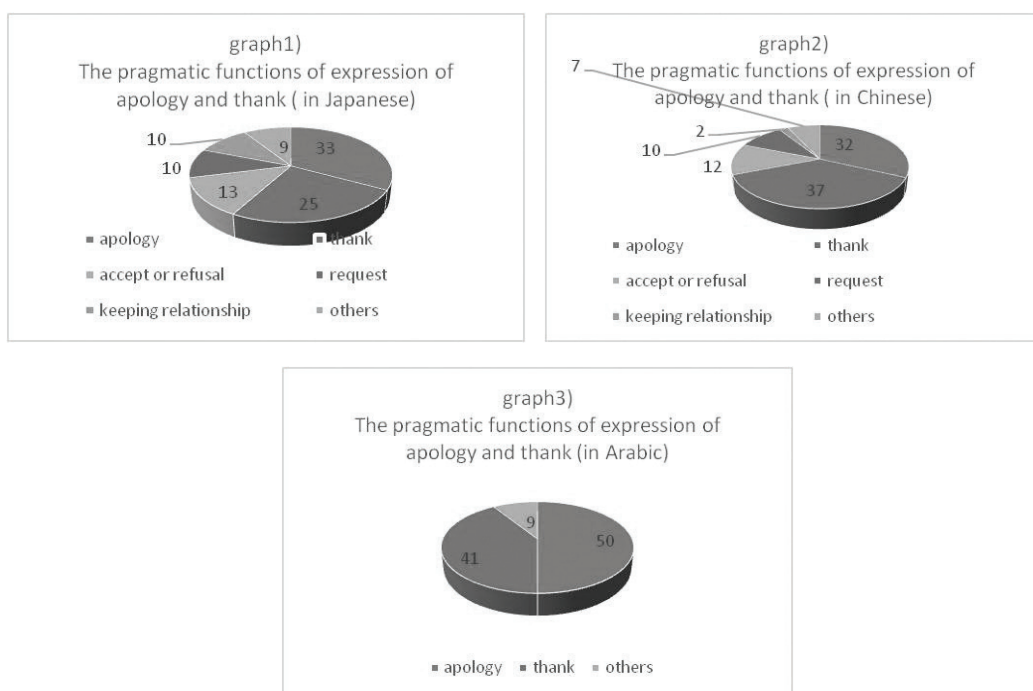
when referenced to the appropriate conditions for apology and thanks mentioned above.

In addition, Nakata (1989) analyzed scenario data for apology and thanks in Japanese and English, and points out that while the targets of apology and thanks are clearly divided in English, apology and thanking acts are linked along a continuum in Japanese. Nakata (1989) explains that while apologizing for one's act and showing appreciation for someone's act are two separate entities in English, a positive act performed for oneself by someone is seen as a negative act for the performer in Japanese.

#### 4. Contrastive studies on apology and thanks

In order to comprehensively observe both types of situations where apology and thanking expressions are used, Taniguchi (2009), following the research on apology and thanks introduced in 3., selected 400 discourses respectively which are close to natural discourse (130 for Arabic) from scenes where apology and thanks are shown in Japanese, Chinese<sup>4</sup> and Arabic

(Egyptian dialect) movies, TV dramas, and analyzed the apology and thank discourse data. Comparing the data of the three languages, it was found that Japanese and Arabic expressions of apology are used much more than expressions of thanks and have more functions. On the other hand, Chinese expressions of thanks are used more often and have more complicated pragmatic functions.



Figures 1 – 3 Show the expressions of apology and thanks in Japanese, Chinese and Arabic grouped according to different pragmatic functions.

<sup>4</sup> Chinese data used in this paper is Chinese used in Taiwan.

The three languages also have a respective expression which has many pragmatic functions including apology and thanks functioning to maintain smooth human relationships. They are “sumimasen” in Japanese, “bu-hao-yisi” in Chinese and “maʕliʃʃ” in Arabic.

The following is an example from Japanese.

It is a scene where a city office staff recommended to a woman visiting the city office to settle her divorce procedures to sit near a heater.

E.g. 1)

職員「あんた、寒いでしょ。こっちきてあったまんなさい。」

(Staff: You must be cold. Come sit here and warm yourself.)

堂々「すいません。」

(Man: Sorry (sumimasen).)

職員「さあどうぞ。」

(Staff: Here. Please.)

堂々「すいません。」

(Man: Sorry (sumimasen)).

- Konshu tsumaga rikon shimasu<sup>5</sup>

When the staff recommended to the man to move closer to the heater, he used “sumimasen” to show thanks, but because he didn’t move, the expression is seen as a

rejection of the staff’s recommendation. When the staff recommended again, he used “sumimasen” and moved closer to the heater. The second time is thus seen as an acceptance of the recommendation. Thus, this situation shows that the Japanese “sumimasen” may not necessarily be an acceptance of a speaker’s good turn and one has to rely on what the speaker does after the utterance to decide what meaning it takes on.

The next example is a conversation between a permanent staff and a contract staff in a company.

It is a scene whereby he is the only contract staff among all the others who has renewed his contract.

E.g. 2) 正規社員「今日はなんか静かだねえ。」

(Perm staff: It’s especially quiet in our office, today.)

派遣社員「すいません。僕だけちゃっかり契約更新しちゃって。」

(Contract staff: Sorry (sumimasen). Only I renewed my contract.)

- Haken no Hinkaku<sup>6</sup>

Even though the other contract staff voluntarily terminated their contract and thus this contract staff has no need to apologize, he still apologized (by saying “sumimasen”) as he felt uncomfortable at being the only one to

<sup>5</sup> Fuji-TV, script by Yoshida Tomoko 2007.

<sup>6</sup> TBS-TV, script by Kitagawa Eriko 2007.

renew his. This utterance is believed to be not expressing apology or thanks, but an intention to maintain peace and harmony with the surrounding. In actual fact, the Japanese “sumimasen” not only expresses apology and thanks as seen in examples 1) and 2), but is also used to repair relationships. We can get a glimpse of Japanese sensitivity in the way it is used.

“Bu-hao-yisi” in Chinese and “maʕliʕʕ” in Arabic are like the Japanese “sumimasen” in that they are also used to patch up relationships that have gone sour between different groups of people.

In the following Chinese example, the hotel staff used “bu-hao-yisi” before he went on to explain the hotel rates to the guest. This is believed to be an act of consideration for the guest because “bu-hao-yisi” can be considered to be a slight apology before an explanation of the hotel rates, something which is quite difficult to say.

E.g. 3) 均昊 “先生小姐、不好意思，本飯店的收費是以天計算的，即使是休息兩個小時價格還是不變。”

(Hotel staff: Miss, I’m sorry (bu-hao-yisi), but we charge on a daily basis. So even if you stay 2 hours you have to pay for 1 day.)

- “Wanzi bian Qinwa<sup>7</sup>” in Chinese

The following is an example from Arabic. The son used “maʕliʕʕ” as a slight apology to pacify his father, who was excited by an extraordinary event.

E.g. 4) Son: ʔasʕil il-imtiḥa:n gih mufa:ʕiʔ,,wi,wi,,,  
(It was a sudden test, and..)

Father: e:h jaʕni e:h gih mufa:ʕiʔ jaʕni ...  
(What do you mean by “a sudden test”?)

Mother: maʕliʕʕ ya raʔu:f, haddi nafs-ak,, maʕliʕʕ.

(It’s all right, Raouf. Calm down. It’s all right.)

Father: ʔistanni ʔinti lau samaḥti.

(Wait, please.)

- “ʕala gussiti<sup>8</sup>” in Arabic

These expressions of apology and thanks not only function pragmatically as requests or rejections, but also function to maintain smooth human relationships and share a feature of being used as adjacency pairs.

Corresponding adjacency pair

e.g.1 A “sumimasen”

B “sumimasen” (Japanese)

e.g.2 A “bu-hao-yisi”

B “bu-hao-yisi” (Chinese)

e.g.3 A “maʕliʕʕ”

B “maʕliʕʕ” (Arabic)

They are not obligatory.

<sup>7</sup> San-li TV script by Ruo Cai-juan 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Script *Ta-mir ʔibrahim* 2012.

Unlike English, German, and French, which see a positive act for oneself as separate from a negative act for the other person and thus the use of respectively different expressions, Japanese, Chinese and Arabic use apology expressions to not only express requests and rejections, but also to repair rough relationships.

Based on the concept of topology<sup>9</sup>, Taniguchi (2013) attempted a classification of languages that see apology and thanks as coordinate phases (Japanese, Taiwanese Chinese, Egyptian Arabic) and those that don't (English, German, French).

### **5. From a Western language approach to an Asian language approach**

Contrastive studies can be said to be one of the important methodologies to discover the universality and unique of languages and or language education. Nevertheless, if the objects of comparison are not chosen carefully, the exercise will just simply become a list of similarities and differences.

This paper has argued for the combination of apology research from English which has treated it separately from research on thanking, with research on thanking in Japanese, Chinese and Arabic, through examples of typological classification to gain new perspectives.

Linguistics studies tend to depend on the huge amount of research on English linguistics when looking for approaches. Nevertheless, when contrasting languages which are typologically and socio-culturally different, there is no necessity to approach it from a western language perspective. It may be possible that new perspectives can be gained from the results of research on the individual language accumulated over the years. Hints for new research can be found when we carefully observe features of the two languages as well as the social and cultural background of the language when comparing the target expressions or language behavior.

<sup>9</sup> It is the mathematical study of shapes and spaces. It is a major area of mathematics concerned with the most basic properties of space, such as connectedness, continuity and boundary. It is the study of properties that are preserved under continuous deformations. For the application of topology to linguistics research, refer to Moriguchi (2004).



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