

"I'm really sorry that I disappointed you": A local grammar of apology

Hang Su (Beihang University, China)

This paper extends the concept of local grammar (Hunston & Sinclair 2000) to speech act studies (Austin 1962; Searle 1969). The reason for doing this is that, while Butler (2004: 158) has noted that "rather than a single general grammar, we might end up with a set of local grammars for particular areas defined by their communicative functions in the discourse", very few studies have investigated empirically the possibility of doing so. Since speech acts are generalisations of communicative functions, it is arguable that an investigation into local grammars of speech acts would help us to explore the feasibility of developing a set of local grammars to account for language used in social interactions. This study therefore presents a preliminary investigation into local grammars of speech acts, focusing specifically on apologising. The primary aim is to develop a local grammar of apology and, based on which, to further explore the possibility of using local grammars to account adequately for speech acts; and the ultimate aim is to explore the general applicability of local grammars in linguistic description and explanation.

Simply put, local grammar is an alternative approach, as opposed to general or traditional grammars, to the description and theorising of language in use. The defining features of local grammar include, first, each local grammar deals with one meaning or function only, and second, it involves mapping functional elements on to formal/pattern elements, thus facilitating the establishment of the connection between form and function in interactive contexts. Third, local grammar takes into account the functions language fulfils in social contexts and analyses each discourse unit in terms that are related directly to its discourse function; and as such, local grammar is in essence a functional description of language in use. To date, local grammars have been applied to the study of, for example, definition (Barnbrook 2002), evaluation (Bednarek 2008; Hunston & Sinclair 2000; Su 2015), disclaimers (Cheng & Ching 2016), and request (Su 2017). Additionally, Warren and Leung (2016) also extends local grammars to describe patterns of co-selection found in collocational frameworks. In general, what these studies have shown is that local grammars can provide a more systematic and comprehensive description of one particular meaning or function, which indicates the significance of the construction of local grammars.

The other framework this study draws on is speech act theory which generally means that in saying something we are also doing something. The particular type of speech acts being focused on is that of apologising; this is because: first, apology is a ritual work that is important for maintaining interpersonal rapport as well as for restoring social equilibrium and harmony; and second, many studies have shown that they are realised by more or less fixed, recurring patterns, which makes it relatively easier to maximally identify instances of apologies in a corpus.

The corpus used in this study is compiled of transcripts of the first seven seasons of the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*. Transcripts of sitcoms are used in the present study partly because it is very difficult to get sufficient amount of data by

recording conversations in real contexts, and more importantly, because conversations between the characters in sitcoms have high similarities with our daily or casual conversation in which the speech act of apologising is frequently performed (cf. Quaglio 2009). The corpus of The Big Bang Theory compiled (henceforward CBBT) comprises 159 texts and has 485,602 tokens. The corpus was uploaded to Sketch Engine (Kilgarrieff et al 2004) for further processing.

This study focuses on apology expressions containing conventionalised forms of apologies. The rationale behind this is that “[a]pologies are generally made up of a small repertoire of relatively fixed expressions representing verbs (*apologize, excuse, pardon*), adjectives (*sorry, afraid*) and nouns (*pardon*) and their expansions, modifications” (Aijmer 1996: 84). Drawing on insights from previous investigation into apology (Aijmer 1996; Blum-Kulka *et al.* 1989; Deutschmann 2003; Jucker & Taavitsainen 2008), this study uses the following key terms to search and extract instances of apology in the CBBT; the forms and their quantitative information are given in Table 1.

The analyses are divided into six sets, according to their similarities and degree of complexity. Table 2 presents an overview of the local grammar patterns of apology identified, with an example given for each pattern. It can be seen that strategies for apologies can be divided into two broad categories, i.e. making apologies and seeking forgiveness. Furthermore, the quantitative information suggests that the former is the typical way of apologising.

Based on the analyses, we can summarise the set of functional labels that are needed for a local grammar analysis of apology (Table 3). It should be admitted, though, that it is not clear whether these labels are comprehensive and sufficient enough for analysing all kinds of apology expressions, as this study has only investigated apology expressions containing conventionalised forms. Nevertheless, since many studies have shown that realisations of apologies are highly conventionalised (Aijmer 1996; Deutschmann 2003), it is reasonably confident that the key terms listed in Table 1 would enable us to identify maximally instances of apologies. This further indicates that these labels would be able to account for most apology expressions in real contexts, because they are not thought-up, but proposed on the basis of analysing instances containing those key terms.

To conclude, the study proposed that a local grammar approach would be useful to account for speech acts. It has reported an investigation into the local grammar of apology, which, we believe, has amassed sufficient evidence to show the possibility and feasibility of developing a set of local grammars to account more adequately for speech acts. Two characteristic advantages of local grammars are particularly worth recapitulating. First, local grammars use context-specific functional element to analyse each corresponding formal element; the resulting description is therefore transparent and a real functional account of language in use (Hunston & Sinclair 2000). Second, local grammars are simpler, compared with general grammars, in that each local grammar deals with only one meaning or discourse function. In the case of speech acts, each local grammar accounts for one particular speech act. Although this indicates the loss of generalisability of the description, this is compensated for by the gains of cumulative coverage achieved by a set of local grammars. An extension of this argument is that local grammars are indeed of general applicability in linguistic description and explanation.

Table 1. Apology terms and their frequency

| Item | Realisation | Frequency |
|--------------|---|-------------------|
| SORRY | <i>sorry</i> | 197 |
| | <i>I/we v-link sorry</i> | 295 |
| | <i>I/we v-link sorry for/about/that/to-inf.</i> | 90 |
| | <i>sorry about/that/to-inf.</i> | 44 |
| | <i>I/we v-link intensifier sorry</i> | 41 |
| | <i>I/we v-link intensifier sorry for/about/that</i> | 12 |
| | | Subtotal: 679 |
| EXCUSE | <i>excuse me</i> | 194 |
| | <i>will/can you excuse me/us/sb</i> | 16 |
| | <i>excuse me for</i> | 2 |
| | Subtotal: 212 | |
| APOLOGIZE/SE | <i>I/we (v-link) apologize/se</i> | 15 |
| | <i>I/we (v-link) apologize/se for</i> | 13 |
| | <i>I/we (v-link) apologize/se to NP</i> | 3 |
| | Subtotal: 31 | |
| APOLOGY | <i>my apologies</i> | 11 |
| | <i>My apologies for</i> | 2 |
| | <i>My apologies to NP</i> | 1 |
| | Subtotal: 14 | |
| FORGIVE | <i>(please) forgive me</i> | 8 |
| | <i>forgive me for ...</i> | 4 |
| | <i>forgive my (language/crude penmanship)</i> | 2 |
| | Subtotal: 14 | |
| REGRET | <i>I regret something or not doing something</i> | 8 |
| | Subtotal: 8 | |
| AFRAID | <i>I'm afraid ...</i> | 7 |
| | Subtotal: 7 | |
| PARDON | <i>pardon me</i> | 4 |
| | <i>(I) beg your pardon</i> | 1 |
| | Subtotal: 5 | |
| | | TOTAL: 970 |

Table 2. An overview of local grammar patterns of apology

| Analyses | Patterns | Number |
|-----------------|--|----------------------|
| Set 1 | Apologising e.g. <i>sorry</i> | 408 |
| | Apologising + Specification e.g. <i>sorry for being late</i> | 48 |
| | Apologising + Apologisee e.g. <i>my apologies to you all</i> | 1 |
| | | <i>Subtotal: 457</i> |
| Set 2 | Apologiser + Hinge + Apologising e.g. <i>we're sorry</i> | 305 |
| | Apologiser + Hinge + Intensifier + Apologising e.g. <i>I'm really sorry</i> | 38 |
| | | <i>Subtotal: 343</i> |
| Set 3 | Apologiser + Hinge + Apologising + Specification e.g. <i>I'm afraid we can't authorize that</i> | 111 |
| | Apologiser + Hinge + Intensifier + Apologising + Specification e.g. <i>I'm truly sorry for what happened</i> | 15 |
| | | <i>Subtotal: 126</i> |
| Set 4 | Apologiser + Apologising e.g. <i>I apologize</i> | 5 |
| | Apologiser + Apologising + Specification e.g. <i>I apologize for my earlier outburst</i> | 5 |
| | Apologiser + Intensifier + Apologising + Specification e.g. <i>I do regret not following up ...</i> | 1 |
| | | <i>Subtotal: 11</i> |
| Set 5 | Apologiser + Hinge + Apologising + Apologisee e.g. <i>I wanted to apologize to the two of you</i> | 3 |
| | | <i>Subtotal: 3</i> |
| Set 6 | Apologisee + Hinge + Forgiveness-seeking + Apologiser e.g. <i>(hope) you can forgive me</i> | 16 |
| | Forgiveness-seeking e.g. <i>forgive me</i> | 8 |
| | Forgiveness-seeking + Apologiser + Specification e.g. <i>excuse me for being so bold</i> | 6 |
| | | <i>Subtotal: 30</i> |
| | | TOTAL: 970 |

Table 3. Functional labels for analysing apology

| Element | Explanation | Example |
|---------------------|--|---|
| Apologiser | The one who apologises | <i>I am sorry.</i> |
| Apologising | The elements that realise apologies | <i>I apologize.</i> |
| Forgiveness-seeking | The action of seeking forgiveness | <i>Please forgive me</i> |
| Apologisee | To whom the apology is made to | <i>Just apologize to him.</i> |
| Intensifier | The elements that upgrade the degree of regret | <i>I am so sorry.</i> |
| Specification | The elements that specify the reason for an apology | <i>I am sorry for what I said.</i> |
| Hinge | The elements that link different functional elements | <i>I am really sorry about this.</i> |

References

- Aijmer, K. (1996). *Conversational Routines in English*. London & New York: Longman.
- Austin, J. (1962). *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Barnbrook, G. (2002). *Defining Language: A Local Grammar of Definition Sentences*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Bednarek, M. (2008). *Emotion Talk Across Corpora*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Blum-Kulka, S., House, J. & Kasper, G. (Eds.). (1989). *Cross-cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Butler, C. (2004). Corpus studies and functional linguistics theories. *Functions of Language*, 11(2), 147–186.
- Cheng, W. & Ching, T. (2016). 'Not a guarantee of future performance': The local grammar of disclaimers. *Applied Linguistics*. DOI:10.1093/applin/amw006.
- Deutschman, M. (2003). *Apologising in British English*. Umeå, Sweden: Umeå University.
- Hunston, S. & Sinclair, J. (2000). A local grammar of evaluation. In S. Hunston & G. Thompson (Eds.), *Evaluation in Text* (pp. 74–101). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jucker, A. & Taavitsainen, I. (2008). Apologies in the history of English: Routinized and lexicalized expressions of responsibility and regret. In A. Jucker & I. Taavitsainen (Eds.), *Speech Acts in the History of English* (pp. 229–443). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Quaglio, P. (2009). *Television Dialogue: The Sitcom Friends vs. Natural Conversation*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Su, H. (2015). Judgement and Adjective Complementation Patterns in Biographical Discourse: A Corpus Study. Unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Birmingham.
- Su, H. (2017). Local grammars of speech acts: An exploratory study. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 111, 72–83.
- Warren, M. & Leung, L. (2016). Do collocational frameworks have local grammars? *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 21(1), 1–27.