POLITENESS FORMULAE AS CONVERSATIONAL ROUTINE IN ENGLISH DISCOURSE

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Our knowledge of verbal routines, of how they are performed, what part they play in the speech economy of a community and how they affect its linguistic system is in the focus of Language study. Prefabricated linguistic expressions, thanks and apologies among them, are of special interest for many researchers, because the production of ever new sentences, by no means unique, is not the only activity of which our everyday interaction consists. Rather, a great deal of communicative activity consists of enacting routines making use of prefabricated linguistic units in a well-known and generally accepted manner.

Key words: conversational routines, discourse, speech acts of politeness, social conventions.

In recent times, it has been widely discussed in sociolinguistics, pragmatics, speech act theory, and discourse analysis that human’s everyday speech is to a great extent routinized. We greet and bid farewell to one another, introduce ourselves and others, exchange wishes, make requests, ask for advice of information, report on what we did, and announce what we are about to do, apologize and express gratitude, the latter occurring especially frequent. As similar speech situations recur, speakers make use of similar and sometimes identical expressions, which have proved to be functionally appropriate. Thus, language use is always characterized by equilibrium between the novel and the familiar.

1. Conversational Routines

In every society there are standardized communication situations in which its members react in automatic manner. Gratitude and apology routines reflect a conception of a social system, and their importance for socialization as well as secondary acculturation is quite obvious because they are tools which individuals employ in order to relate to others in an accepted way.

It is not surprising, therefore, that child discourse is one of the domains of research where ‘thanks and apologies’ routines have been given special attention. It was proved by Bates (1976:292), Garvey (1977:43) and Ervin-Tripp (1977:168) that children acquire a repertoire of pragmatic ‘thanks and apologies’ idioms to perform a number of communicative functions before they are capable of forming structurally and conventionally correct sentences. These routines are learned en bloc, and, as Garvey (1977:43) observes, are available at an early age. Children also learn how to gain control of the sequencing of moves in conversation (Schegloff 1968). As far as the sequential organization of conversation is routinized, it is only natural that children acquire such sequencing routines as thanks and apologies.

‘Thanks and apologies’ routine formulae abound in everyday conversation and we shall regard them as highly conventionalized prepatterned expressions whose occurrence is tied to more or less standardized communication situations.

According to Webster’s New World Dictionary routine is “a regular, more or less unvarying procedure, customary, prescribed, or habitual, as of business or daily life.” The Oxford English Dictionary defines routine as “a regular course of procedure; a more or less mechanical unvarying performance of certain acts or duties.” Clearly, according to these definitions, routine can be found in a great variety of human practices. Wherever repetition leads to automatization, we could call a performance a routine. Let us take examples:

1) Suddenly I felt depressed, longing for something I felt was forever beyond me. I got to my feet.

"Thank you, Doctor," I said automatically. "Now you can return to your interrupted lunch. I'm... sorry I had to disturb you."

"One of the hazards of my profession," he returned formally, "as of course you must know (Hughes. Nurse at Golden Water, p.73).

2) “[…] Thank you, Dr. Frederick,” I returned crisply, restraining my laughter. I looked at Liam Rogers.

"Thank you again, Doctor. Good-bye” (Hughes. Nurse at Golden Water, p.75).

As indicated in the two examples, a gratitude formula “Thank you” and an apology formula “I'm sorry” are linguistic conversations and routines used automatically, out of habit, by the speaker to terminate the talk with the doctor, and as such are essentially a social phenomenon.

Excessive currency of the mentioned routines corrupts expressiveness and diminishes meaningfulness. Investigation of what is called the contact or phatic function of speech (Malinowsky 1923; Laver 1975) revealed a high recurrence of stereotyped patterns of behaviour of which stereotyped phrases are internal ingredients. Apart from Many thanks and
apologies, I’m sorry, I have to…, phrases such as Good to see you! How are you? Take care! etc. (for some further English examples see e.g. Quirk et al., 1972:411 ff.) are often perceived as hackneyed expressions having lost their expressiveness. They don’t lack meaning in a strict sense altogether, as Malinowsky (op. cit.) seems to have assumed; but it is common knowledge in semantics that frequency of occurrence and meaningfulness are inversely related; thus, as they are used more and more they mean less and less (Chao 1968:73). Relative frequency of occurrence can therefore be considered as intrinsic feature of linguistic units. Obviously, it is closely related to the usefulness of expressions to speakers in recurrent situations.

2. Politeness Formulae

Some observers as it has already been noted above relate thanks and apologies to general theories of ritual, others to a general theory of politeness (Leech 1980:24-35, Leech 1983:125, Levinson 1983:240) or to the notion of “face” (Brown, Levinson 1978:66). The latter needs to be explained in detail. According to these scholars, “face” is a public self-image that every member of the society wants to claim for himself and which exists in two related aspects: a) negative face and b) positive face. These two components of face are defined differently in terms of their semantics: negative face as the want of every ‘competent adult member’ that his actions be unimpeached by others and positive face as the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others (Brown, Levinson 1978:66).

In other words, by negative face we mean the basic claim to a person’s privacy (territories), personal preserves, rights to non-distraction, i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition, whereas by positive face we mean the positive self-image or ‘personality’ (with desire to be appreciated or approved of) claimed by interactants. Thus “face” is tide up with notions of being embarrassed or humiliated, with something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost (‘losing face’), maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction. In general, people cooperate and assume each other’s cooperation in maintaining face in interaction. That is, normally everyone face depends on everyone else’s being maintained, and since people can be expected to defend their faces if threatened, and in defending their own to threaten others’ faces, it is in general in every participant’s best interest to maintain each other’s face, that is to act in ways that assure the other participants, and conform to conventional expectations.

Thanks and apologies primarily pertain to notions of positive and negative face and, respectively, to positive and negative politeness. ‘Thanks’ formulae concern the most salient aspect of the coparticipant’s personality in interaction - the desire to be ratified, understood, appreciated, liked or admired, whereas ‘apologies’ formulae concern the formal politeness of non-imposition, i.e. the want of every competent adult member that his actions be unimpeached by others (ibid., p.66).

‘Thanks’ positive-politeness strategy is oriented toward the positive face of the listener, the positive self-image that he claims for himself. By and large, “thanks” positive politeness refers to the service done by the addressee in interests of the addressee / requester and as such is result-based. ‘Apology’ negative-politeness strategy is oriented mainly toward partially satisfying listener’s negative face, his basic want to maintain claims of territory and self-determination. ‘Apology’ negative politeness strategy, thus, is essentially avoidance-based, and realizations of negative-politeness strategy consist in assurance that the speaker recognizes and respects the addressee’s negative-face wants and will not (or will only minimally) interfere with the addressee’s freedom of action. Hence ‘apology’ negative politeness is characterized by self-effacement, formality and restraint, with attention to the listener’s self-image, centering on his want to be unimpeached. Face-threatening acts are redressed with apologies for interfering or transgressing, with linguistic and non-linguistic deference (ibid., p.75).

For negative politeness the speaker may do very elaborate apologies with enormous syntactic complex of a profusion of conjoined sentences and adverbial clauses by means of which he apologizes, expresses reluctance, gives deference, and belittles his own incapacities. For example:

3) I’m terribly sorry to bother you with a thing like this and in normal circumstances I wouldn’t dream of it, since I know you’re very busy, but I’m simply unable to do it myself, so… (Brown. Levinson 1978:99).

Similar other apology-politeness formulae can be:

4) Look, I’m terribly sorry to bother you but would there be any chance of your lending me just enough money to get a railway ticket to get home. I must have dropped my purse and I just don’t know what to do (Brown, Levinson 1978:86).

5) I’m awfully sorry to bother you and I wouldn’t but I’m in an awful fix, so I wondered if by any chance you could lend me some money? (Brown, Levinson 1978:86).
Other politeness formulae are:

Look Harry, I’m awfully sorry to bother you but I Hey wonder if you would just possibly do me a small My God, favour (Brown, Levinson 1978:87).

For the same purpose, less sophisticated apology politeness formulae are as follows:

Excuse me, would you by any chance... or Excuse me, sir, would it be all right if I... or If don’t mind me asking, where did you...(Brown, Levinson 1978:85,98).

Let us consider the examples:

6) A famous excuse! You ought to have known me;

I knew you, though you were going ahead like a steam-engine. Are the police after you? (Bronte. The Professor, p.31).

7) “I beg your pardon.”

Gatsby’s butter was suddenly standing beside us.

“Miss Baker?” he inquired. “I beg your pardon, but Mr. Gatsby would like to speak to you alone.”

“Yes, Madame” (Fitzgerald. The Great Gatsby, p.54).

By means of unusual “A famous excuse” (6) and very formal “I beg your pardon” (7) the speakers in the both examples recognize and respect the addressee’s freedom of action and apologize for interfering it. Both examples are cases of “apology” negative politeness on the part of the intruder and are characterized by self-effacement, formality and by respect to the listeners’ self-images to their wants to be unimpeded.

Let us take two more examples, this time with positive politeness formulae of gratitude.

8) “I’ll telephone for a taxi to take you home, and while you’re waiting you and Jordan better go in the kitchen and have them get you some supper.” He opened the door.

“No, thanks. But I’d be glad if you’d order me the taxi. I’ll wait outside.” Jordan put her hand on my arm.

“Well you come in, Nick?”

“No, thanks” (Fitzgerald. The Great Gatsby, p.143).

9) “Thank you for your hospitality.”

We were always thanking him for that- I and the others.


In example (8) the most neutral politeness formula “thanks” is approach-based. It mitigates the action of the addressee (Nick) by indicating that he is treating the listener as a member of an in-group, a friend, a person whose wants and personality traits are known and liked.

In example (9) the politeness formula “Thank you” is result-based - it aims at expressing gratitude for the heart-felt hospitality and delicious breakfast. The “thank you” formula here is energy and face saving, the banality which help to develop a close relationship for the duration of the exchange, reduce the discomfort of having been in the centre of the host’s attention and maintain harmony in further possible interactions. The speaker pays respect, deference to the addressee in return for his attention and thereby lessens a future debt by “thank you” payoff.

3. Social Conventions of Thanks and Apologies Strategies Performed

Social conventions, primarily extralinguistic factors, govern the production of ‘thanks and apologies’ strategies in English in order to maintain (in ‘thanks’ case) or restore (in ‘apologies’ case) harmony whenever a gratitude or offensive act has been committed and remedial interchanges (to use Ervin Goffman’s term (1971)) are performed according to the rules of speaking and social norms of the speech community. A remedial interchange, required to social harmony, consists of a dialogue in which the ‘thanks’ provider or the offender provides excuses and accounts for his offence and the offender, on his part, shows some sign of acceptance and sometimes appreciation for the offender’s corrective behaviour.

Since remedial interchanges are the result of a violation of a social rule, their performance will be affected by the social rules that characterize the interaction. The individual’s awareness of any social rule is crucial in order to provide the appropriate interchange. Since social norms are perceived diversely by different groups of individuals, they are also responded to differently. Therefore, the situation is carefully considered, either implicitly or explicitly.

‘Thanks and apologies’ productions are social norms that are accepted by the great majority of social groups regardless of cultural, educational or language background. As accepted norms, their violation in any context whatsoever, implies some sort of remedial work. For example, hitting someone in the face is generally perceived as an offence and the victim expects some excuse.

According to Wolfson (1989), speakers are always attentive to the correctness and appropriateness of the language production of their interlocutors in order to respond to possible deviations in the most reasonable way under the circumstances. Speakers are able to recognize when a sociolinguistic rule has been broken and what they think should be
done. They are able to express the norms of speech behaviour taking the situation into account. To take the situation into account means to assess social conventions that govern the interlocutors’ behaviour.

To social conventions influencing the choice of a ‘thanks or apology’ strategy and, respectively, its language realization by a certain formula belong a number of variables among which of most crucial importance are:

1) degree of acknowledgement (in ‘thanks’ speech act) and degree of severity of the offence (in apology speech act);
2) status and age of interactants;
3) degree of familiarity between interactants.

As for the degree of acknowledgement, it can be: 1) of high or low grade; 2) emotional vs. emotionless; 3) highly or standard appreciated. As for the degree of severity of the offence, it can be severe or non-severe. As for the degree of familiarity between interactants, it falls into familiar vs. non-familiar type. As for the status and age of interactants, they are respectively of subordinative vs. non-subordinative (equal) relationships, young vs. old.

A combination of these variables led to the configuration of the numerous situations used in the study. Here follows a brief description of some of the situations and the variables represented in them for which we managed to find the illustrative examples. These configurations are:

1. Highly appreciative – familiar – equal – old;
2. Standardly (stereotypically) appreciative – familiar – subordinative - young;
3. Severe – Familiar - Equal – Young;
4. Severe – Familiar - Unequal – Old;
5. Severe – Unfamiliar – Young;
6. Severe – Unfamiliar – Old;
7. Non-severe – Familiar – Equal – Young;
8. Non-severe – Familiar – Unequal – Old;
9. Non-severe – Unfamiliar – Young;
10. Non-severe – Unfamiliar – Old

Here are the examples testifying to each case.

Case (1). Stanley: Sorry for having bended your glasses. I can’t be forgiven, can I? (Kaufman, Hart. The Man Who Came to Dinner, p.24).

A friend placed his glasses on the couch and without noticing, Stanley sits on his glasses bending them very badly.

Case (2) Clive: Awfully sorry, ma’am. Indeed. I must apologize a thousand times and again. I’ll buy you new glasses, to repay this damage.

The lady of the house: Don’t bother, please. I am glad I’ve got rid of them at last. They have been causing problems to my eyes (Kaufman, Hart. The Man Who Came to Dinner, 44).

Clive, a young man, is in the bus with the lady of the house where he is staying during his visit to the USA. The two have become very good friends though she is an elderly woman. Clive’s shopping bag, that was on the luggage rack in the bus, falls down and breaks the lady’s glasses into pieces. The glasses are outdated and cause problems to her eyes and she is not sorry at all to throw them away at last.

Case (3) Walter: “Sorry, I should have been more and more careful.”

Margaret: “Don’t do it any other time, or you’ll be - you know what – a corpse?” (Williams. Cat on a Hot Tin Root, p.122).

Walter and Margaret are close friends. Margaret is in love with Walter who unfortunately has taken to alcohol and is often drunk. Being in such a state he couldn’t watch his step and fell over Margaret, injuring her a bit on her head. Margaret’s immediate reaction is half serious, half joking, saying, “You’ll be a corpse” which means she’ll kill him for this, may it happen once more.

Case (4) Young man: “Please, forgive me. Don’t call the police. I guess we can settle it down, if you please.”


A boy who is eighteen and who is on his stay in Great Britain has very cheap hotel, has no money to pay for it and decides to steal money from an old gentleman, his room mate.

Case (5) “I must apologize. I did not mean this.”

“No, I see you didn’t” (Mortimer. The Dock Brief, p.198).

Backing out of a parking place, a man ran into the side of another car driven by a young driver unknown to him.

Case (6) “Er, you know. Prof. Roberts, er, it is my fault, I must confess, I ask your pardon. This blur, this spot... it’s my sister’s. she’s only 6” (Swanson. Come Back Some Day, p.27).

A student returns a damaged book to his old professor who gave it to him for a short use.

Case (7) “Hi, folks. It was not my fault - I tried but couldn’t catch the damn thing in time. Anyway, excuse me, captain, you too” (Swanson. Come Back Some Day, p.127).

The young man arrives late for a casual basketball game with his fellow-students.

Case (8) “Oh, ha-ha, where’s my drink?” You had it, Steve, ha- ha. Can I have your’s instead?

“Sorry, awfully sorry. I’ll call the waiter to order one” (Swanson. Come Back Some Day, p.34).

Steve, one of the main characters, is in a restaurant with his friends and their parents, whom he also knows for a long time. Without noticing, he took his friend’s father’s drink and drank it.
Case (9) “Excuse me, can you tell me which way to take to cross bridge Plaza? (Swanson. Come Back Some Day, p. 123).

Lost in the middle of a big city a young lady interrupts a group of young students who are talking to ask for directions.

Case (10) “Milles pardons, ma’am, milles pardons.

- It was my fault (Swanson. Come Back Some Day, p. 140).

A young man of a French origin, walking in the street, bumps into an old lady shaking her up a bit without hurting her.

The situations picked up to illustrate the cases each time elicited an apologetic response, not always with a reply from the receiver.

These and other apologies obtained from fiction and drama works were categorized according to the following apology strategies:
1. Denial of apology: “I didn’t do it;”
2. Minimization of the offense: “Oh, everything is o’kay, isn’t it?”
3. Acknowledgement of responsibility: “It was my fault;”
4. Offer of intensified apology: “I’m awfully sorry”
5. Explanation: “Sorry, I’m late but I missed the bus”
6. Offer of repair: “I’ll pay for the glasses”
7. Promise of forbearance: “This won’t happen again.”

Each apology obtained for each individual may be as simple as one single apology strategy but as complex as a combination of more than one strategy and/or repetition of strategies, as in cases (4), (7), (10).

As Trosborg noted (1987:147), the speaker may use six different formulae in order to express acknowledgement of responsibility (e.g. expression of lack of intent, expression of embarrassment, self-deficiency, acceptance of blame, implicit and explicit acknowledgement). Although these formulae do not appear linguistically complex in terms of their syntactic and lexical components, they are less frequently preferred than a simple routinized expression “I’m sorry” or “Excuse me.” Furthermore, strategies such as acknowledgement of responsibility were produced more under the severe condition than under the non-severe context. Such behaviour is expected since a severe offensive action seems to require a type of remedial work marked by the speaker’s acceptance of responsibility in order to emphasize regret for the act committed. For the same reason, repairs were offered more frequently in the severe condition, see cases (2), (4), (6), (8). The remedial work here is destined to express sincere regret and responsibility for an action which caused some damage to the victim (e.g. breaking the victim’s glasses or damaging his book). It also accounts for frequent use of intensified apologies (under severe conditions). The formulae such as “I’m awfully sorry”, “I’m very sorry”, “Excuse me, excuse me”, and so forth is comprehensible since a severe offence requires a deeper feeling of regret on the part of the speaker and a deeper concern for the hearer.

4. Direct and Indirect Thanks and Apologies in Discourse

In terms of Searle (1975:59), direct and indirect speech acts are distinguished in discourse. The apology and thanks are illocutions Searle assigns to the paradigm of his Expressive category for which “the truth of the proposition is presupposed” (Searle 1976:12). Both speech acts have a “pre-history” in the sense of Rehbein and Ehlich (1976:314), i.e. something is “presupposed” to be the case when such illocutions occur. The following are approximations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Apologize</th>
<th>S did P, P is bad for H</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thank</td>
<td>H did P, P is good for S</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(where S = speaker, H = hearer, P = proposition/event)

We note that in the case of the apology and thanks the same event P might be involved.

Locutions containing a small set of lexical items like Thanks, I apologize, Sorry, and Grateful are but some that are used to perform illocutions (speech acts) of thanking and apologizing.

Let us consider utterances such as
20) Oh, you’ve washed up, darling! How nice!
or
21) I’m glad you’ve done the washing-up! or
22) It was nice of you to do the washing-up! or
23) Oh, shouldn’t have done the washing-up
(Edmondson 1981:279).

These utterances do not readily constitute thanking illocutions. These illocutions can be derived due to the context in which these utterances occur. Therefore, for utterances which do not readily constitute thanking illocutions and are understood as such in regard to the context, we apply the term Indirect Speech Act of Thanks.

Other illustrations of indirect speech acts of thanks can be the following:
24) Brien: You are almost through with this difficult and exhausting job. You should have something for me.

25) Jimmy: I’ll never forget what you’ve done for me, neither now nor ever after.

Alison: Jimmy, please don’t go on (Osborne.
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Look Back in Anger, p. 19).

Let us consider some other utterances such as:

26) I've gone and broken your record-player
27) I wish I hadn't been so careless with your record-player
28) It was really bad of me to break it (Data fabricated by Edmondson, p. 27).

The cited examples support the idea that an apology has been made in each utterance. But it is made indirectly, i.e. without standard apology formula and where context is of core help to arrive at the conclusion.

The next example contributes to the indirectness of the apology speech act:

Jimmy: Perhaps you haven't noticed it, but it's interfering with the radio.
Alison: I shan't be much longer (Osborne. Look Back in Anger, p. 23).

Alison, Jimmy’s wife, is busy with her ironing. She folds some of the clothes she has already ironed and is taking Jimmy’s trousers to go on with her work. This gets on Jimmy’s nerves. He wants to listen to the music and asks Alison to stop ironing. Alison apologizes with the words “I shan’t be much longer.”

The apology and thanks speech acts are instances in which illocutionary force may be derived indirectly from locutionary force with a minimum of potential negotiation. Both apology and thanks speech act are instances of socially-sanctioned hearer-supportive behaviour.

In the light of the above characterization of the apology the most predictable function of this illocution in discourse that it counts as an attempt on the part of the speaker to cause the hearer to withdraw a proceeding complaint, it is an attempt to restore social harmony. In the case that the apology is accepted, the complaint stops to be a valid focus for talk - the exchange initiated by the complaint is ‘closed’ by the illocution by means of which the apology is accepted/satisfied. This illocution leads to forgiveness. Thus a three-element exchange looks as follows:

Illocutions: Complaint - Apology - Forgiveness
For example:
30) S: Well, er, I'm terribly sorry but er I'm afraid you're in my seat.
Y: Oh, I'm ever so sorry but I'm in this terrible rush...
S: It's O'kay (Edmondson, p. 281).

In this discussion we have tried to treat fully all aspects of thanks and apologies viewed from various perspectives, discourse – strategic and cross-cultural. Though the general account of these two kinds of speech acts is bound to remain fragmentary yet there are a number of conclusions to be drawn from the above considerations. Among the linguistic tools of ready-made routine behaviours thanks and apologies occupy a prominent position. Under the ethic effect of indebtedness, communicants tend to equate gratitude with a feeling of guilt. Apology expressions seem to be the most appropriate means to meet the resultant requirements. Accordingly, communicants’ verbal behaviour exhibits an exquisite sensitivity to mutual obligations, responsibilities, and moral indebtedness, drawn on the range of routine formulae provided by the English language.

References