



Teaching apologies through the use of audiovisual materials

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I. Abstract

Since Austin's (1962) classic work *How To Do Things With Words* there have been numerous studies about the way in which utterances are used as a mean to perform actions. The branch of linguistics that deals with this phenomenon is pragmatics, which emerged in the 1960s as a reaction to Chomsky's idea that the importance of language lies in the correct use of grammar (Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan 2010). After the elaboration of several models of communicative competence presented by a number of authors such as Canale and Swain (1980), Bachman (1990), and Celce-Murcia (1995, 2007), the idea that pragmatic awareness is necessary in order for speakers to be successful in communication has spread, being one of the most relevant constructs the one introduced by Celce-Murcia (2007). Research has been conducted especially on speech acts, such as Leech's (2014) book *The Pragmatics of Politeness*, whose taxonomy will be used in this study, and on the use of audiovisual material for teaching purposes. For that reason, we have carried out an analysis on speech acts, and in particular on apologies, in the fiction TV series *The Big Bang Theory*. The aim of this study is to analyse whether apologies in the nine episodes examined mirror real-life conversations, and if so, to show that this audiovisual material may be used for classroom activities as an appropriate tool to develop students' pragmatic knowledge.

Key words: communicative competence, pragmatics, speech acts, apologies.

II. Introduction

The last century has witnessed a development in the research of an appropriate definition of what speech acts are and on how they are employed to perform actions by the mere use of utterances. Actually, it was after the publication of Austin's (1962) pioneering work *How To Do Things With Words* that attention was drawn to this field of enquiry. This is why Austin and Searle, who, together with Grice, formulated the speech act theory and the conversational maxims (McCarthy 1991) are considered the founding fathers of pragmatics.

Furthermore, in the last decades the importance of communicative competence (CC) has been widely recognised in the field of linguistics. As a matter of fact, Hymes (1972) was the first who developed the concept of CC, and he defined it as «the knowledge of both rules of grammar and rules of language use appropriate to a given context» (as cited in Usó-Juan and Martínez-

Flor 2008, 158). He claimed that communicative competence is indispensable for speakers to negotiate meaning in various contexts. Later on, Widdowson (1983, 27) defined CC as «an active force continuing creativity», so he was the first who gave more importance to the concept of performance rather than competence (Bagarić and Mihaljević-Djigunović 2007). It is important to introduce the notion of CC in this paper since a «competent language user should possess not only knowledge about language but also the ability and skill to activate that knowledge in a communicative event» (Bagarić and Mihaljević-Djigunović 2007, 100); thus, it is crucial that speakers have full control of CC in order for a speech event to be understood. In this sense, it may be argued that the speech act theory developed into a notable instrument for the analysis of communicative competence since communication is performed by the use of speech acts. The most popular models of CC are the ones presented by Canale and Swain (1980), according to whom CC is composed of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. In turn, Bachman (1990) argued that language competence is made up by organizational competence and pragmatic competence; finally, Celce-Murcia elaborated a first model in 1995, whose main components were discourse competence, socio-cultural competence, linguistic competence, actional competence, and strategic competence. This author proposed in 2007 a second model which is considered the most important since it also includes formulaic competence and interactional competence (Celce-Murcia 2007).

The field of pragmatics expanded rapidly after the introduction of the notion of CC, since it may be analysed by the classification of language according to communicative functions elaborated in the speech act theory. In fact, pragmatics is part of this construct and it is necessary for speakers to achieve their knowledge in the target language (TL). This concept has been defined as:

The study of language from the point of view of the user, especially on the choices he makes, the constraints he encounters in using language in social interaction, and the effects his use of language has on the other participants in an act of communication (Crystal 1997, 278).

In particular, this branch of linguistics arose in the 1960s as a response to Chomsky's competence theory, according to which language is an abstract idea whose importance lies in the correct use of grammar independently from the actual usage of language itself (Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan 2010). One of the authors that reacted to that theory was Leech (1983), who argued that, instead of competence, the main aim when acquiring a TL should be the ability to use it for communication, that is, performance should be the purpose of language (Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan 2010). Thomas

(1995) argues that meaning is constituted by the negotiation between the speaker and the hearer, the context and the potential meaning of the utterance, being meaning a dynamic process rather than a static one. Actually, in this branch of linguistics interaction plays a central role, since the focus is not only on the speakers' intentions but on the way the interlocutors perceive what is being said as well (Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan 2010). This is why Taguchi (2015, 1) claims that «pragmatic competence means an ability to deal with a complex interplay of language, language users, and context in interaction».

It is within the field of pragmatics that we should talk about speech acts. Austin divided utterances into constatives and performatives, being the former statements used to describe or report something, and the latter considered as «being the part of doing an action, which again would not normally be described as, or 'just', saying something» (Austin 1962, 5). For the purpose of this study, we will consider the second type of speech acts, and specifically the speech act of apologies.

In his work *The Pragmatics of Politeness* (2014) Leech deals with the different strategies employed by speakers while apologising. For instance, he mentions formulaic devices that often take place alone, such as *sorry*, *pardon me*, *excuse me*, which according to him have been *pragmatized* in the sense that they have lost their grammatical value to come to be just a pragmatic particle. We will take Leech's (2014) taxonomy on apologies in order to classify the apology strategies in our data. These are the following ones:

1. Expression of regret
2. Asking somebody for pardon (or forgiveness)
3. Using a performative utterance

According to this author, the first strategy is commonly used by speakers, while the third one, compared to the others, is infrequently used (Leech 2014). Further, apologies usually occur to solve a problem between two speakers, having one of them committed an offense to the hearer (Usó-Juan and Martínez-Flor 2014).

The reason why we have selected the speech act of apology is that few studies have been conducted on the use of audiovisual materials to teach them, since those studies have mainly focused on other speech acts such as requests (Alcón Soler 2005, Martínez-Flor 2007, Fernández-Guerra 2008), compliments (Tatsuki and Nishizawa 2005), suggestions and advice (Martínez-Flor and Guerra 2002). Thus, since apologies typically occur in everyday conversations this study intends to find a proper source for teaching them to foreign or second language learners.

Having this theoretical framework in mind, this study aims at analysing one particular type of performative speech act, that is,

apologies. In order to achieve this purpose various episodes of the TV series *The Big Bang Theory* have been analysed to observe in which ways the characters perform such speech act, being the main objective of the observation understanding if the use of apologies that the characters make resembles real-life conversations, and thus, if this type of audiovisual material can be used in classroom activities in order to achieve pragmatic awareness. Therefore, the research questions of this paper are the following:

1. Does the use of apologies in the fiction TV series *The Big Bang Theory* mirror real-life conversations?
2. Is this audiovisual material and appropriate tool for teaching purposes?

III. Purpose of the study

As mentioned in the previous section, the main purpose of the study is to analyse the use of apologies in the fiction TV series *The Big Bang Theory*, in order to understand if this type of audiovisual material could be used as an appropriate source of apologies to teach pragmatics at school.

Several studies have been conducted on the use of audiovisual input for raising pragmatic awareness in EFL or ESL contexts, but few of them focused on apologies. Actually, the use of audiovisual materials in classroom activities may be beneficial for students since «learners are exposed to authentic language samples in which speech acts appear contextualized» (Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan 2010, 429).

Nevertheless, before using a certain film or TV series as a teaching material it is important to analyse the use of language in order to see if it resembles real-life language. Therefore, one of the main objectives of this study is precisely to compare the use of apologies strategies in *The Big Bang Theory* to Leech's (2014) taxonomy, which is based on the real use of the English language. If the analysis gives positive results, that is, if the language used in the TV series coincides with Leech's (2014) taxonomy, then *The Big Bang Theory* would be appropriate audiovisual material for teaching purposes, and this is the second main objective of this study.

What is more, it is important to mention the fact that we selected apologies because despite the scarce research conducted, they are one of the most common speech acts, but they are quite complex to perform for SL or FL students who do not have an adequate knowledge of norms and conventions in the TL. Impoliteness and rude behaviours may be the consequence of this lack of pragmatic awareness (Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan 2010).

IV. Methodology

The present study aims at ascertaining whether the use of apologies in the fiction TV series *The Big Bang Theory* corresponds to real-life use of language, and if so, to show that it could be used as a source for pragmatic input in classroom contexts. In fact, previous studies such as Kite and Tatsuki (Kite and Tatsuki 2005) corroborate that the use of pragmalinguistic strategies in films are equivalent to those occurring in real discourse. Moreover, other research has shown that audiovisual material can be a good source of speech acts, for instance, Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan (Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan 2010, 427) claim that «video input has long been used as a valuable resource that enhances the language learning process in the classroom, as it provides learners with realistic models to imitate».

Taking into account the above-mentioned research, this section will give an account on how this investigation has been carried out. First, the material and instruments employed will be described, then, the data collection procedure will be explained, as well as the data analysis.

4.1 Materials

In order to carry out this study a number of online episodes of the TV series *The Big Bang Theory* were watched, and the ones which provided a wider array of apologies were selected. Scripts were consulted online (Ash 2009).

4.2 Data collection procedure and analysis

We selected this TV series because it provided a clear example of how the different techniques proposed by Leech (2014) are used in the performance of apologies in everyday conversations. Specifically, nine episodes belonging to seasons 1, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10 were chosen as they illustrated a wide array of apologies. Therefore, every time an apology appeared, it was transcribed for subsequent classification. The context in which it was uttered was also provided (see appendix 1), so as to better understand the whole scene.

One should bear in mind the differences among each character in order to better understand the strategies employed and also the responses received. As a matter of fact, it is an unspoken truth that Dr. Sheldon Cooper (one of the main characters, a physician) suffers from Asperger Syndrome as it has been argued in the electronic magazine *Quo* (BigBang Ciencia and Ferrer 2014). If this hypothesis were true, it would explain all the weird behaviours of this character. For instance, he understands language literally or he does not understand sarcasm, irony, and double meanings (apart from other actions that have nothing to do with language).

The other characters of the TV series are Penny, who is a waitress and accomplishes the stereotype of blondes; Dr. Leonard Hofstadter, who is Sheldon's flatmate and a physician (and who at a certain point starts a relationship with Penny); Dr. Raj Koothrappali, who is an Indian astrophysicist and at the beginning of the series has problems in interacting with women; Howard Wolowitz, who is a Jewish aerospace engineer (he is the only one of the four boys who has not a PhD and this is the reason why Sheldon is always despising his work); Dr. Bernadette Rostenkowski, a microbiologist and Howard's fiancé; and finally Dr. Amy Farrah Fowler, a neurobiologist and Sheldon's fiancé (actually, she is considered as weird as well, but not as much as Sheldon who seems unable to maintain physical contact with other human beings).

In order to analyse the data collected, the percentages of the strategies employed in the episodes were calculated.

V. Results and discussion

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This section is devoted to analysing the results of the research carried out. As previously mentioned, nine episodes of the TV series *The Big Bang Theory* were examined as data for the present study, aiming at establishing if these apologies mirror real-life apologies and, thus, if they might be used as appropriate input for teaching purposes.

A total number of nine episodes were transcribed. Results show that the use of expressions of regret is the most common strategy in the episodes, in line with Leech's (2014) research. Nevertheless, not always does a character utter the sentence «Sorry/I'm sorry» when he or she really intended to apologise for an offense. As a matter of fact, the expression was used once ironically (episode 4, season 1), and in another example it was employed in order to start a conversation with somebody who the character did not know, as a politeness marker (both cases in episode 4, season 1).

The second most common strategy employed by the characters is asking for pardon or forgiveness. However, this strategy is sometimes not used as a real apology, but just to be ironic in an argument (episode 6, season 4) or as a politeness marker (episode 4, season 1). What is more, other indirect strategies for apologising are used the same number of times. Actually, a way to apologise is acknowledging the error, such as «I just wanted to say that I was wrong» (episode 4, season 1), «Look, I admit it, I may have crossed a line here» (episode 6, season 4), or «All you did was offer maternal care and affection, and all you received in return was rude and insensitive behaviour» (episode 13, season 9). Furthermore, it has been observed that justifications are also used as apologies. For

instance, in the sentence «I was not myself. I had lost a lot of thumb blood» (episode 16, season 5).

Therefore, results show that, as Leech (2014) claimed, the least frequently used strategy is the performative sentence. In fact, it is used just twice in the nine episodes examined, and once it was employed as an indirect request: «I hope you accept my apology» (episode 13, season 9), instead of «I apologise». Figure 1 below illustrated how the strategies have been employed by the characters of the TV series.

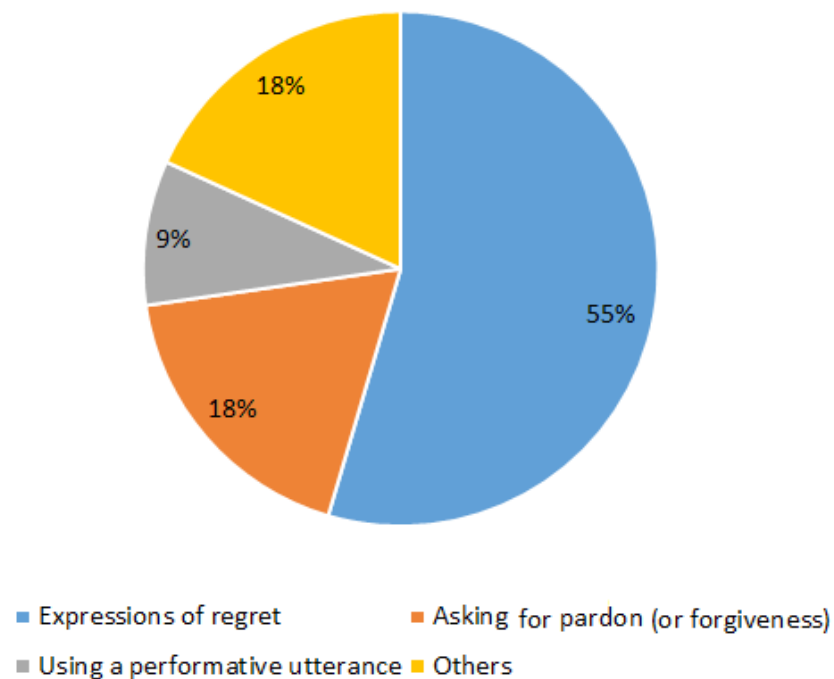


Figure 1: Strategies employed

One should bear in mind that Sheldon Cooper's apologies sound contrived due to his peculiarities and the fact that he is believed to suffer from Asperger syndrome. Instances of this are found in different episodes: when Sheldon is forced to do so by his mother (episode 4, season 1), when he uses absurd justifications instead of starting the conversation with a real apology (episode 16, season 5), in the episode where he starts apologising to everybody just because he wants to be forgiven in order to be able to go to the trip with his friends (episode 13, season 5), and especially when he says that a real apology requires of three steps and the he enumerates them all (episode 23, season 9).

It is also worth mentioning that results also show different responses to the apologies performed. Indeed, some reactions were positive, while others were negative. What is more, some responses were made through the use of questions. In this sense, one of the

negative reactions was non-verbal (episode 2, season 1), that is, when Penny closes the door in Sheldon's face, and in two different cases the apology was ignored (episode 4, season 1). Consider examples 1 and 2:

Example 1:

Mrs. Cooper: Excuse me, Dr. Gablehouser, are you busy?

Gablehouser: Well, actually...

Mrs. Cooper: Sheldon, he's just doodling, get in here.

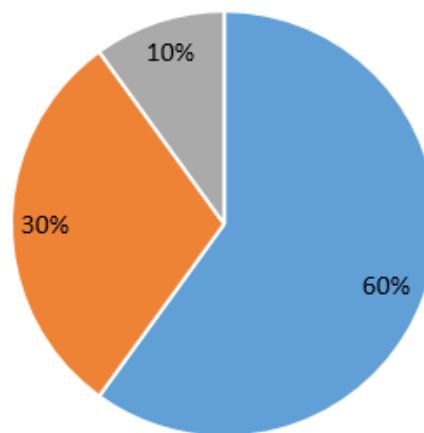
Example 2:

Sheldon: Um, as you know, several weeks ago in our first encounter we may have gotten off on the wrong foot, when I called you an idiot. And I just wanted to say that I was wrong. To point it out.

Gablehouser (to Mrs. Cooper): I'm sorry, we haven't been introduced. Dr. Eric Gablehouser.

Mrs. Cooper: Mary Cooper, Sheldon's mom.

Figure 2 shows the characters' reaction to the apologies received. Actually, some of the characters reacted positively or negatively, but some times the apologies were also ignored.



■ Positive responses ■ Negative responses ■ Neither positive nor negative

Figure 2: Type of Responses

In three negative situations the character asked a question for clarification, as in «What? You slept with my sister?» (episode 6, season 4). However, in most of the situations there was a response with a declarative statement, such as «Get out» (episode 2, season 10), or «Well, I don't accept your apology» (episode 13, season 9).

On the other hand, all positive reactions were performed by means of a declarative or affirmative statement, such as «You're forgiven» (episode 16, season 5), or «Thank you, I appreciate that»

(episode 13, season 9). What is more, as it happens with the strategies employed, Sheldon's responses to the apologies received were exaggerated. For example, he says «But that behaviour is beyond the pale and cannot be tolerated. We are no longer friends» (episode 6, season 4) just because Raj has used his toothbrush.

Taking everything into consideration, we can say that as Leech (2014: 130) stated «polite speech events [...] tend to come in pairs syntagmatically; that is, one speech event typically evokes, or is followed by, another kind or speech event as response», which form an adjacency pair, and that usually the most common response is the polite one, that is, to accept the apologies.

The results obtained were somewhat expected, since they corroborate previous research reported in the theoretical framework about apologies, being the first strategy (i.e., expressions of regret) the most used in real-life conversations. Therefore, the findings of this study suggest that the dialogues of the fiction TV series *The Big Bang Theory* mirror everyday conversations and for that reason this audiovisual material could be used as input in classroom activities in order for students to improve their pragmatic awareness.

VI. Conclusion

The field of pragmatics has widely developed in the last fifty years as a response to Chomsky's competence theory, starting with the publication of *How To Do Things With Words* (1962), to more recent works such as *The Pragmatics of Politeness* (2014).

It is important to highlight the link that exists between the elaboration of the concept of communicative competence and the one of the speech act theory, since pragmatic competence is considered to be part of the construct of communicative competence. In fact, the speech act theory classifies language according to communicative functions that are exemplified in the models of communicative competence.

A number of authors have tried to provide an appropriate definition of what pragmatics is, but it could be argued that the central idea is that it is the branch of linguistics according to which context plays a crucial role, since the meaning of an utterance may vary accordingly. Since language can be used to perform actions, it is relevant to say that it is speakers that should negotiate meaning in order to achieve successful communication.

Bearing these issues in mind, this paper focused on the use of performative speech acts, which are considered to complete the action a speaker wants to perform (Hazen 2015), and more specifically on apologies. These are considered to be one of the most common speech acts and they are usually accomplished using different strategies, including expressions of regret, asking for

pardon and using a performative utterance (Leech, 2014). The study conducted about this fiction TV series demonstrates that the use of apologies mirrors real-life dialogues since the results obtained coincide with the research carried out by Leech (2014) on the English language. Actually, the most common strategy used is the one of expressions of regret such as *I'm sorry*. Further, several types of responses have been observed, and again the results coincide with previous research, since positive responses are more frequent than negative ones.

Our findings indicate that this particular TV series may be an appropriate audiovisual material for classroom activities and for this reason further research on that field of enquiry should be conducted since the lack of pragmatic awareness in ESL or EFL students is considered a problem in education and in the mastery of the target language.

VII. References

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