

English and Malay Text Messages and What They Say about Texts and Cultures

Ernisa Marzuki¹, Catherine Walter²

¹Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Sarawak, Malaysia

²University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

Email: mernisa@cls.unimas.my, catherine.walter@education.ox.ac.uk

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This study of the pragmatics of cross-cultural text messages throws light on the evolution of new hybrid forms of literacy and on the complex ways that culture is expressed and mediated in second language/second culture contexts. An investigation was carried out into the pragmatics of apology in first-language (L1) and second-language (L2) short messaging service text messages of adult Malay speakers who are proficient users of English, living and studying in an English-speaking university environment; and into L1 English users' text apologies in the same context. Research questions included whether these proficient L2 English users would perform differently from L1 English users in this high-stakes speech act, and from their own L1 Malay use; and whether apologies in what has been called a hybrid medium would differ from those previously studied in writing, in speech and in other electronic media. Twenty-six native speakers of English and 26 native speakers of Malay responded via text messages to discourse completion tests (DCTs) in L1; the DCTs represented either high or low levels of offence calling for apologies. The Malay native speakers also responded to apology situations in L2 English. Data were coded using an adapted version of Cohen and Olshtain's (1981) coding scheme. Analysis of the messages sent by participants revealed clear signs of a hybrid type of text that is differently conceptualised by the two communities. It also showed that the Malay users' second language literacy was shaped in a complex way that sometimes accommodated the second language/second culture and sometimes retained first language/first culture values.

Keywords: Text Messages; Texting; Pragmatics; Apologies; Literacies; New Literacies

Cross-Linguistic Apologies by Text Message

Apology

Apologies attempt to rectify social discord caused by norm violation (Scher & Darley, 1997). By apologising the speaker/writer indicates acceptance of the violated norm, takes responsibility for the violation and expresses regret for it (Aijmer, 1996), thereby attempting to remedy the offence caused (Trosborg, 1995). Apology attempts to preserve or restore the hearer's/reader's face (Linnell, Porter, Stone, & Chen, 1992), and is simultaneously face-threatening to the speaker/writer (Brown & Levinson, 1978).

Given the importance of apology for social cohesion and the potential for loss of face in the failure of high-stakes apologies, it is not surprising that this speech act has received a great deal of attention. Characteristics of apology have been shown to be influenced by various factors, including the severity of the offence (e.g., Grieve, 2010; Wouk, 2005), the interlocutor relationship (e.g. Mulamba, 2009; Shardakova, 2005), and gender (e.g., Holmes, 1989; Hobbs, 2003). Performances and perceptions of apology have been extensively studied in the first language (L1) communication of native speakers of a range of varieties of English (NSEs), both adults (Grieve, 2010; Mulamba, 2009; Kim, 2008; Kasanga & Lwanga-Lumu, 2007;

Sabate i Dalmau & Curelli i Gotor, 2007; Ancarno, 2005; Bharuthram, 2003; Hobbs, 2003; Nakano, Miyasaka & Yamazaki, 2000; Linnell, Porter, Stone, & Chen, 1992; Sugimoto, 1997; Olshtain, 1989) and children (Ely & Gleason, 2006; Kampf & Blum-Kulka, 2007). In Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper's seminal 1989 work, they studied apologies in three varieties of English, and also in French, German, Danish, Russian and Hebrew. They found little variation between languages in the use of the five main pragmatic strategies for apology. (Note, however, that already in 1983 Olshtain and Cohen had found that, unlike English apologies, Hebrew apologies were less likely to include *Offers of repair* and *Promises not to repeat offence* than English ones.)

Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) have called for more investigation of apologies in non-Western cultures. This is in large part in order to address the question of whether all human beings follow a universal set of politeness rules, which has been debated since Brown and Levinson's (1978) original suggestion that face is a universal need which is addressed by politeness. Leech (1983) proposes eight maxims of politeness; although he holds these to be universal, he concedes that different cultures vary in the extent to which they accept and/or use the maxims. Some researchers, for example Wierzbicka (1991), maintain that since each culture has its own unique norms, it is difficult to deter-