The Construal of “Sorry” in Apologies. A Construction Grammar Perspective

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Speech act research has been one of the very active areas of pragmatics recently, with different speech acts being analyzed from different perspectives, either in the case of speakers of English as native speakers (Butler, 2001; Deutschmann, 2003; Risen & Gilovich, 2007) as well as non-native speakers (Bataineh & Bataineh, 2006; Cohen, 2005), or in that of speakers of different languages (Cohen & Shively, 2007; Demeter, 2006; Wouk, 2006). Yet other studies were comparative analyses of two or more languages (Jung, 2004; Lubecka, 2000; Márquez-Reiter, 2000; Tamanaha, 2003). Recently, however, speech act studies have brought in a new perspective by advocating a cognitive linguistics approach to speech acts, and to pragmatics in general, in which the analysis should rely both on communicative-functional and cognitive aspects (Moeschler, 2004; Nuys, 2004; Wolf & Polzenhagen, 2006).

Thus, the present paper attempts to analyze one speech act, the apology, making use of one of the theories put forward by cognitive linguistics, namely construction grammar (Croft & Cruse, 2004; Fillmore, Kay, & O'Connor, 1988; Goldberg, 2006). In the lines of this theory, it is our claim that “sorry” should not be considered a standalone lexical item in an apology, but rather as an integral part of a construction. Moreover, the meaning of the apology would then be given by the entire construction, and not only by the lexical item “sorry.”

The purpose of the present study is to examine the different constructions that “sorry” is used in order to construe apologies, and whether there is a relationship between the type of construction and the meaning that the apology expresses. A corpus analysis methodology was used to examine formal spoken discourse, more specifically a 1,981,165-word corpus comprising transcripts of committee meetings and press briefings, part of the Corpus of Spoken Professional American-English (CSPAE). The different constructions that “sorry” is part of are presented, and several examples are used to demonstrate the fact that the meanings of the apologies in which it is used are given by the entire construction. For example, a pair of constructions that clearly demonstrates this claim is (I’m) + sorry + for + gerund and I’m + sorry + for + passive gerund. In the case of the first construction, such as in “I’m sorry for being late,” the speaker in expresses an apology which also contains an acknowledgment of responsibility for being late to the meeting. On the other hand, in the case of the second construction, such as in “I'm sorry for being delayed,” by using a passive gerundial construction instead of an active one, the speaker shifts the responsibility for the delay. Thus, he does not acknowledge responsibility anymore, and suggests that he delay was out of his control, and blames the bureaucratic problem in the apology.

The conclusion that is drawn at the end of this study is that the meanings of the different apologies that use “sorry” is given by the entire construction in which they are used.