

Speech acts or speech act sets: apologies and compliments

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ABSTRACT

The present paper arises from wider research (Válková, 2004, 2012) aimed at various manifestations of politeness theory, namely at the processes of apologising and complimenting and their results, i.e. overt language entities of different sizes and various structural configurations that can be perceived (or negotiated) as apologies and compliments. These are treated within the framework of a modified model of speech act set theory, with corpus-based samples discussed to verify the validity of the theoretical findings. The results show that rather than single speech acts, apologies and compliments should be treated as speech act sets opening up space for identifying more delicate, partly universal and partly language specific scenarios, by means of which cross-cultural similarities and differences can be considered. The consequences for SLA are also obvious: the lack of pragmatic competence in producing appropriate speech reactions diminishes the possibility of accomplishing the intended communicative goals.

KEYWORDS

politeness theory, apologies, compliments, speech act theory, speech act set

1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of a speech act set (SAS) is based on the assumption that if a more delicate scale of taxonomy is applied to canonical speech acts (Austin, Searle), such speech acts can be approached as chains of smaller units (discrete speech acts), which, if produced together, contribute in a specific way to a global scenario representing a 'sequentially' emergent complete speech act (cf. also Murphy and Neu, 1996). If more interlocutors participate in the overt language manifestation of such a set, there is a preference among some scholars to speak about a speech *event* (Scollon and Scollon, 2001). The aim of this paper is to introduce apologies and compliments (which belong to the traditional class of *expressives* in Searle's 1975 taxonomy) within a framework of speech act set theory (SAST), discuss the constants and variables in the patterns of their realisations as emergent from the data, and consider the validity and applicability of the SAS model in second language acquisition (SLA), specifically in increasing the pragmatic competence of non-native users of English in polite interactional modalities (Held, 2005) in which both apologies and compliments have a significant share.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The recognition of speech acts by the philosophers of language (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) and the implementation of their findings into the theoretical frameworks of lin-

guists, sociologists, pragmatics, and ethnographers of communication, and also scholars of literary criticism interested in the concept of intention, contributed to a shift in linguistic thinking in the second half of the 20th century from a prevalently prescriptive to a significantly descriptive approach, based on authentic language data of ordinary language use anchored in a situational context. The idea behind speech act theory, as explicated by Austin (1962) and elaborated by his disciple (Searle, 1969, 1975, 1976), was to reflect and materialise the fact that the functional potential of language is broader than to serve as a tool for conveying messages and manifesting our conceptualisation of the extra-linguistic world. Austin, similarly to his followers, has led us to believe that when using language we (under well-defined conditions) can also ‘do things with words, perform particular acts from which we, as interactants, can either benefit or be exposed to various face-threatening acts’ (cf. Goffman’s 1967 conception of *facework*).

The recognition of speech acts (both direct and indirect, Searle, 1975), illocutionary forces, and performatives, and the consequent proposals of new taxonomies, opened up space to new cross-language universalities (with speech acts being approached rather as ‘weak’ universals, cf. Greenberg, 1978), but also brought in a series of methodological problems related to the applicability of speech act theory and the emergent task of how to develop a consistent and integrated approach on which to base systemic and functional data processing. As mentioned above, one of the solutions the present paper wants to discuss is a dynamic and context-sensitive model (cf. Cohen and Olshtain, 1981) of SAST. By lifting the lid off native speakers’ patterns of pragmatic competence in performing SASs of apologies and compliments, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of the partly ritualised and partly creative patterns of human interaction in apologising and paying compliments.

Though both apologies and compliments can be considered to be polite interactional modalities (Held, 2005; Válková 2004, 2012), they are mostly used in different situational settings, and only rarely co-occur in a single communicative event, as the following example might illustrate

...I must both apologize to you and compliment you. (BNC AN8 2524)

This is one of the reasons why in the following sections they will be discussed as separate but compatible SASs.

2. APOLOGIES

Apologies are universal in the general human need to express regret over offensive acts and they have accompanied human communication from the oldest times up to the present, with the potential number of addressees ranging from one to innumerable (cf. *Apology* by Plato or Mel Gibson’s *Apology to the Jewish Community*). As remedial interchanges contributing to linguistic etiquette, apologies have long been the focus of attention for philosophers of language (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), sociolinguists (Goffman, 1967, 1971; Gumperz, 1982), ethnographers of communication (Hymes, 1974) and conversational analysts (Coulmas, 1981; Tannen and Öztekin, 1981;

Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), not to mention the series of manuals on “How to shine in society” dating back to the 18th century. In the classical period of speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) the things people can do with language were grouped into various numbers of categories or subcategories that resulted either in extensive lists (Austin) or reduced regroupings (Searle), together with the conditions under which a particular speech act is successful. For many speech acts *performative verbs* were listed, which explicitly signal the intended speech act. Apologising (Austin, 1962) is treated in the fourth category of performative verbs, referred to as *behabitatives*, together with congratulating, blessing, challenging, etc. In Searle (1976), apologies belong to one of his five groups taxonomised according to speakers’ intentions, i.e. expressives. Bach and Harnish (1982) divide speech acts into *communicative* and *conventional*, with subcategorisation within each type. When trying to project apologies into their classification, we find out that more speech acts can participate in the act of apologising (e.g. *I’m sorry* = constative, *this will never happen again* = commissive), which supports the idea that speech acts can be activated sequentially within a single speech event. This is most probably the reason why the traditional model has been extended to take not only speech acts but also speech act sets into consideration. The idea of an apology as a speech act set appeared in Cohen and Olshtain (1981); they found that an apology can comprise one or more components, each of which could be a speech act in its own right (see Table 1).

an apology (1)	acknowledgement of responsibility (2)	an offer to compensate (3)	a promise of forbearance/ an explanation (4)
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TABLE 1 The model of apology as a speech act set 1 (after Cohen and Olshtain, 1981)

When exemplified by language data, one of the possible manifestations of an apology as a speech act can have the following form (based on Tanck, 2004, 2):

I’m sorry, (1) / it was my fault. (2) / I’ll replace it. (3) / It will never happen again. or It was an accident. (4)

The speech act set approach was elaborated by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989) to provide a five-item pattern of apologising composed of the following components: an illocutionary force indicating device (IFID), e.g. *I apologise, I’m sorry, Excuse me*, etc., followed by an apologetic account, different strategies for expressing responsibility, offers of repair, and a promise of forbearance.

The following figure may illustrate the concept in a more transparent way:

IFID (1)	an apologetic account (2)	an expression of responsibility (3)	an offer of repair (4)	a promise of forbearance (5)
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TABLE 2 The model of apology as a speech act set 2 (after Blum-Kulka et al., 1989)

The following example is a possible manifestation of the above-mentioned model in Table 2 (based on Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, 1984, 207–208):

I'm sorry (1) / I'm so late. (2) / You know me I'm never on time (3) / I'll see what I can do. (4) / This won't happen again. (5)

One of the drawbacks of their otherwise thought-provoking theory seems to be in the constructed situations of personally offensive acts, which does not correspond to real-life situations. Another drawback, revealed by my corpus-based analysis (see below), is the presupposed regularity of the above-mentioned sequences within the speech act set, which is not supported by natural language data. To illustrate the variability and complexity of natural encounters, I borrowed an example from Fraser (1981) that may serve as a good example of what I have in mind when speaking about the complexity and also the partial unpredictability of the configurations of speech act sets. It shows that the individual parts in this example are incompatible with the schema presented in Table 2.

(In this example a mother is talking to her children about an impending divorce.)

I'm sorry. (1) / I know how much it hurts you. (2) / I just have to do it (3) / and you've got to try to understand. (4) / Daddy will still be your father. (5) (Fraser, 1981, 266)

When applying the above-mentioned speech act set approach, we can identify the following:

IFID (1)	event (2)	justification (3)	request for understanding (4)	a soothing remedy (5)
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In the article *The learning of complex speech act behaviour* (1990, 47), Olshtain and Cohen modified their original model of the speech act set of apology into a five-item pattern which reflects two strategies that are general and hence not liable to contextual constraints (i.e. the explicit expression of an apology, i.e. IFID, and the expression of responsibility). The other three strategies are situation-dependent and much more limited in their usage (i.e. an explanation, an offer of repair, and a promise of forbearance).

IFID (1)	an expression of responsibility (2)	an explanation(3)	an offer of repair (4)	a promise of forbearance (5)
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TABLE 3 The model of apology as a speech act set 3 (after Olshtain and Cohen, 1990)

In accordance with their finding that “Potentially, the expression of an apology and/or the expression of speaker’s responsibility could realize an apology act in any situ-

ation.” (ibid., 47). I would suggest that although there are more strategies that make up the speech act set, there is no fixed number of strategies to be used, nor any regularity of the sequences of discrete slots and their expected fillers (see below).

The following examples (excerpted from the book version of *A Corpus of English Conversation* by Svartvik and Quirk, 1980, referred to as the London-Lund Corpus) show that the five-item pattern matrices would sometimes results in more empty slots than explicit fillers (the case of two-item and three-item pattern configurations) or various modifications appear, with some of the slots being identical with the configurations suggested in the above-mentioned models but also other parts that were not taken into consideration and whose presence in the pattern would break the pre-supposed regularity of the sequences.

I'm terribly sorry (1) / but I shan't be with you until five past ten. (2) (LLC, 130)

IFID (1)	an apologetic account (2)
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(...and he tried to wave me in) *I said no I'm not coming in (1) / I'm sorry. (2)* (LLC, 360)

an apologetic account (1)	IFID (2)
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I'm sorry (1) / about the mess, (2) / how stupid of me. (3) (LLC, 281)

IFID (1)	an apologetic account (2)	disarmer (3)
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I'm very sorry (1) / I cannot teach at the institute. (2) / I will do my best to find someone who can (3) / and I would suggest you do the same. (4) (LLC, 76)

IFID (1)	an apologetic account (2)	an offer of repair (3)	suggestion (4)
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I'm sorry (1) / I haven't replied (2) / but I would. I'm going to (3) / because I would like to come. (4) (LLC, 106)

IFID (1)	an apologetic account (2)	an offer of repair (3)	explanation (4) (or reasoning)
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These results confirm that for the corpus-based samples the speech act set status of apologies is more adequate for current communicative situations than a single speech act approach, leaving some space for culture- but also situation-bound variables, both qualitative and quantitative (cf. different configurations within the set, as well as partly predictable and partly unpredictable reductions/extensions of the speech act set.)

3. COMPLIMENTS

To listen to someone is the greatest compliment you can pay. (BNC CBU 2071)

A compliment is a played-out result of a reciprocal negotiation between the speaker's illocution and the addressee's perlocution — and the consequent reaction of the addressee (by means of a compliment response, or, in face-to-face communication, by a gesture, or, less frequently, by a communicative silence). The acceptance of a compliment by means of a compliment response by the addressee (e.g. by *Thank you so much*) completes or finalises the speech act set of complimenting, or blocks its illocutionary force, e.g. by the refusal of a compliment. This is why I think that compliments, similarly to apologies, should not be treated as single speech acts but rather as speech act sets. While apologising can be considered a reaction to an impolite act or behaviour, compliments are not predictable in the same way. But there are culture-bound expectations with compliments which may be so strong that the absence of a compliment may be perceived as a sign of disapproval, cf.

A: "How do you like this one?" inquired Tom. "I bought it last week."
 B: "It's a nice yellow one," said Wilson, as he strained at the handle.
 <Fitzgerald>

Compliment responses (both verbal and non-verbal), on the other hand, are predictable reactions to a compliment, prototypically as parts of the adjacency pair *compliment-compliment response* (see Huth, 2006, 2028). Although the type of reaction can vary and in different studies on compliment responses different classifications appear, most authors agree that it is not acceptable to ignore a compliment completely.

Since most of the complimenting strategies do not have an explicit performative verb of complimenting, cf. e.g. *I compliment you on your new blouse...*, the illocutionary force (IF) of paying compliments is — to a significant degree — dependent on the complimentee's response, by which s/he in fact confirms that s/he has decoded the perlocutionary force of the act of complimenting and has accepted its result, i.e. a compliment paid.

Put simply, paying a compliment is a *relational* concept, dependent on the harmony or disharmony of the illocutionary (IF) and perlocutionary (PF) forces of

the whole adjacency pair, i.e. an intended compliment and the compliment response, cf.

COMPLIMENT		COMPLIMENT RESPONSE
<i>That's beautiful.</i>	—	<i>Thank you.</i>
(IF — compliment paid)	—	(PF — compliment accepted)
<i>You did a great job cleaning up the house.</i>	—	<i>Well, I guess you haven't seen the kids' room.</i>
(IF — compliment paid)	—	(PF — compliment rejected)

(examples from Pomerantz in Herbert, 1989,10)

The typical communicative pattern of compliments (see Table 4 below), as emergent from my data, is the pattern in which the process of complimenting is realised within a *six-item pattern* of core/constant and rather peripheral/variable optional sets of discrete steps leading to a kind of complimenting scenario, which, if accepted by the complimentee, confirms the intended goal, cf.

IFID (illocutionary force identifier)					
complimenter				complimentee	
attention getter	compliment base		request	IF amplifier	response
	object	evaluation			
optional 1	2	3	optional 4	optional 5	6

TABLE 4 The model of a compliment as a speech act set

Cf. the following illustrative example (my own), with numbers referring to the slots in Table 4 above (unfortunately, there are no examples in the corpora where all the slots are filled).

- A: "Hi, Sue (1) / this blouse, (2) / you look so cute, (3) / where did you buy it? Marks and Spencer? (4) / Really, it's nice." (5)
 B: "It's from H&M, but thanks, anyway." (6)

Concerning the discrete slots in Table 4, slots 1–5 belong to the complimenter's part of the speech act set, while slot 6 is the complimentee's response. In the complimenter's part, *attention getters* can be greetings, forms of address, or combinations of both. The *compliment base* consists of two parts, i.e. the *object of complimenting* (either explicit or context-retrievable; either referring to a simple, concrete item, as in *this blouse*, or to a whole event, as in *the way you dress*) and an *evaluative standpoint*. The sequence of 2 and 3 is flexible. A *request* is an optional addition of details about the object of the compliment, often used to reinforce the explicatory force of the compliment proper, or, in the case of insincere compliments, to pretend deep interest on the part of the complimenter in the object of the compliment. An *IF amplifier* is an

optional item of the speech act set of a complimenter's explicit intention, i.e. to pay a compliment, as in ...*and that is meant as a compliment*. A *response* is an expected reaction (further specification) of the complimentee by which the speech act set of complimenting is completed, either simply, by confirming the acceptance of the compliment that has been offered (*Thank you*), or by diminishing the appraised quality of the object itself (*This old thing, I got it at a bargain basement sale!*), or — in a less polite way — by rejecting the compliment.

The basic pattern introduced in Table 4 can be modified by extensions within the slots but also by the addition of optional 'categories' (as is obvious from the following examples):

- A: "The way you dress is so attractive." (2+3)
 B: "Joking again, are you?" (6)
 A: "Can't you accept a compliment graciously?" (5) (BNC JY8 1641)

(extension of the complimenter's part in case the compliment is not explicitly accepted by the complimentee).

complimenter		complimentee	complimenter
object (2)	evaluation (3)	response (6)	extension/IF amplifier (5)

- A: "I really admire you, bringing up four from the time the youngest was only five and working full time." (3+2)
 B: "No bravery. Circumstances dictated it." (6) (BNC ABW 2307-2309)

complimenter		complimentee
evaluation (3)	object (2)	response (6)

- A: "I mean it," he said. (5) "You are a natural teacher. (2+3) That stuff about metaphor and metonymy, for instance. I see them all over the shop now. TV commercials, colour supplements, the way people talk." (explanation)
 B: Robyn turned and beamed at him. "I'm very glad to hear you say that. If you understand it, anybody can." (6) (Lodge, 1989, 355)

complimenter		complimentee
IF amplifier (5)	object (2)	evaluation (3) (+ explanation)
		response (6)

- A: *You're a remarkably well-read young woman, (2+3) Angelica, (1) do you know that? (5) Where were you educated at all? (4)*
 B: *"Oh, various places," she said vaguely. "Mainly England and America." (6)*
 (Lodge, 1985, 28–29)

(the complimentee's answer is not in fact a reaction to the compliment itself but rather to the following request)

complimenter				complimentee
object (2)	evaluation (3)	attention getter (1)	IF amplifier (5)	response (6)

The response slot (see under 6), similarly to the *compliment base slot*, can be further sub-categorised into sub-sets of what Rose and Kwai-Fun (2001, 146) refer to as 'categories'. The projection of their categories into a table, similar to Table 4 above, can result in the following visualisation:

acceptance	dis/agreement	self-praise avoidance	return compliment	comment history
Thanks.	I like it too. No, it's not really that nice.	Anyone can do this.	You look good, too.	My mother gave it to me.

TABLE 5 Categories of response realisation

In general, compliment responses can be divided into three broad categories according to the strategies applied:

- accept
- reject
- deflect/evade

Each of these categories has a number of sub-categories, which differ according to the various language data that researchers use. Pomerantz (in Herbert, 1989, 10) introduced quite a simple taxonomy in 1978 that became a starting point for other linguists. Holmes (1988) modified this simple classification according to the New Zealand data and added several sub-categories. Herbert (1989), who compared American and South African data, changed the three-part classification into two basic categories of agreement and non-agreement, to which he introduced several additional categories. Request interpretation, according to him, forms a separate category for those situations when speakers treat a compliment as something other than a compliment, most commonly as a request. Miles (1994) provided a synthesis of existing categories

that became a starting point for further research into compliments and compliment responses.

Some classifications include *ignoring* (i.e. silence) as one of the strategies in compliment responses; none of the above-mentioned classifications, however, recognises non-verbal reaction (e.g. a smile) as another possible category. In Herbert's study (1989, 11) we can find a note that smiles and nods belong to the category of acceptances and together with e.g. *Thank you* they create "textbook" responses to compliments. In Yuan's (2002) analysis of compliment responses in Kunming Chinese this reaction is listed together with acceptances and rejections to form a separate category. A *smile* also appears in the comparative study of Czech, Polish, and English compliment strategies by Bielewicz-Kunc (2010) as a type of compliment response. She also introduces *no reaction* (i.e. ignoring) as a common type of response, thus distinguishing it from the non-verbal reaction of e.g. a smile, which, unlike the *no reaction* strategy, recognises the compliment.

In recent studies (Lorenzo-Dus, 2001; Yuan, 2002; Golato, 2002; Huth, 2006) linguists mostly adopt (and partly adapt) some of the existing classifications, concentrating more on preferences in compliment responses in various languages (e.g. Spanish, Chinese, and German) with the aim of making cross-cultural communication easier. It is also possible to trace a tendency towards 'fine-tuning', i.e. researchers do not seem to force compliment responses found in their corpora into given 'boxes' of the opposite categories of *accept* and *reject* but they rather try to list and name all the possibilities on a *scale* from clear acceptance of a compliment to its rejection.

The following table summarises compliment responses as emergent from the studies of different researchers, based on different language data.

POMERANTZ	HOLMES	HERBERT	MILES
I. Acceptances	A. Accept	Agreements	
1. Appreciation Token	1.Appreciation/ agreement token	Appreciation Token	Acceptance
2. Agreement	2. Agreeing utterance	Comment Acceptance	Agreement
	3. Downgrading/* qualifying utterance o		
	4. Return compliment o	Return o	
		Praise Upgrade	
		Comment History o	
		Reassignment o	

* The letter "o" marks the original position of the compliment response type in the classification proposed by the author. To allow the comparison of the categories, I rearranged the types of compliment responses in order to visualise the similarities/differences in the classification of the respective linguists. Rather than labels or terms alone, I followed the similarities of examples representing each category.

POMERANTZ	HOLMES	HERBERT	MILES
II. Rejections	B. Reject	Non-agreements	
1. Disagreement	1. Disagreeing utterance	Disagreement	Disagreement
	2. Question accuracy		
	3. Challenge sincerity		
		Scale Down o	
		Qualification	
		Question	
		No acknowledgement o	
III. Self-praise Avoidance Mechanisms	C. Deflect/evade		
1. Praise Downgrades			
a. agreement	3. Downgrading/qualifying utterance	Scale Down	Self-praise avoidance
b. disagreement			
2. Referent Shifts			
a. reassignment	1. Shift credit	Reassignment	
b. return	4. Return compliment	Return	Return compliment
	2. Informative comment	Comment History	Comment history
	3. Ignore	No acknowledgement	
	4. Legitimate evasion		
	5. Request reassurance/Repetition		
		Request Interpretation	

TABLE 6 Summary of compliment responses

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude the brief survey of the speech act set theory approach, it is possible to say that for corpus-based samples, the speech act set status of apologies, as well as compliments, is more adequate than that of a single speech act. As a result of the complex interplay of linguistic and extra-linguistic factors in real-life communicative situations, the processes of apologising and complimenting are not so straightforward and transparent as to be forced into a straitjacket of predictable speech act set slots. On the contrary, both the processes allow for a variety of language-in-action modifications. Such findings prove the validity of what Mathesius (1982) referred to as the potentiality of the phenomena of language: they are at the language user's disposal, but need not necessarily be activated as fixed configurations of patterns and fixed numbers of discrete slots.

5. APPLICABILITY OF THE FINDINGS IN SLA

Though the results of many comprehensive empirical studies comparing the behaviour of both native and non-native speakers have been in existence for decades (cf. the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Research Project (CCSARP)), as reported by Blum-Kulka et al. in 1989, the need to include pragmatic competence into language teaching has remained a moot point (Kasper, 1997), supported by arguments that pragmatic knowledge does not need to be taught as it develops alongside lexical and grammatical knowledge. Nevertheless, the results of various studies show that non-native speakers and students of foreign languages experience pragmatic failure when interacting with native speakers. Olshtain and Cohen (1990, 45) state that “learners of a language may lack even partial mastery of speech act sets and this lack of mastery may cause difficulties or even breakdowns in communication.” They also claim that many teaching materials are based on the writer’s intuition and are constructed in the absence of empirical studies, reflecting a high level of simplicity and generality. I hope that studies concerning the essence of various speech acts or speech act sets would help the authors of language coursebooks move from general, socio-culturally neutral materials based on self-intuition or tacit knowledge to more specific, empirically anchored studies. Kasper (1997) emphasises the fact that “Because native speaker intuition is a notoriously unreliable source of information about the communicative practices of their own community, it is vital that teaching materials on L2 pragmatics are research-based.” Such materials would help learners acquire socio-pragmatic and pragmalinguistic information through various awareness-raising activities, as well as activities offering opportunities for communicative practice. I believe that raising non-native speakers’ awareness of speech act sets of apologising and complimenting in English can improve their pragmatic knowledge and competence in this area and make them more successful communicators in English as a second or foreign language.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SAS — speech act set	IF — illocutionary force
SAST — speech act set theory	IFID — illocutionary force indicating device
SLA — second language acquisition	PF — perlocutionary force

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