

THE SEMANTICS AND PRAGMATICS ANALYSIS OF JAVANESE AND ENGLISH APOLOGETIC SPEECH ACTS

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Abstract

Reconsidering the role of apologizing as one of fundamental aspects in speech act learner has become important nowadays. It is argued that acquiring apologizing speech act can build their attitude. The purpose of this study is analyzing semantic and pragmatic of Javanese apologetic speech act, especially with respect how Javanese apologetic speech act expression differ conceptually from English expression. In order to find out the differences between Javanese apologetic speech act *nuwun sewu* and English speech act *sorry*, I used the natural semantic metalanguage proposed by Wierzbicka (1987). Furthermore, I described some distinguishable features of Javanese culture as well. By using Blum-Kulka (1989) and her collaboration model, I analyzed Javanese apology speech act strategies found in several conversations and situations. The findings of my study are the attitudinal meanings of *nuwun sewu* and *sorry*, as well as the illocutionary acts associated with the two expressions are different. My study further suggests that conceptualizing speech act expressions, using semantically simple words, may help second learners acquire the proper ways of using speech acts in the target language and culture.

Keywords: Apology, Speech Act, Javanese, *Nuwun sewu*, *Sorry*

Introduction

Understanding and producing speech acts seem to be among of the most difficult aspects insofar as the pragmatics and semantics competence of either second or foreign language learner concerned with. Saussure (1959: p16) defines language as a system of signs that express ideas. Though his definition is based on modern linguistics, his theory does not cover all parts of language itself. Austin (1975) proposes speech act since it encompasses the way people apologize, promise, request, and perform other linguistic acts. At the first time, he used “performative sentence” or “performative utterance” which indicated that “the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action”.

However, Bach and Harnish (1979) believed that there is more to a speech act than Austin idea. In their view, speech acts are a complex combination between utterances, locutionary,

illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. Thus, the speech act schema, or SAS, is as follows, where *e* is an expression, *S* the speaker, and *H* the hearer: “In uttering *e* [utterance act], *S* says something to *H* [locutionary act]; in saying something to *H*, *S* does something [illocutionary act]; and by doing something, *S* affects *H* [perlocutionary act]” (Bach & Harnish, 1979, p. 3).

According to Allan (1998) there are two ways of classifying speech acts, lexical classification (which distinguishes among speech acts according to the illocutionary verbs they express) and expressing act (according to the act they express, such as requesting, apologizing, promising, and so on. Nonetheless Austin (1975) first classified speech acts into five categories: “verdictives,” which represent acts that give a verdict, “exercitives,” which express power on the hearer, “commissives,” which commit the speaker to doing something, “behabitives,” which express

different social behaviors such as apologizing, congratulating, and the like, and “explosives,” which are conversation or argument related, such as “I assume” or “I concede” (p. 151).

However, this categorization had several problems, such as the fact that the categories are not mutually exclusive, and that there is an assumption that speech acts and speech act verbs correspond exactly (Márquez-Reiter, 2000). Consequently, over the years, many researchers have attempted to devise a taxonomy of speech acts that would be generally accepted. Communicative approaches to speech act theory mostly categorize speech acts according to what they communicate to the hearer. Thus, Searle (1976) proposed five types of speech acts, namely: representatives/assertives (present the way things are), directives (instruct somebody to do something), commissives (when one commits oneself), expressives (express feelings and attitudes), and declarations (that bring about changes with the use of utterances).

Following this classification, Leech (1983) distinguished speech acts by the verbs that express them, as he believed that it was impossible to create a taxonomy of illocutionary acts. Those categories have specific difficulties. According to Leech (1983: 125), apologizing is an important means of “restoring” the relationship between participants. He also adds that it is also a difficult speech act to learn by learner in a second or foreign language.

Practicing a new word as a need is often done by second language learner, yet it is important to be practiced for getting a better speaking skill. There are several speaking skills need to be known and mastered by learner in learning and acquiring their second or even foreign language after they are mastering first language. In Javanese, people tend to use Javanese language as their first language. English, which is used globally, is seen as foreign language.

As stated before, expression must be performed and used in daily life in order to get better understanding in using it. One of the most difficult expression used is apologizing. Apologies, however, are difficult for learners to practice as it carries with it humiliation and/or a need for compensation on the part of the speaker. Many Javanese learners of English fail to perform apologizing speech act effectively. For example, they

might say sorry in situations where the Javanese *nuwun sewu* is appropriate, regardless of whether sorry is appropriate in such situations (*nuwun sewu* is translated as sorry in most bilingual dictionaries). Moreover, Javanese learners of English often use nonlinguistic expressions, such as nodding or smiling, as apologies for minor offenses. This is often misinterpreted by English speakers.

The aim of this study is: (1) to examine how Javanese apology speech act expression differ conceptually from corresponding English expression; (2) to examine how Javanese perform the apology speech act. By providing a semantic and pragmatic analysis of the main Javanese apology speech act expression *nuwun sewu*, and compares it with the use of the English word *sorry*. Furthermore, other senses and uses of *nuwun sewu* are considered, as the pragmatics of apologizing in Javanese, which includes non-verbal meaning. The second part of the paper provides an analysis of the findings of the using of both *nuwun sewu* and *sorry* found in daily life.

The findings are that Javanese and English speakers use different combinations of apology strategies. As *nuwun sewu* expresses the speaker's responsibility directly, it is usually followed by compensatory utterances rather than responsibility expressions, while *sorry* is used by English speakers in various strategies which do not emphasize compensation.

Method

The study aimed to investigate semantic and pragmatic of Javanese apologetic speech act, especially with respect how Javanese apologetic speech act expression differ conceptually from English expression.

A qualitative descriptive study is used and applied for describing and explaining the phenomenon. According to Creswell (1994: 145), qualitative research is descriptive in that the researcher is interested in process, meaning, and understanding gained through word or picture. In unfolding meaning, data analysis is considered to be a systematic search. Hatch (2002: 148) describes that it is a way to process qualitative data so that what has been learned can be communicated to others. Analysis means organizing and interrogating data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relation-

ship, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories.

In this study, I analyzed some conversation done by my friends. An observation instrument was used as the main method of collecting data. The data collected was based on observing the conversation chosen. In addition, the sentences were investigated. Analyzing the data was done right after gathering the data had been done well. There were some steps done in doing this study based on the conversation chosen such as coding, and writing the findings following the analysis.

Coding as the first step was done by investigating the conversation. In doing investigation, field note was used for making a written record of the data to make sure that the data gathered was collected completely. After collecting the data by using field note, the analysis was done based on it. Writing the findings as the last step was done after the analysis complete.

The first step in this analysis was obtaining senses for *nuwun sewu* and *sorry* from relevant dictionaries. For *nuwun sewu*, I used *Kamus Bahasa Jawa*, while for *sorry*, I took the definition from *Longman's Dictionary of Contemporary English*. The lexical and grammatical semantics of *nuwun sewu* are discussed using the natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) proposed by Wierzbicka (1987), which is based on the idea that words in all languages can be defined in terms of a simple set of universal semantic primitives. The use of NSM allows for subtle analyses of *nuwun sewu* and *sorry*, with less risk of ethnocentric bias. This includes the fact that *nuwun sewu* performs the apology speech act more directly than *sorry*, but it also provides a key to explain why Javanese speakers use different strategies from English speakers for an apologizing speech act. The various contexts for using *nuwun sewu* and *sorry* are discussed. Furthermore, as stated by Cruse (1986), this kind of discussion can show that the boundary between the semantic and pragmatic domain of lexical meaning is permeable.

Result and Discussion

Expression *nuwun sewu* have mentioned as one of apologetic expression used for Javanese people to ask apology from others. By using natural semantic metalanguage (NSM) proposed by Wierzbicka (1987), this expression will be explained briefly on the following sections.

Lexical and grammatical Semantics of Nuwun Sewu

By using sentence, this section briefly describes how *nuwun sewu* is used; how its arguments express speech act participants' feelings, and how the act may be intensified using adverbs. The situation denoted by the expression *nuwun sewu* includes at least three components in conversation happened. Those are 'the person who feels X' [X stands for *nuwun sewu*], 'what the person feels X about', and 'who the person feels s/he has upset' (Kim (2008: 257-278)) Firstly, the component 'the person who feels X' is a person who did something bad. Secondly, the component 'what the person feels X about' is something that happened before and something that was bad for the hearer. Thirdly, the component 'who the person feels he or she may have upset' is the person or group that was potentially offended. There are two social factors, age and solidarity, related to the component 'who they feel they have upset'. In general, *nuwun sewu* is used for a hearer who is older than the speaker, or is a stranger or the hearers are a group of which the speaker is not a member.

The Pragmatics of Nuwun Sewu

Since the expression *nuwun sewu* includes a component expressing the speaker's responsibility, Javanese speakers do not usually express the speaker's responsibility, by adding phrases similar to the English expressions 'My mistake', 'You are right to be angry', etc., when they say *nuwun sewu*. Such phrases are usually used in order to make clear whose fault it is or to intensify the speaker's apology, especially when the level of severity of offense is high and the speaker cannot provide direct or indirect compensation.

Though *sorry* has become conventionalized to perform an apologetic speech act, it is distinguishable from *nuwun sewu* in situations where the speaker does not take responsibility or takes responsibility insignificantly. Thus, "I'm sorry" as an expression of 'sympathy' or an act of courtesy expression is appropriate, but *nuwun sewu* is not. Fasold (1990:153) claims that "'I'm sorry' is an indirect apology", as it does not express the speaker's responsibility in itself, but "involves the speaker's 'thoughts and feelings'" that the speaker

regrets the act for which he or she is apologizing. Since *nuwun sewu* expresses the speaker's responsibility, it is a more direct way of performing an apology, as compared to *sorry*.

Another significant difference between *nuwun sewu* and *sorry* is that *nuwun sewu* is much less used than *sorry* is, since Javanese speakers often convey their apology implicitly or non-verbally. While Austin (1962:19) recognized that non-verbal or inexplicit performatives could exist, he includes "special reference to verbal utterance" when defining the necessary conditions of a performative.

However, cultures vary as to whether acts similar to those carried out by speaking may be carried out by non-verbal means; this relates to the value placed on imparting information directly. Hall (1977) distinguishes between high-context and low-context cultures relative to how much information is imparted via the context. In high-context cultures such as Indonesia, Japan, and China, communicative situations are common in which much is understood implicitly, and the hearer takes responsibility for misunderstanding; by contrast, in low-context cultures, nothing can be taken for granted in communicative situations and it is the speaker's fault when the hearer cannot discern the meaning.

Accordingly, apologizing is not always verbalized in Javanese, especially within in-groups whose members know each other well and are attuned to getting along with each other. Thus, I include in the discussion of the act of apologizing nonlinguistic acts such as smiling, bowing, and even silence, because these are important in Javanese for performing acts which are usually conveyed by verbal utterances in low-context communicative situations.

The Different Concepts of *Nuwun Sewu* and *Sorry* as 'apology'

Bach and Harnish (1979:52) states that English speakers apologize with two intentions in mind: one is to soothe the hearer's hurt feelings by saying that they regret having done something, the other to "satisfy the social expectation" of expressing regret. The latter intention is adequate for *sorry* as a courtesy expression, but not for *nuwun sewu*.

In order to determine the subtle differenc-

es between *nuwun sewu* and *sorry*, I analyze the words terms of Wierzbicka's natural semantic metalanguage (NSM; Wierzbicka, 1987, 1991). Wierzbicka's approach to meaning is a 'radical semantic' approach. Semantics, pragmatics, and social practice are covered by her proposed components for the meanings of lexical items used to carry out speech acts. Instead of separating linguistic pragmatics from linguistic semantics, Wierzbicka distinguishes between 'linguistic pragmatics', that aspect of meaning which incorporates attitudinal meanings and illocutionary meanings, and 'nonlinguistic pragmatics' which has to do with other considerations of linguistic use, such as those that concern sociologists and ethnomethodologists.

There are two advantages of defining *nuwun sewu* using NSM. First, it is claimed to be a language-independent and culture-independent technical language (Wierzbicka, 1991). It is composed of semantically simple words, the translation-equivalents of which exist in most languages of the world, such as "I", "something", "good", "say", "want", or "because". Because of this, it provides a way of expressing the attitudinal meanings of *nuwun sewu* in human relationships with less risk of ethnocentrism. While general principles of politeness (e.g. Brown and Levinson, 1987) such as maintaining 'solidarity' and respecting 'face' can be used to describe how Javanese apologize, they do not give learners sufficient direction to use individual expressions correctly.

Second, decomposing *nuwun sewu* into illocutionary components provides a more fine-grained description of the assumed attitudes and state of mind of Javanese performing this speech act. Once a detailed understanding of the attitudinal meanings of *nuwun sewu* has been obtained, this will illuminate how Javanese make apologies. For example, the relationship between *nuwun sewu* and 'forget it', which can be said by the offender, respectively the offende in Javanese culture, can be understood in the light of the illocutionary components of *nuwun sewu*. As well, explications in terms of NSM explain why the same word, *nuwun sewu*, can serve not only for apologizing, but also for thanking and requesting; it does this by showing the overlapping sets of semantic components for each of these uses. Overall, decomposition of the meaning of ex-

pressions into an explicit semantic metalanguage, such as NSM, reveals the speaker's emotions and intentions more clearly and concisely than vague application of terms such as 'negative' or 'positive face' (Brown and Levinson, 1987), since the expression in a semantic metalanguage of what are sometimes said to be conventional implicatures makes falsifiable predictions. In fact, such detailed understandings of the meanings of individual expressions are necessary precursors for understanding the range of illocutionary acts in a speech community, and, indeed, for generalizing how 'face' is respected in a society.

The following is Wierzbicka's (1987) definition of the English apology speech act verb apologize:

I know that I caused something to happen that was bad for you
I think that you may think something bad about me because of that and feel something bad towards me because of that
I say: I feel something bad because of that
I don't want you to think something bad about me because of that and to feel something bad towards me because of that
I say this because I think I should say it to you (1987:215)

Furthermore, despite the fact that English speakers can say sorry for what they are in the process of doing, Wierzbicka's definition needs to be expanded. For instance, the speaker says sorry when he or she does not understand, or does not agree with the hearer during a discussion: "Sorry? I didn't catch what you said" or "I am sorry. I can't agree with you". The speaker does not experience being humiliated by saying sorry in this situation, but does feel the need to satisfy the social expectation of expressing regret without taking responsibility.

The concept of sorry is defined as follows:

I know that I caused something to happen that was bad for you or I am now doing something bad to you
I think that you may think something bad about me because of that and feel something bad towards me because of that

I say: I feel something bad because of that

I don't want you to think something bad about me because of that and to feel something bad towards me because of that

I say this because I think I should say it to you

However, nuwun sewu is not always appropriate as a translation of sorry; for example, it is not appropriate when the speaker is doing something bad to the hearer on purpose. An explication of the meaning of nuwun sewu as 'apology' is outlined below:

I think

- a. People want to be a member of a group and support each other as if they were family.
- b. People know what they should do for others according to their positions in the group and people know that they should respect people who are older than them.

I know

- c. You are close to me.
- d. I am not younger than you.
- e. I caused something to happen that was bad for you.
- f. I think that you may think something bad about me because of that and feel something bad towards me because of that.
- g. I want you to know that I did not have any bad intention to do something bad to you and I want you to know that I was unable to prevent it from happening.
- h. I say: I feel something bad because of that.
- i. I don't want you to think something bad about me because of that and to feel something bad towards me because of that.
- j. I want you to know that I want to do something good for you if possible by saying this.
- k. I say this because I think I should say it in order to continue to be thought of as someone who is part of a group of people which includes you.

Components (e), (f), (h) and (i) of this explication show that nuwun sewu as an apology

speech act is similar to the concept of sorry. However, components (a)–(d), (g), (j) and (k) differ. These components are necessary because nuwun sewu has as an essential part of its meaning the idea of the importance of group membership and of responsibility for other members of the group. Historically, these components were influenced by the Javanese tradition.

Other Uses of Nuwun Sewu

In discussing the meaning and use of nuwun sewu, it is important to consider the other speech acts which it can be used to perform (such as ‘thanks’ or ‘request’), as well as contrasting it with the English sorry which can be used for expressing ‘sympathy’. Such a comparison helps illuminate the proposed components. According to Susanto (2008: 2-8), nuwun sewu has 7 other functions in conversation. Here, there will be shown those functions following by the data recorded by the writer.

The definition of nuwun sewu as “asking people to talk”

Nuwun sewu is applied for inviting people who has higher in status social than the speaker such as leader in an organization. It can be illustrated on the following example:

Fajar : Kangge penyelenggaraan acara punika, kita taksih butuh anggaran kint-en-kinten 3 juta rupiah, nanging saldo menika berjumlah 1 juta. Nuwunsewu, mba Dwi dan mas Zaki wonten saran kangge dana tambahan? Monggo. (In order to hold this event, we still need 3 million rupiahs, but the balance is only 1 million rupiahs. I’m sorry, Dwi and Zaki, do you have any suggestion for additional money? Please.)

Dwi : Dipun cobu mawon damel Proposal kegiatan. (Just try to make some proposals.)

Zaki : Leres, kangge diajukaken teng perusahaan menengah. (Right, applying to some companies).

Apologizing expression used by Fajar on the conversation above since he is on the lower status than other people involved in the conversation.

Fajar wants to show respect to Dwi and Zaki. As the lower or younger people, Fajar wants to give his respect to Dwi and Zaki, so he used word nuwun sewu.

Furthermore, since it is related to asking money, Fajar needs to make it as polite as possible. Money, in Javanese culture is one of sensitive issue to be discussed in a forum. Therefore, Fajar uses nuwun sewu.

The definition of nuwun sewu as “decreasing disappointment”

When speaker wants to show that he or she needs to decrease dissatisfaction for other speaker, he or she may use nuwun sewu expression. This definition can be seen on the following example:

Tofik : Kados pundi? Sampun wonten kepastian dosen ingkang badhe rawuh sebagai pembicara?(How’s it? Is there any confirmation for the lecturer coming as the speaker?)

Octa : Kula wau sampun menghubungi Pak Amir, nanging nuwunsewu konco-konco, beliau dereng saged rawuh amargi ngajar. (I have contacted Mr. Amir, but I’m sorry guys, he cannot attend the event due to teaching some classes.)

On the conversation above, it can be seen that Octa used word nuwun sewu before she announced the announcement. She might know that her information will make others disappoint since that was not expected news that want to be heard by her fellows in a seminar.

This situation happened when Octa and her friend were discussing about the speaker on their seminar. They had asked one of their lecturer and expected a good news from him. Nevertheless, their lecturer had to teach his class, so he could not attend and give material on their seminar.

The definition of nuwun sewu as “interruption”

Nuwun sewu is also used for interrupting when someone is speaking. In doing conversation, interruption is one of communicative strategies. By doing interruption, it is expected that conversation is running well. The example of using nuwun sewu in a conversation can be seen on

the following conversation.

Bety : Kangge tanggal nikah ipun kula lan keluarga ngusulaken tanggal 31 Mei 2017. (I propose the marriage date is on May 31 2017.)

Agus : Nuwunsewu dek, tanggal menika ngepasi sedinten sedherenge puasa nggih? (I'm sorry dear, is it a day before fasting month?)

Agus mentioned nuwun sewu for interrupting Bety intention in proposing a date for their marriage date.

The definition of nuwun sewu as “critic”

Nuwun sewu can be functioned as critic for other people. This definition can be seen on the following example.

Malinda : Nuwunsewu bapak/ibu, menawi luwih sae nek bapak/ibu sedanten gadhah tempat sampah kangge misahaken sampah organik kalih sampah anorganik. Mangke kula lan kanca-kanca ingkang badhe ngangkut. (I'm sorry sir/madam, it is better that you have dustbins to separate organic and anorganic waste. My friend and I are responsible for taking all of them.)

On Malinda's point of view, the utterance nuwun sewu is criticizing someone in polite way. Malinda tends to use nuwun sewu to make polite critic in negative way. Brown and Levinson (1987) mentioned this phenomena as hold-on-record.

The definition of nuwun sewu as “command”

Moreover, nuwun sewu is also used for commanding someone. The example of using nuwun sewu in a conversation can be seen on the following conversation.

Jeffri : Mba, nuwunsewu, menawi kepareng nopo mba saged tapak asma teng presensi menika? (Miss, I'm sorry. Would you please sign this attendance list?)

Puspa: Nggih mas, kula wau kesupen dereng tanda tangan. Maturnuwun mas.

(Sure, I forgot to sign. Thank you.)

In this example above, Jeffri used nuwun sewu for commanding Puspa in polite way. Principle andhap asor used and believed by Javanese people will influence how people treat each other.

The definition of nuwun sewu as “clarification”

Nuwun sewu is also used for clarifying when someone is speaking. In doing conversation, clarifying is one of communicative strategies. By doing clarification, it is expected that conversation is running well. The example of using nuwun sewu in a conversation can be seen on the following conversation.

Bagus: Nuwun sewu, maam, kula taksih dereng mudeng bab kalih menika. Menika saged dipun ulangi mboten nggih maam? (I'm sorry maam, I still don't understand chapter 2. Would you please explain to me again?)

Mrs. Intan : Oh, ya Bagus.. (Oh, sure Bagus)

Nonlinguistic Expression as ‘apology’

I turn now to other nonlinguistic ways of expressing apology used by Javanese speakers. First, Javanese smile in situations in which English speaker would never smile. For example, when stepping on someone's toes in a crowded bus, smiling while saying nuwun sewu is an acceptable act of apology. When the Javanese speaker apologizes with a smile for a minor offense, the hearer usually returns the smile and accepts the apology. Using a smile to apologize relates to the Javanese desire for rapid conflict resolution. In a similar vein, when students come to school late, they say pangapunten with a smile to teachers they are close to. Since both nuwun sewu and pangapunten are translated as sorry, Javanese speakers sometimes smile while saying sorry when they apologize to an English speaker. English speakers may misinterpret the smiling and doubt the sincerity of the speaker's apology. In the above situation, if a student smiles and says sorry, an English-speaking teacher will often be upset and say things like “It is not funny” or “You are rude”.

Second, silence is sometimes used when the

speaker and the hearer have a close relationship; speakers assume that hearers can read speakers' feelings in their faces, and so they don't have to say *nuwun sewu*. For example, parents rarely say *nuwun sewu* to their children in Java. However, their intention to apologize is conveyed by a slight change in their facial expression. Non-verbal communication in high-context traditional Javanese communities is still valued, even in modern society. Silence which means to detect someone's intention without any or with very little verbal expressions is very common in Java in-group apology situations.

Third, Javanese speakers nod to show that they accept their faults, and then they expect the hearer's generous forgiveness. Nodding is usually done to an older person or a stranger. Since it is not polite to have eye contact with an older person in Javanese, the speaker inclines his or her head a little. Nodding expresses the speaker's regret, and has many specific situational meanings which are often hard for outsiders to learn, but which are outside the scope of this paper.

CONCLUSION

This study has outlined the semantic and pragmatic properties of the main Javanese speech act expressions *nuwun sewu* and related these expressions to the strategies Javanese use for apologizing. Contrasting the Javanese expressions with the Australian English speech act expressing apology, sorry, not only illuminates their meaning, but also should help Javanese second language students to learn how to apologize appropriately and effectively in English, depending on the situation.

According to the NSM definition provided above, *nuwun sewu* directly involves the expression of responsibility. The comparison of the concepts of *nuwun sewu* and sorry in the domains of 'apology', 'thanks', 'sympathy', and 'request' emphasizes this difference, which is also supported by the fact that a literal translation would result in negative interlanguage transfer. In the present study, the Javanese speech act strategy preferences for apologizing were investigated; the data collected from seventy-four Javanese university students across the seven situations confirm that Javanese speakers prefer not to express responsibility. Instead, they follow up their IFIDs with a compensation strategy. When the

speaker cannot compensate for a serious offense, expressing the speaker's responsibility is used as intensification; the explanation strategy is not preferred in Javanese.

I conclude that, as the comparison of strategy preferences across four languages has shown, a literal translation of speech acts does not contribute to the appropriate speech act performance in the target culture. The present study suggests that the many second language learners who have good lexical and grammatical knowledge, but fail to perform speech acts effectively, should explore the concepts embodied in the main speech act expressions studied by decomposing the latter into the semantically simple units provided by NSM.

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