

RESPONSE TO GHAWI

DONNA M. JOHNSON

*Director, English Language/Linguistics Program
University of Arizona*

Mohammed Ghawi's study makes an interesting contribution to the growing research literature in cross-cultural pragmatics and provides an impetus for further research on Arabic/English pragmatic contrasts. The study essentially addresses three questions: (1) How are apologies realized differently in Arabic and in American English? (2) How do Arabic speakers apologize when using English as an additional language? and (3) What are Arabic and English speakers' perceptions of cultural differences in apologizing? The simultaneous focus on these three questions--the comparative question, the interlanguage question, and the perceptual question--gives the study a certain multidimensional interest. Ghawi has not only uncovered some important cross-cultural contrasts in apologizing, but has begun to draw connections between Arabic speakers' perceptions of pragmatic differences and their performance in both Arabic and English.

A key comparative finding of the study is that, given comparable situations, Arabic speakers were less likely than English speakers to offer an explicit statement of apology (e.g., "I'm sorry") as part of their response. Arabic speakers reported that Americans apologize too frequently, sometimes unnecessarily, and less sincerely than Arabic speakers. When Arabic speakers apologized, they were more likely to offer explanations for the offense than were English speakers. Ghawi reports that some English speakers view this strategy as an avoidance strategy. While the perceptual component of Ghawi's study is very limited, the examination of perceptual information and discourse production within the same study can help explain reasons for cross-cultural misunderstandings.

Data were elicited in using eight role-play situations that had been developed and used in previous research. These data were supplemented by a short questionnaire and by interviews with the subjects about their perceptions of apologizing in each language.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of the study is the comparison between native speakers of Arabic performing in Arabic and native speakers of English performing in English. Ghawi established a set of (essentially quantitative) baseline "norms" (using the term loosely) for performance of these discourse elicitation tasks in a specific research situation for both groups. These "norms" provide a basis for examining the performance of the Arabic speakers in English, which is their second (or third, etc.) language. It would also be desirable to examine the performance of native speakers of English learning Arabic, but few such students were available. Many studies of problems in intercultural communication examine only the performance of learners of a language, comparing their language use with that of native speakers of that language. While such studies can provide valuable information about discourse productions (e.g., Scollon, 1993; Tyler, Jeffries, & Davies, 1988), there is little basis for drawing conclusions about the reasons for the patterns observed, including possible L1 transfer. Ghawi's study avoids this problem by examining Arabic speaker's L1 performance as well as their performance in English. His study, then, falls into the categories of (1) comparative studies, as well as (2) studies that examine interlanguage pragmatics in the context of native language use in both of the languages of interest.

Yet, there are a number of validity questions that must be raised. First, how well does the Arabic speakers' performance on the discourse elicitation task represent their actual Arabic language use in everyday interaction with other Arabic speakers? The best way to answer this question, and thereby conduct a validity study, is to gather extensive naturalistic discourse. This approach would be quite time consuming because apologies may not occur frequently. A compromise might be to draw examples from existing sources such as literature, or to devise creative, semi-naturalistic data collection techniques. Second, how well does the Arabic speakers' performance reflect their language use in Arab cultural contexts? That is, how relevant are the task

situations to life in the Arab world? There may be some important cultural differences in the typical situations that call for an apology. A more culturally-oriented comparative study might employ, if not ethnographic techniques, task situations developed in the context of each culture. What is lost in comparability and control from an experimental perspective would be offset by what is gained in cultural authenticity and cultural explanation.

Now let us consider some validity questions regarding the performance of the Arabic speakers in English. First, it would be interesting to examine the English performance of Arabic-speaking students of English at comparable levels of proficiency who had not lived in an English-speaking country. One might expect patterns of performance in English that would be more similar to those of Arabic speakers using Arabic. Second, it is important to consider how the ethnicity, language abilities, and other characteristics of the researcher conducting the role plays might have affected the performances of the subjects. For example, how might the subjects have performed differently if they had enacted the English role-play situations with a native speaker of English from the U.S.? Because all of the Arabic-speaking subjects expressed the view that one apologizes differently in Arabic and in English, it is possible that they made a strong attempt to use what they perceived as a U.S. apology style. On the other hand, some subjects might have used (either consciously or unconsciously) Arabic ways of apologizing because the researcher was a native speaker of Arabic. These issues complicate interpretation of the data but they are also worthy of further study; that is, one could examine in more detail advanced students' ability to vary their pragmatic or discourse style according to a variety of situational factors, including characteristics of interlocutors.

Perceptions

A most interesting, although very limited, part of this study is the examination of the subjects' perceptions of the "language specificity" or the "universality" of apologizing. By briefly interviewing each of the subjects, Ghawi learned that all of the speakers of Arabic reported that English speakers apologize differently. While this might have been the answer they knew he was expecting, there is some consistency among these reports, their further comments in the interviews, and their discourse performance data. For example, in interviews, Arabic-speaking subjects reported an awareness that Americans apologize to their children to a greater extent than in Arab cultures. The data bear this out. While 100% of the Americans provided an explicit apology to a child and 53% provided an explanation, among the Arabic-speaking subjects, only 59% offered an explicit apology to a child, while 71% offered one (or more) explanations. When using English, this group of Arabic speakers exhibited patterns of performance in the use of these two strategies that fell between the Arabic and English "norms."

Ghawi's analysis of the language specificity or universality of apologizing involved dichotomous coding; that is, students answers were coded as either reflecting a language-specific perception of apologizing or a universal perception. Because the responses of all subjects were categorized as reflecting a language-specific view of apologizing, the most interesting information from these brief questionnaires and interviews involved the specific kinds of language differences the subjects perceived and how they related these differences to cultural behavior and values. Yet, this information was not reported in a systematic way. There is much room for further research in this area, specifically for innovative approaches to linking language performance to cultural perceptions. For example, extensive interviewing involving systematic analysis of the qualitative data would be productive as would experimental studies using video-taped role-play enactments to compare perceptions of language use and cultural appropriateness (see Kasper & Dahl, 1991, for a discussion of methodological problems in metapragmatic judgment studies).

Analysis

Other issues regarding analysis of the data raise questions. Because functional coding of discourse data is not straightforward, interrater reliability should be established based on definitions developed in the context of each specific study.

Speech act data were coded for the presence or absence of a strategy. Frequency of use data were not reported, however. Are there any salient frequency findings that would enrich the data

that are reported? For example, did the speakers of Arabic tend to give long explanations in Arabic and shorter explanations when they were using English? What was the nature of their explanations? Did the native English speakers tend to use one semantic formula for expressing an explicit apology or two? What were these? Information such as this would enrich the comparisons.

Discourse

This study is about language use but, because of the quantitative orientation of the study, we see very little of the actual language that the subjects produced. This is a problem that is typical of much of the research in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics, while research in the Gumperz tradition, for example, emphasizes discourse (Gumperz, 1992). Authors of studies in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics should provide typical examples of discourse that illustrate some of the key findings of a study. For example, it would be most interesting to readers if Ghawi would provide several typical comparative examples of complete Arabic L1 responses and English L1 responses to situations that illustrate, for example, how the Americans provided an explicit apology statement, while the Arabic speakers emphasized explanation. Providing rich examples of actual discourse would not only enhance the article as a report of research, but it would make the findings more useful to materials developers, teacher trainers, and learners.

Interpretation

An important goal of the study was to find evidence of transfer of pragmatic strategies from Arabic to English. The fact that percentages of students using particular strategies in interlanguage performance often fell between percentages of students using these strategies in their L1s provides some indication that transfer from the L1 might be a factor. However, other factors affecting performance must be considered as well, such as those discussed above. If some of the students were multilingual, it would be important to consider how knowledge of other languages and cultures might have influenced their performance and perceptions. Also, in some cases a student may have wanted to make an offer of repair, let us say, but may have been unsure of the correct way to express the offer and may have omitted it.

I would like to see more of the author's own cultural interpretation of the meaning of the differences he found in pragmatic strategies. For example, some subjects explained that "in a meeting individuals should not feel insulted" (p. 43). This statement requires further explanation for non-Arabs. Because the author is a native speaker of Arabic who is highly bicultural, readers would be interested in his interpretations of the reasons for some of the phenomena he observed, even though his explanations might be speculative. His own interpretations would be particularly valuable if he compared them with interpretations of other native speakers of Arabic.

In conclusion, work in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics can be very important not only in addressing issues of comparison and transfer, but ultimately in promoting better cross-cultural understanding. However, to better achieve these goals, a stronger emphasis on naturalistic or ethnographic data collection and on the analysis of discourse in context should lead to richer insights.

REFERENCES

- Gumperz, J.J.(1992). Contextualization and understanding. In A. Duranti & C. Goodwin (Eds.), *Rethinking context: Language as an interactive phenomenon* (pp.229-252). Cambridge University Press.
- Kasper, G. & Dahl, M. (1991). Research methods in interlanguage pragmatics. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 13, 215-247.
- Scollon, R. (1993). Cumulative ambiguity: Conjunctions in Chinese-English intercultural communication. *Perspectives: Working papers of the Department of English*, City Polytechnic of Hong Kong, 5(1), 55-73.
- Tyler, A. E., Jefferies, A. A. & Davies, C. E. (1988). The effect of discourse structuring devices on listener perceptions of coherence in non-native university teacher's spoken discourse. *World Englishes*, 7(2), 101-110.