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Arta de a Cere Scuze in Cultura Romaneasca: Use of Apology in Ethnic Romanian Culture

Oana Trimbitas
University of Akron

Yang Lin
University of Oklahoma

Kathleen D. Clark
Ohio State University

Oana Trimbitas (M.A. University of Akron, 2005) was a graduate student at the School of Communication of the University of Akron. Yang Lin (Ph.D., University of Oklahoma, 1997) is Associate Professor, and Kathleen D. Clark (Ph.D., Ohio State University, 1995) is Associate Professor in the School of Communication, University of Akron, Akron, OH 44325-1003, Email: kclark@uakron.edu.

Abstract

Ethnic Romanian communication behavior constitutes a remarkably understudied area of research. The present study seeks to remedy that by investigating the role of apologies in ethnic Romanian culture. The research questions are (1) What situations demand an apology in ethnic Romanian culture? and (2) What forms and expressions of apology do ethnic Romanians use in situations which demand apology? In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 ethnic Romanians currently residing in the American mid-west using both English and Romanian language. Drawing upon concepts from the intercultural communication literature focusing on apologies, the transcribed interviews were analyzed. The analysis revealed distinctive cultural characteristics regarding use of apology in daily life of ethnic Romanians.

Arta de a Cere Scuze in Cultura Romaneasca: Use of Apology in Ethnic Romanian Culture

Situated at a crossroads of civilizations and graced with harmoniously distributed landforms, Romania brings a unique contribution to world history and culture. Ethnic Romanians are the descendants of the eastern Roman world. From the point of view of language, ethnic Romanians and Romanian culture are related to other Latin people (such as the French, the Italians, the Provençals, the Spanish, and the Portuguese), but, from the point of view of geographical location and religion, ethnic Romanians are closer to the Eastern Byzantine world (Treptow, 1997). Romania is an “island of Latinity” amongst other Slavic countries and cultures. In spite of this geographical distance from the other Latin peoples, ethnic Romanians have “preserved an awareness of their Latin origins throughout the centuries, it serving both as a means of defense and self-preservation” (Treptow, 1997, p. 74).

When the Cold War ended in the late 1980s, the new political environment in Central and Eastern Europe enabled people living in that region to re-establish normal contacts with the rest of world at personal and/or national levels. Today these contacts have become closer, easier, and more frequent with the development of new technology in communication (such as the Internet), integrated economic systems (such as the European Union), and changes in immigration patterns (Samovar & Porter, 2000). Although these contacts, like any other intercultural encounters, can be beneficial, productive, and joyful, they can also lead to frustrating and even harmful consequences (Stephen, 1995). An inquiry to understand communication patterns of individuals of a particular culture can help improve intercultural relations and increase the communicative competence of those who visit or work with ethnic Romanians.

Greetings, compliments, requests, complaints, excuses, justifications, and apologies represent a few communication behaviors common to all people. Apologies, for example, are a part of daily life. Individuals usually apologize when they do something wrong. Sometimes they also apologize on behalf of other people close to themselves, and they apologize for the behavior of these people. People apologize as a social convention, for things and/or behaviors that affect other individuals close to themselves. This is the case of the “situationally required feel-good apology” (Kotani, 1999, p. iv), defined as a type of apology given “when the situation requires him or her to apologize, even when the speaker does not feel responsible for the offense, to make the other party feel good” (p. iv). In most cases, apologies are accompanied by solutions and remedies to the problems for which people apologize.

However, apologies as well as other communication behaviors are influenced by the cultures of the people who use them. People are informed by their cultures about how they should use apologies in their daily lives. Sometimes, when individuals of different cultures interact with each other, the difference in how an apology is used can lead to intercultural miscommunication. For example, it was reported that a Japanese businessman confused his American colleague by repeatedly apologizing for filing a report late, when the American was expecting explanations for and solutions to the problem (Rintell & Mitchell, 1989). Studies of cultural anthropology, pragmatics, and communication suggest that use of apology is a cultural phenomenon (Blum-Kulka & House, 1989). Thus, understanding what occasions require an apology, as well as the

form and expression of the apology, can be a lens through which cultural characteristics can be examined.

A review of the literature found very little research into any form of communication behavior in Romanian culture, however, the purpose of this study is to explore the ways ethnic Romanians apologize and describe the circumstances in which they apologize. As a first step toward identifying and understanding Romanian ethnic culture and its distinctive use of apology, Hofstede's (2001) and Hall's (1976) foundational dimensions of individualistic versus collectivistic cultures and high-context versus low-context cultures are used to establish a conceptual framework for considering apologies.

The function of apologies

Deutschmann (2003) states that definitions of apology include four basic elements: the offender, the offended, the offense and the remedy (p. 44). The offender is the person who offends by saying something wrong, the offended is the victim of the offense, the offense is the offending incident itself, and the remedy is considered to constitute the apologetic act. He considers there to be three categories of apologies: (a) the "formulaic" apology, in the case of a minimal, almost non-existent offense; (b) the "formulaic apology with added function," when the offense is minimal and the apology has other functions in addition to that of repairing the offense; and (c) the "face attack" apology, in cases when "the remedial nature of the apology is questionable" (p. 46).

Apology is not only a speech act but also a social act. As a social act, it is "a response to the accusation of wrongdoing that recognizes the offense, accepts responsibility, expresses regret, and makes a promise" (Adsit, 2002, p. 52). Goffman (1971) considers apology a ritual work that restores social equilibrium and harmony. Thus, the apology

[A]llows the participants to go on their way, if not with satisfaction that matters are closed, then at least with the right to act as if they feel that matters are closed and that ritual equilibrium has been restored (p. 140).

Finally, apologies cannot be understood without reference to cultural beliefs, values and attitudes (Suszczyńska, 1999). Apologies can be either direct or indirect (Fraser, 1981), and they can also be either verbal or nonverbal. Verbal apologies are the those uttered in some particular circumstances that bear this type of communication. Nonverbal apologies employ mimicry, gestures, and facial expressions, with a special emphasis on eye contact.

Cultural characteristics relevant to apologizing

Apologies as a common communicative practice in human interaction are universal, but apologies themselves and the way people apologize vary from one culture to another. Of particular relevance for the study of apologies is Hofstede's (2001) and Hall's (1976) characterization of cultures along the polarities of individualistic versus collectivistic, and high-context versus low-context. While it is important to note that in both individualistic and collectivistic cultures one can find individuals who are *allocentric* (paying primary attention to the needs of a group) or *idiocentric* (paying more attention to their own needs than the needs of others), it is useful for the purposes of this study to consider the broad distinctions characteristic of cultures.

Collectivism refers to cultures that focus more on preserving relational harmony and promoting the integration of the individual within a cohesive group (Samovar & Porter, 2004; Jandt, 2001; Ting-Toomey, 1999; Hofstede, 2001). Collectivistic cultures stress the needs and goals of the group, rather than those of the individual. Individuals belonging to collectivistic cultures are defined by the group to which they belong, depending on family, friends, or the organization to which s/he belongs.

On the other hand, individualistic cultures are the opposite of collectivistic cultures, promoting the individual and his/her personal achievement. Individualism, as a concept, refers to the fact that each individual belonging to a certain culture is unique, special and different from other individuals from the same culture. Some features of individualist cultures include “equality of opportunity,” “independence,” “initiative,” and “self-reliance” (Gannon, 2001, p. 213). An individualistic culture favors competition and personal goals over teamwork and group goals, stressing individual achievement.

Hofstede (2001) identified a variety of cultures based on their scores of individualistic-collectivistic measurement. A few examples of countries with dominant individualistic cultural characteristics are the United States, Australia, Great Britain, Canada, and Netherlands. Examples of countries with collectivistic cultural characteristics include Japan, Korea, China, Venezuela, and Colombia. Sharing aspects of both characteristics are Latin-based cultures, like French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese, which are neither collectivistic nor individualistic (Hofstede, 2001; Jandt, 2001; Ting-Toomey, 1999).

Context is another dimension along which cultures vary (Hall, 1976). In high-context cultures, much of the information and meaning for social interaction is provided by context, while in low-context cultures, such information is provided by the direct verbal communication in the interaction. In the case of a low-context culture, the meaning of a message is “determined by the context because the message is encoded in the explicit code” (Jandt, 2001, p. 219). On the contrary, in a high-context culture, there is less need to speak or write, since the meaning of a message is “in the physical environment or already shared by people” (p. 219). One characteristic of a high-context culture is its consistency. According to Samovar and Porter (2004), individuals belonging to a high-context culture share similar experiences, are aware of their surroundings and thus can “express and interpret feelings without stating them” (p. 77).

High-context cultures and low-context cultures reflect fundamentally different perceptions about knowledge, cognition, and social development. High-context cultural societies tend to be quite hierarchical, with social interaction strongly defined by age and gender. Low-context cultures, such as the United States and Germany, tend to be more heterogeneous and individualistic and accordingly have evolved a more direct communication style. Typically, individuals of a low-context culture prefer independence, self-reliance, and a greater emotional distance from each other. They must rely more on words, and on those words being interpreted literally. Getting or giving information is the goal of most communication exchanges. In high-context cultures, such as Japan, which tend to be homogeneous and collectivist, people carry within them highly developed and refined notions of how most interactions will unfold, of how they and the other person will behave in a particular situation. People in high-context cultures have evolved a more indirect style of communication. They rely less on words, the nonverbal communication and subtleties being more important.

Low-context culture is a pattern found in North America, Canada, and Western Europe, whereas high-context culture is the dominant pattern in the Middle East, Central Asia, Far East, Africa, South America, and to some extent in Eastern and Central Europe.

Each of the aforementioned aspects of culture has important ramifications for interpersonal communication. Individualistic cultures use a more direct communication style and emphasize the importance of the individual, promoting “individual responsibilities” and “personal autonomy” (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 67). In contrast, collectivistic cultures use an indirect communication style and emphasize the importance of “we.” Jandt (2001) states that “the wants, needs, and desires of a speaker” are illustrated by the verbal/spoken message in the case of the individualistic cultures, while in the case of the collectivistic cultures the same issues are illustrated in the nonverbal language, meaning that they are implied (p. 203).

Collectivistic cultures are usually characterized as being high-context as well, while individualistic cultures are low-context. This means that individuals from a high-context culture use a more indirect communication style; because they share similar experiences, verbal messages are expressed in few words. Gestures, subtle behavior and choice of words are the main features of this type of culture. On the other hand, persons belonging to a low-context culture use a direct communication style, relying on literal interpretations of verbal messages.

The function of apologies varies by culture

Since communication behaviors are influenced by cultural patterns, the use of apology varies as well. Apologies and their structures have been studied in cultures such as the United States (Takaku, 1997; Sugimoto, 1995; Kotani, 1999; Savina, 2002; Edmundson, 1992), Japan (Takaku, 1997; Sugimoto, 1995; Kotani, 1999; Haley, 1998), Korea (Koo, 2001; Kim, 2001; Lee, 2000), Russia (Savina, 2002; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983), and European and African countries (Suszczyńska, 1999; Lipson, 1994; Mulamba, 1991). To better understand the function of apology, comparing and contrasting apologies in two cultures can help clarify the distinctions: Japan is an example of a collectivistic, high-context culture while the United States exemplifies an individualistic, low-context culture. Researchers have studied the comparative functioning of apologies in these two cultures, and, therefore, they are particularly useful for our purposes.

Wolfson, Marmor, and Jones (1989) found that there are seven kinds of situations when Americans feel obliged to apologize: not keeping a social or work-related commitment; not respecting property; causing damage or discomfort to others; making others responsible for one’s welfare; expecting another to be available at all times; confusing strangers with acquaintances; and protecting another from sanctions from those in authority over them. On the other hand, Eastern Asian cultures tend to place a higher focus on apologies and the act of offering apologies, and so tend to focus more on saving face, apologizing more often. Eye contact and facial expressions are particularly characteristic of the Asian cultures in apologetic circumstances, especially in business conflicts and/or communication.

Other researchers found that Japanese students apologize and offer accounts more often than American students (Takaku, 1997; Sugimoto, 1995; Kotani, 1999; Haley, 1998). Kotani (1999) reported that the Japanese students interviewed perceived the “situationally required feel-good apology” as being very important, while American

students stated that the “sincere apology” was most important. In addition, the Japanese students tended to apologize more often for failure and incompetence, while the American counterparts more often apologized for poor manners and incompetence (Barnlund & Yoshioka, 1990).

Sugimoto (1998) explains that Americans tend to apologize only for “self and small children and pets that supposedly lack the reason of mature adult humans” (p. 255), while the Japanese are expected to apologize for a larger part of their social network, ranging from their immediate family to distant relatives, to friends (mostly peers and juniors) from school or work and to members of any social networks to which they are strongly connected (p. 255).

Identifying ethnic Romanian culture

Hall (1966, 1976) places Latin cultures in the middle of the dichotomy low-versus high-context cultures. To date, there has been no study that specifically identifies ethnic Romanian culture as either collectivistic or individualistic. All that is known is that ethnic Romanian culture is Latin-based. There is, though, some speculation that ethnic Romanian culture is collectivistic since it possesses some collectivistic features, and as such we can infer it may also be a high-context culture. More specifically, ethnic Romanian people are characterized by the idea of unity; family, friend, and group are vitally important to ethnic Romanians. Ethnic Romanian individuals are defined by the group to which they belong and the set of values and beliefs they share. Ethnic Romanians “display a more indirect communication” approach, according to Riel (1997) being very careful not to offend the person(s) to whom they speak. Verbal messages shared among ethnic Romanians do not need to be very specific, instead focusing more on nonverbal communication behaviors, such as gestures, mimicry, and intonation of voice, rather than on words. These speculations suggest that ethnic Romanian culture may be considered more collectivistic and high-context culture than individualistic and low-context.

Understanding apologies in ethnic Romanian culture

Anecdotally, Riel (1997) notes that ethnic Romanians are characterized by other peoples as being warm, open and very friendly, as are other Latin-origin peoples. Usually, they are careful not to offend other persons and, therefore, use an indirect communication style. As individuals, ethnic Romanians are defined by the group to which they belong, and by their friends, and family. They are very talkative and like to beat around the bush, oftentimes being really difficult for an interlocutor to understand. They tend to apologize very frequently, for fear of offending the other person engaged in a communication interaction. They use all types of expressions of apology, from the very simple “*Scuze*” (“Sorry”) to the more complex “*Imi pare rau, te rog iarta-ma*” (“I am awfully sorry, please forgive me”), or “*Iti promit ca nu se va mai intampla niciodata. Lasa-ma sa ma revansez*” (“I promise you that that will never happen again. Please, let me make it up to you”). Ethnic Romanians tend to accompany their apologies by solutions, justifications, and remedies to correct the wrongdoing.

As seen earlier, apology as a communicative behavior reflects deep cultural structures. Knowledge of the use of apology helps understand underlying cultural assumptions and values. To date, apologies have been studied in relation to various cultures and languages, but no study was found that examines use of apology in ethnic Romanian daily life from the perspective of human communication. This present study

makes an attempt to fill such a void, and, therefore, the two research questions for this study are:

RQ1: What situations require an apology in ethnic Romanian culture?

RQ2: What forms and expressions do ethnic Romanians use when apologizing?

Method

The primary research method used in this study was in-depth interviews. All the participants of the study were ethnic Romanians currently living in a Mid-Western region of the United States. Using contact information provided by the local Romanian community and through personal networking, the first author of this study personally approached each potential participant and briefly explained the purpose of the study. This lead researcher is an ethnic Romanian who has lived in the United States for three years and is fluent in both Romanian and English,

Pilot study

In a pilot study, the researcher interviewed five ethnic Romanians; at the time of the interviews, the length of their stay in the United States ranged from one and a half years to five years. Although all of them had some knowledge of English, they were free to choose whatever language they wanted for the interview, between Romanian and English. Three of them chose English. The reason for that, they stated, was the fact that they use English in their everyday life at work or on campus and thus, it is easier for them to express themselves in a language other than their own. The other two used the Romanian language, this being the language they felt more comfortable with when expressing themselves. None of the participants desired to be audio-taped, so the researcher used shorthand to record their responses. At times, when some explanations or clarifications were needed, they were offered in Romanian, at the researcher's request. The researcher also double-checked all responses with the participants to make sure that everything was documented correctly. The pilot study provided helpful information for the researcher to develop the interview questions that were used in the main study.

Main Study

Fifteen ethnic Romanians (eight females and seven males) participated in the full scale in-depth interviews. Among the participants, five were between 20 and 30 years old, five between 31 and 40, three between 41 and 50, and the remaining two between 60 and 70. Eight participants chose the Romanian language for the interview (each participant was free to choose whatever language made them feel more comfortable), and the rest decided to use English. At the time of the interviews, the participants' length of stay in the United States ranged from one and a half years to 20 years.

The interviews lasted from an hour to about two hours each. Each participant was interviewed separately. With the approval of the participants, two of the interviews were audio taped and transcribed. The other thirteen interviews were recorded using shorthand notetaking. The research also double-checked all the information provided by each participant in order to be sure there was no misinterpretation or misunderstanding of the meaning. Whenever some more details or clarifications were necessary, the participants were asked to offer them in Romanian.

The interviews were conducted by using a "semi-structured approach" (Warschauer, El Said, & Zohry, 2004, p. 164). In addition to the background information about the respective participants, the researcher asked the participants a series of questions about the use of apologies, the forms and expressions used when engaging in

an apologetic communication context, and some situations when different expressions of apology are used. Adapted from Cohen and Olshtain (1981), the questions focused on five situations that were perceived as universal apologetic situations: (1) insulting someone at a meeting; (2) forgetting a meeting with your boss; (3) forgetting a meeting with your friend; (4) backing into a car; and, (5) bumping into an older woman, spilling her packages and hurting her. Participants were first asked to respond to those situations and then to answer the questions about the situations and their use of apologies

Analysis

Situations requiring an apology

What situations trigger the use of an apology? Participants' responses suggest that such situations occur in two distinct contexts. The first context is professional, or the work place, and the second is personal life not directly related to individuals' job. Most of the participants' responses reflected experiences in the second context.

Professional context Several participants explained that if an employee forgets a meeting with his/her boss, this employee needs to offer a formal apology in a respectful manner. One female participant also mentioned that she apologized to one of her clients even though she wasn't responsible for the problem, saying, "I apologized to a client for an increase in her payment due to factors outside myself and outside the company. I apologized for the fact that sometimes things happen and no one is really to blame." Being polite and respectful, especially at work, or with strangers and superiors, is admired and esteemed. Although only a few participants mentioned incidents that required an apology at a work place, most of them suggested that apologizing at work place should be formal and sincere across all situations.

Personal life context Most of the participants' responses were related to their personal life outside their work place. First, the context of family life presented various situations requiring an apology. Family comes first, so apologies offered to family members are considered one of the most important communicative practices. This is especially true of the older Romanians interviewed. One participant (father of two & grandfather of one, retired, married, age 60, 7 years in the United States, Romanian language) mentioned several offensive acts requiring an apology, "*cind inseala asteptarile copiilor*" [when s/he [parent-translator's note] doesn't meet her/his children's expectations] or "*cind isi supara parintii*" [when s/he upsets her/his parents]. Another participant (mother of two & grandmother of three, retired, widow, age 70, 12 years in the United States, Romanian language) considered that the most important situation in which people should apologize is "*cind gresesc cu ceva important fata de familie*" [when people behave wrongly with their families].

One female participant responded that she apologized many times for something she did not do, especially to her parents, "... many times ... I apologized for having an opinion, to my parents especially. I felt that by expressing my opinion, which I still hold, it hurt them and I felt like I had to apologize, even though I don't think I did anything wrong." Another participant (father of one, age 37, employed, married, 15 years in the United States, Romanian language) said that he would offer apologies to his wife even when he didn't do anything wrong so that everything would be all right. He also declared that his wife would do the same:

[English translation] I ask for excuses or offer apologies when I'm wrong.

Usually I offer apologies to my wife, even if I'm not wrong, to 'calm the air' in

our home. Sometimes, she does this as well. It makes us feel more comfortable with one another... [laughs]

Using apology in this way, according to him, would make a more peaceful ambiance within the family.

Second, the relationship between friends also creates different situations in which individuals need to apologize to each other. In some of these situations, an apology had to be accompanied by remedy and a positive attitude. For example, in the given situation of “forgetting a meeting with your friend,” an appropriate way to apologize is: “*Imi pare rau ca am uitat*” [I’m sorry I forgot about this] followed by a ‘treat’ (e.g., inviting the friend to a movie, to a restaurant), or simply “I’m sorry, X,” accompanied by a ‘treat’ such as a cup of coffee. The actual ‘treat’ in these instances is not as important as the gesture and the invitation, doing something to ‘repair’ your failure to remember the meeting. However, in certain situations, an apology would not be enough to repair the relationship. Some participants indicated that an apology would not be accepted if the offender verbally or physically hurt the offended person, or if the person who apologized did not mean it (i.e. to lie or to use the apology as a scapegoat). One participant (female, age 33, graduate student, married, 2 ½ years in the United States, Romanian language) described such a situation:

[English translation] When a close person, especially a friend, insults me, I cannot think of him or her as my friend anymore. I usually end the relationship with that person. I agree that friends usually tell the truth to each other about certain things, but from here to insult me ... No, no way I would accept an apology in this case.

The most difficult situations for apologizing. Some of those interviewed identified a particular apologetic situation, ones which require an apology, but are very difficult. “The most difficult situation” is that particular situation when the offender finds it the most difficult to apologize (to say the words “I’m sorry” or to behave in an apologetic manner) for an offensive act. There were two important questions asked during the interviews, “What was the most difficult situation when you had to offer an apology?” and “What was the most difficult situation when somebody else had to offer you an apology?” All the respondents referred to personal situations, involving close family (parents, siblings, and spouse) or significant other. For example, one participant (male, age 30, employed, married, more than 4 years in the United States, English language) responded that the most difficult situation when he had to offer an apology was when he missed his sister’s wedding:

When I missed my sister’s wedding. I have (sic) been here (in the U.S.- transcriber’s note) for only two years and I had no papers that could allow me to travel outside the United States. Moreover, I had just starting working for this important company, and I had no vacation at that time. I explained this to my sister and she forgave me, but still.... To this day, I feel awful for not making it to my sister’s wedding. I saw the tape...she sent me the tape from her wedding, but it’s not the same thing. ... [sighs]

Another participant (father of one, age 37, employed, married, 15 years in the United States, Romanian language) reflected:

[English translation] I think that the most difficult situation was when I had to apologize to my wife. It happened before we got married. We were friends, but she was living in Romania, I was living here [in the U.S.], and some insignificant and unjustified suspicions came up. You know...when the person you love is not by your side...I apologized for that. It was the first and the only situation of this kind.

Two of the other participants indicated that an event involving a divorce was the most difficult situation when they had to be offered an apology. One of them (mother of one, age 37, employed, divorced, 5 years in the United States, English language) described this situation,

It was when we divorced. Things were not as they used to be and we ended up getting a divorce. It was the most difficult for me, especially as we had a boy, and he was caught up in the middle.... He apologized to me ... you know ... I'm so sorry, I won't do this again... but I just couldn't ... [forgive him anymore].

The most difficult situation for another participant (male, age 48, employed, divorced, 20 years in the United States, Romanian language) was as follows:

[English translation] When I was 18, my father died. I was all alone with my mom and a younger sister. Over night, I got to be "the head of the household." At that age, other boys went out, they got girlfriends ... [smiles] ... I had to take care of the house, to help my mom with the household chores, you know how that is. One day, I don't know what got into me, I just exploded. I yelled to my mom that she was to blame for my dad's death and for me not having time to go out with my friends. I was so sorry for this outburst ... I apologized to my mom, and she forgave me, she understood me ... I was only 18 ...

Another participant (female, age 23, student, single, 2 years in the United States, Romanian language) apologized to her significant other:

[English translation] When I got into a fight with my boyfriend. We see each other only four months a year. He's living in Romania and sometimes there are questions you have no answer for, such as "what if s/he cheated on me," questions that came from both of us, and they led to fights (on the basis of some unfounded suspicions ... which I think anyone in this situation has) and then to asking for forgiveness.

Other most difficult situations mentioned by participants were when somebody dumped them, when they had to wait in a restaurant for a table to become available (and the host forgot about them), or when another person did something wrong and one of the participants was the one who got punished (the respective participant was ultimately offered an apology for that).

In sum, it seems that all participants mentioned a member of their families, or a friend/significant other as being the one who had to apologize to them, or whom they had to apologize to in some circumstances they perceived as being the most difficult.

Situations in which apologies are not accepted. In spite of the many difficult situations which prompted ethnic Romanians to apologize, those interviewed describe a

limit, a situation for which an apology is simply not acceptable. Such situations are those where someone has intentionally hurt someone else, either emotionally or physically. Such a situation is one in which an offended person rarely accepts the apologies offered by the offender.

One participant (mother of one, age 37, employed, divorced, 5 years in the United States, English language) was offered an apology when she divorced from her husband due to his infidelity. Even if on the surface she accepted the apology, for their child's sake, she could not forgive him or his behavior:

It was a shock for me to find out of his infidelities. We were married for seven years and I thought that he loved and respected me. It wasn't true. When I found out [about his love affairs] and I told him about the divorce, he started crying like a baby, but I couldn't forgive him. Not anymore...you know, I have (sic) heard some rumors before this, but I didn't believe them. He truly hurt me and my feelings. We came here [the US] together but I ended up alone, with a child to take care of. He apologized many times, but nothing was the same anymore. [...] I accepted his apologies for my son's sake, but deep down in my heart I could not, and he [her husband] knows that.

Apologies offered between or among friends are generally accepted easily in the case of a minor incident (like that of forgetting about a meeting). However, invading privacy is a reason considered to be absolutely intolerable, and an apology is neither acceptable nor accepted. In a situation like invading your friend's privacy by means of gossip, the friendship is usually terminated.

One of the female students (age 25, single, 20 years in the United States, English language) stated that a situation in which she finds it inexcusable not to apologize is when a close friend invades your privacy by gossiping about you, although even a sincere apology would not be enough to save the friendship. She recalled one time when she had a very close friend with whom she shared all her secrets and intimate thoughts, but her friend unintentionally shared the participant's secrets with a third person. The participant found out and their friendship ended. Her friend apologized several times, but the participant declared that, "I could not trust her anymore, as she used to be like a sister to me and she betrayed my trust. I could not accept her apologies, even if they were sincere."

Forms and expressions of apology

Apologies are classified as direct and indirect and formal and informal (Fraser, 1981). A direct apology is, for example, the form "I'm sorry," or "I (must) apologize for ..." where the verbal statement alone is sufficient. An indirect apology is an apology that is usually accompanied by a solution, remedy, promise, or explanation. Some examples of indirect apologies are: "Forgive me for...", "I truly regret that I ...," and "That was a mistake. I promise I will never do/say that again."

Analysis of the interviews showed that in both formal and informal contexts, ethnic Romanians would be expected to accompany apologies by explanations, promises, solutions, or remedies, using forms such as "*Imi cer scuze, a intervenit ceva si n-am putut veni,*" [I apologize, something came up and I couldn't make it] or "*Iarta-ma, imi pare rau, promit sa nu se mai intimple,*" [Please forgive me, I'm so sorry, I promise this won't happen again] or "*Scuze ca + cauza + lasa ca + solutie,*" [I'm sorry that + cause + let

me/I will + solution] or “*Imi pare rau ca s-a intimpla asa, ma voi revansa*” [I’m so sorry this happened, I will make it up to you].

In addition to direct and indirect ways of making apology, there are formal and informal contexts where specific apologies are uttered. A formal context implies apologizing to a superior/boss/teacher /older person, while an informal context implies apologizing to family, friends or close persons. Some examples of apologies offered in a formal situation are “Please excuse me, that was my mistake and I will remedy it at once,” or “I apologize for not being able to attend the meeting.” Apologies offered to family members and friends are not very different, but they are uttered in a more ‘relaxed’ tone of voice: “I’m so sorry. Please accept my apologies,” or “Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.”

In a formal communication context, when offering apologies to superiors, elders or strangers, one would expect ethnic Romanians to use forms and expressions such as: “*Imi pare rau, nu trebuia sa spun ce-am spus,*” [I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that] “I am so very sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings by telling what I think,” “*Va rog sa ma scuzați,*” [Please forgive me] “*Imi cer scuza, a intervenit ceva si n-am putut veni*” [I apologize, something came up and I couldn’t make it].

For example, in the given situation of “insulting someone at a meeting,” several respondents would use: “*Imi pare rau, nu trebuia sa spun ce-am spus*” [I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that], or “*Scuze, am fost deplasat. Nu se va mai intampla*” [I’m sorry, that was out of line. It would never happen again]. This context is considered to be a formal one, and therefore the expressions used were formal and polite. In the Romanian language, the politeness is expressed by means of the pronoun of politeness, which is similar to the personal pronoun in its second person plural form, but more powerful and respectful.

More polite forms of apology are indicated by expressions several participants indicated that they would use in a formal type of situation, such as “*Imi pare rau. Va rog sa ma scuzați, nu se va mai intimpla*” [I’m sorry. Please excuse me, it won’t happen again], “*Va rog sa ma scuzați, voi remedia problema*” [Please excuse me, I will see to it immediately/I will solve the problem], “*Va rog sa ma iertati daca...*,” [Please excuse me if...] “I apologize for...,” “*Imi pare rau ca s-a intamplat asa*” [I’m sorry this happened] and “*Imi cer scuza pentru intarziere...*” [I’m sorry for being late...].

One participant (father of two & grandfather of one, retired, married, age 60, 7 years in the United States, Romanian language) stated that he would not use words to apologize in a formal context, but his attitude, and behavior. More exactly, he said that, when found in a formal type of context, he would avoid offering apologies to others, but would apologize through his attitude, by doing something for the offended person:

[English translation] I avoid offering apologies. I avoid using the classical forms of apology, and even if I am wrong, I would rather apologize through my attitude. For example, when I was young, in college, I made a joke--it doesn’t matter now what joke--to a young instructor. She found out that I did it, and got upset, though not very, as she got a nice sense of humor. As she was young, more or less our age, and to make up for that bad joke, I offered to prepare the lessons for another class she had. She accepted.

Finally, it is interesting to note that all participants agreed that there are some differences between asking for apologies and asking for pardon. Asking for pardon implies a more formal and polite context (such as bumping into somebody at the mall, stepping on somebody's toes while dancing, etc.), while asking for apologies is "a way of expressing regret for something committed against someone (each time, not a one-time thing) and it's thought of in the context of day-to-day exchanges" (female, age 25, employed, single, 15 years in the United States, English language). Moreover, apology is offered and/or received in a more serious circumstance (asking for forgiveness from family, close friends, etc.), and pardons are offered to a stranger on the street, or for something less important (for example, forgetting to call somebody, or not holding the door for another person when entering a store, etc.).

Discussion

In addressing the research questions, this study begins to shed light on characteristics of ethnic Romanian culture and helps comprehend a specific communicative practice, the use of apology. Various cultures may have different uses and/or understandings of apologies and apologies differ in form. For example, apologizing to a close person (family members, friend, spouse, etc.) is considered an informal act, while apologizing to a stranger, a boss, or an instructor is considered a formal act. Moreover, apologies offered for a minor incident (like bumping into somebody on the street, or in the supermarket) are different from those offered for a major or severe incident (such as lying to somebody, not keeping a promise, invading privacy, etc.). Apologies are uttered subsequent to an offense to acknowledge wrongdoing.

The first research question considers those situations which require the use of apology in Romanian culture. All the reasons and situations mentioned by the participants during the interviews are important to consider, however, several situations mentioned by the respondents seem to absolutely require apology. Emotionally or physically hurting another individual, either intentionally or unintentionally, is a situation that requires an apology. Ethnic Romanians are especially sensitive to such a situation involving a family member, and they consider that offering an apology to a family member for any wrongdoing is one of the most important communicative acts in their social life. For the purpose of family harmony, an ethnic Romanian is sometimes willing to apologize to other family members for something he or she is not responsible for, and the other family members would expect him or her to do just that. Clearly, ethnic Romanians' use of apology in family setting reflects an interesting characteristic of Romanian culture. This feature, an emphasis of maintaining family harmony, has been identified to be associated with many collectivistic and high-context cultures such as Japanese, Korean, and Chinese cultures (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001; Ting-Toomey, 1999).

An extreme situation is when an individual's privacy is violated, and, thus, one person is considered to have committed an inexcusable offense. In general ethnic Romanians value warmth and openness and consider any individual—an acquaintance or a stranger—their friend. However, if this person gossips about his or her friends, then his or her friends would consider that he or she invades their privacy, and, thus, betrays them. In this situation, to ethnic Romanian participants, although an apology may have been offered, the apology would not be accepted. Therefore, the apology cannot undo the

offense, and the relationship cannot be repaired. Since existent intercultural communication studies of apology focus primarily on the forms and expressions of apology (e.g., Haley, 1998; Kotani, 1999; Takaku, 1997; Sugimoto, 1995), future research needs to investigate the implications of unaccepted apology for interpersonal relationship, particularly when such a relationship (e.g., between parents and children and between spouses) cannot be terminated.

The second research question focuses on the forms and expressions of apology used by ethnic Romanians. The analysis of the participants' responses illustrated that ethnic Romanians use a variety of ways to express an apology, ranging from the very simple "Sorry" to the more complex "I'm very sorry. Please forgive me for doing/saying that. I promise I'll never do/say that again." Ethnic Romanians also tend to use the indirect forms of apology. In addition, apology is usually accompanied by remedy, promise, or solution in both an informal context and the context of a major incident that involves close persons. Again, this particular feature on how an apology is offered in Romanian culture is very similar to what has been identified in Japanese culture (Takaku, 1997; Sugimoto, 1995).

A general conclusion could be drawn from the participants' responses that ethnic Romanians tend to use indirect apologies, and to prioritize the group's (either family or friends) interest over their own. Family members are the most important, and the participants' responses reflect that (the most difficult situation when they had to apologize involved a family member or close friend/significant other). Even if, at times, a simple and straightforward "I'm sorry" will do, most of the times they use indirect apologies, accompanied by either solution, or remedy, or promise. This study, as discussed previously, provides some evidence to support a previous speculation offered by Riel (1997) that Romanian culture may be a collectivist and high-context culture.

Finally, the results of this study suggest that communicative competence which recognizes that ethnic Romanians may use a more indirect and contextual form of communication than other Europeans has important implications for intercultural relationships. In particular, those from low-context, individualistic cultures who develop personal or professional relationships with ethnic Romanians in Romania or other countries need to be aware of the importance and nuanced use of apologies in maintaining trust and harmony in social relationships.

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