

## Natural Semantic Metalanguage Theory and Some Italian Speech Act Verbs

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### 1. Introduction — the study of speech acts and the risk of ethnocentrism

This paper examines some Italian speech act verbs, looking at how we can best express their meanings in an accurate way intelligible to people unfamiliar with Italian, but without falling into the trap of ethnocentrism. Speech acts have for many years now been the focus of research, both in the fields of pragmatics and semantics. They constitute an interesting area of study because across languages one can observe many fascinating differences in the kinds of speech genres most used by (and presumably most salient for) a particular group of people.

Unfortunately, however, insights into the rich inventories of speech acts in the world's languages are limited by researchers' heavy reliance on the English language as an interpretive tool. All too often it is assumed that English speech act categories like "apology", "thanks", "request", or "order" are in some way universal, and that speech acts of other languages can be analyzed in terms of the way they fit into these categories. These complex categories are far from universal, however – they reflect Anglo culture and values, and are therefore inappropriate tools to use when examining other languages, since they bring an ethnocentric bias into one's analysis. For example, a researcher might decide to undertake a crosscultural analysis of, say, "apology" in a particular language. The problem with this is that "apology" is a very complex term, and it is by no means universal. The scholar could well find themselves studying so-called "apology" in a language that does not even lexicalize the concept "apology". "Apology" certainly is a salient concept in the English-speaking world, but it is ethnocentric to assume it holds the same importance in other cultures and languages. Similarly, every so often, a scholar decides to undertake a crosscultural analysis of "gratitude" or "gratitude expressions", and the same problem arises. Expressing thanks is of such fundamental importance in Anglo culture that it is all too easy to assume that it must be the same the world over, but in fact this is not the case (cf.

e.g., Apte's 1974 study of Hindi and Marathi culture).

While scholars may take an English concept like "apology" as their starting point, there are of course many who in their findings go on to explain that the language in question actually does not express apology in the way we would expect, or that it does not have an equivalent for the English "sorry", or the category of "apologizing". They are still using an English concept as their measuring stick, however, and essentially analyzing the other language in terms of how it is different or lacking something from the standard (English), and this still amounts to ethnocentrism.

## 2. An example from Japanese

Japanese provides a particularly good example of a language in which Anglo ideas about notions like "apology", "thanks" or "gratitude" do not apply. One Japanese expression which is common in a number of situations that in English would call for "sorry" is *sumimasen*. English speakers are told this word means "it never ends", it is also sometimes glossed as "indebted". But what strikes English speakers as much more curious is the fact that it also appears in many situations where in English we would say "thank you" (Wierzbicka 1991:157). Armed with this information, the temptation is to say – as quite a few scholars do – that Japanese does not distinguish thanks and apologies, that there is some kind of blurring between these two categories. Sometimes Japanese scholars themselves do this, especially if they are explaining the Japanese language and culture to English speakers. For example, in their book *How to be polite in Japanese*, Mizutani and Mizutani (1989:47) say "apologetic-sounding expressions are often used as polite expressions of gratitude". The flaw in this kind of analysis is that it assumes that these two English concepts – "thanks" and "apology" – are in some way universally applicable categories, boxes into which we must be able to squeeze the speech acts of other languages. In practice, however, this is not the case, and trying to analyze other languages and cultures in terms of English concepts proves to be very limiting.

In the case of Japanese, one is able to make much more sense of the use of *sumimasen*

by looking at it from *within* the Japanese language and culture, rather than trying to approach it by means of English. For example, cultural key words (cf. Wierzbicka 1997) can often tell us a great deal about the meaning and significance of a particular speech style; thus, in the case of *sumimasen*, the Japanese key word *on* is very revealing. *On* is a highly culture-specific concept, a central human value for the Japanese, which can only be approximately glossed in English as something like 'indebtedness', 'debt of gratitude', or 'obligation'. A longer, more detailed explication is required to make its meaning clear, but essentially it refers to some bad feelings a person has when another person does something good for them. One feels bad because of a kind of "debt" or "obligation" one now has to that kind person. Of course, sometimes one feels good things because of another's kindness, as is the case with "thank you" and gratitude in English, but this is not the focus of the concept *on*, which refers to a one-sided relationship, involving almost a kind of burden. In the light of the centrality of *on* to the Japanese, it is much easier to understand the use of *sumimasen* where English speakers might expect thanks, since in Japanese culture, in certain situations it is important to focus on the *bad* feelings that result when another person goes to some trouble on one's behalf.

Clearly, then, it is quite pointless to try to apply categories like "apology" and "gratitude" to the Japanese language and world view. It is ethnocentric to assume that there is some natural distinction between these two categories, and to define another culture by their lack of this *Anglo* distinction. The Japanese might just as easily describe Anglo culture as one lacking a sense of *on*. (For a full discussion of the meaning and cultural importance of *on* and a number of other key words of Japanese, see Wierzbicka 1997.)

### 3. The Natural Semantic Metalanguage

Having seen from the case of Japanese the dangers of relying on English-specific concepts in the analysis of speech acts in other languages, it becomes apparent that if we are to achieve a fruitful examination of speech act verbs, a framework for analysis is required, one that helps us to avoid the trap of ethnocentrism. The framework to be used in this paper is the Natural Semantic

Metalanguage theory (or NSM), which has been built up by Anna Wierzbicka and her colleagues over the last thirty years. (Cf. e.g., Wierzbicka 1996; Goddard ed. 1997; Goddard and Wierzbicka eds 1994 and 2002.) It offers a methodology which we can use to analyze cultures in a way that is clear and rigorous, and not ethnocentric. The NSM consists of a mini-lexicon of about 60 undefinable concepts (or primes), each of which is believed to be universal, that is, to be lexicalized in all languages. These primes have been proposed after a great deal of crosslinguistic investigation of many diverse languages, including both Japanese (Onishi 1994) and Italian (Maher 2000). Below is the list of primes in English and in Italian:

English version

Substantives:	I, YOU, SOMEONE(PERSON), SOMETHING(THING), PEOPLE, BODY
Determiners:	THIS, THE SAME, OTHER
Quantifiers:	ONE, TWO, SOME, MANY/MUCH, ALL
Attributes:	GOOD, BAD, BIG, SMALL
Mental predicates:	THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
Speech:	SAY, WORDS, TRUE
Actions, events, movement:	DO, HAPPEN, MOVE
Existence, and possession:	THERE IS, HAVE
Life and death:	LIVE, DIE
Logical concepts:	NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF
Time:	WHEN(TIME), NOW, AFTER, BEFORE, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME
Space:	WHERE(PLACE), HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE, TOUCHING (CONTACT)
Intensifier, augmentor:	VERY, MORE
Taxonomy, partonomy:	KIND OF, PART OF
Similarity:	LIKE (HOW, AS)

Italian version

Substantives:	IO, TU, QUALCUNO(PERSONA), QUALCOSA(COSA), GENTE, CORPO
Determiners:	QUESTO, LO STESSO, ALTRO
Quantifiers:	UNO, DUE, C'È...CHE, MOLTO, TUTTO

Attributes:	BUONO(BENE), CATTIVO(MALE), GRANDE, PICCOLO
Mental predicates:	PENSARE, SAPERE, VOLERE, SENTIRE, VEDERE, SENTIRE
Speech:	DIRE, PAROLE, VERO
Actions, events, movement:	FARE, SUCCEDERE, MUOVERSI
Existence, and possession:	C'È, AVERE
Life and death:	VIVERE, MORIRE
Logical concepts:	NON, FORSE, POTERE, PERCHÉ, SE
Time:	QUANDO(TEMPO), ADESSO, DOPO, PRIMA, MOLTO TEMPO, POCO TEMPO, PER UN PO' DI TEMPO
Space:	DOVE(POSTO), QUI, SOPRA, SOTTO, LONTANO, VICINO, (DA UNA) PARTE, DENTRO, TOCCARE(CONTATTO)
Intensifier, augmentor:	MOLTO, (DI) PIÙ
Taxonomy, partonomy:	TIPO DI, PARTE DI
Similarity:	COME, COSÌ

The Natural Semantic Metalanguage also has its own very simple grammatical rules governing the way the primes can be combined. Again, this grammar is based on extensive crosslinguistic studies. Thus, the Natural Semantic Metalanguage enables us to express complicated ideas by putting together very simple concepts. Limiting ourselves to using only the simple universal concepts and structures of NSM helps us to avoid the temptation to base our analyses around language- and culture-specific concepts. When we use NSM we are forced to use universals – we can no longer rely on our more convenient, but also more biased, language-specific labels. Furthermore, explications formulated in NSM are so precise and detailed that everything we are asserting about a culture is laid bare, for anyone to test. We can't hide in the fog of vague expressions like "directness" and "indirectness" because our analyses are spelled out component by component in simple words that anyone can understand and judge critically.

The Natural Semantic Metalanguage has been used to explicate cultural norms and

values (cf. e.g., Goddard 2000, 2001; Wierzbicka 1991), emotion terms (cf. Wierzbicka 1999), and the meaning of the Gospels (Wierzbicka 2001). As an example of the use of NSM, let us consider Wierzbicka's (1997:260) explication of the Japanese concept *on* (slightly adjusted here in the light of more recent research into the Metalanguage):

*on*

- (a) X thinks like this about someone:
- (b) this person did something very good for me
- (c) I can't do something like this for this person
- (d) I have to think about this always
- (e) I have to do good things for this person because of this
- (f) if this person wants me to do something I have to do it
- (g) when X thinks like this, X feels something bad because of this

This explication, because it is expressed in such simple concepts, makes the meaning of *on* clear to anyone, regardless of whether they have a background knowledge of Japanese, or of linguistic semantics. It pins down the word's meaning much more effectively than any English glosses.

One area of meaning in which the Natural Semantic Metalanguage is a particularly useful tool is in the explication of speech act verbs. The NSM method can help us avoid common pitfalls such as circularity and the defining of words using other equally, or even more, complex words. Its applications are perhaps even clearer if one wants to compare words across different languages because we can easily pick out which components of meaning are missing or slightly different in the explications of words which a bilingual dictionary might tell us are equivalent. NSM helps us to break these often very complex concepts into simpler units of meaning, enabling us to look more accurately and systematically at the semantic composition of different speech acts. This was done in depth by Wierzbicka in her 1987 book *English Speech Act Verbs: A semantic dictionary*, which remains a very useful resource, although the Metalanguage has been refined and improved upon significantly in the intervening years.

A number of Italian speech act verbs do not have exact counterparts in English. The best way to explain them, then, is by dividing them into chunks of meaning using the

metalexicon of simple, undefinable words. The speech act verbs to be examined here are *salutare*, *raccomandare* and *raccomandarsi* (in the form *mi raccomando*). These verbs have been chosen because they are of interest both semantically and culturally – they do not have exact equivalents in English, and it seems probable that their importance in Italian is due to some extent to certain characteristics of the culture. Examples of use of the verbs are mostly drawn from novels and film, as well as some overheard uses and sentences checked with native speakers. In each case an English gloss has been provided to give some idea of what the sentence says, but it must be remembered that these are only approximations of the meaning of the original Italian, because English speech act verbs rarely coincide exactly with Italian ones. To explain more fully and exactly the verbs' meanings is, of course, the purpose of the NSM explications.

#### 4. *salutare* 'greet', 'farewell', 'say hello to', 'say goodbye to'

*Salutare* is a word whose full meaning is particularly difficult to translate into English because it is something like a combination of the meanings of more than one English speech act verb. The following examples and their English glosses show some of the different contexts in which *salutare* can be used:

- 1) Eravamo a Zurigo, abbiamo pensato di passare a salutarla. (De Carlo 1997: 209)  
'We were in Zurich so we thought we'd pass by and say hello to her.'
- 2) Settimio salutava e scortava alle poltrone chiunque entrasse. (De Carlo 1997: 155)  
'Settimio greeted everyone who came in and escorted them to the armchairs.'
- 3) [Era] mille volte piú rock...di quando l'avevo salutata la notte della sua festa di matrimonio. (De Carlo 1997: 209)  
'[She was] a thousand times more "rock" ... than when I'd said goodbye to her / farewelled her on the night of her wedding reception.'
- 4) Misia ha telefonato per salutare suo figlio. (De Carlo 1997: 296)

'Misia phoned to say hello to her son.'

- 5) [at the end of a letter] Adesso ti saluto se no perdo l'aereo. (De Carlo 1997: 360)  
'I have to say goodbye now, otherwise I'll miss the plane.'
- 6) Salutami Angelo / la tua mamma / tutta la famiglia...  
'Say hello from me to Angelo / your mum / the whole family'

What can be seen by comparing these example sentences to their English glosses is that *salutare* has more than one English translation. In similar situations, an English speaker would use the speech act verbs *greet* or *farewell*, or, more likely (and somewhat more colloquially), simply the expressions *say hello* and *say goodbye*. It would be incorrect, however, to say that *salutare* was polysemous between 'greet' and 'farewell', since there is no evidence that this is the case. Italian, it would seem, does not make the distinction that English makes between saying something to someone at the beginning of an encounter (greeting), and saying something to them at the end (farewelling). My proposed explication of *salutare*, formulated using NSM, is as follows:

#### **SALUTARE**

- (a) I want to say something to you now
- (b) I think that it will be good if I say it
- (c) I know I can't say things like this to you at all times
- (d) I can say it now
- (e) I say: I'm thinking about you now  
because of this I feel something good
- (f) I think that if you can you will say something like this to me at the same time

As shown by examples 4, 5 and 6, *salutare* can be done not only in person, but also by telephone or by letter, or through a third person, which means that our explication cannot require speaker and addressee to be in the same place. This is one way in which the Italian verb differs from some related English speech act verbs such as *greet* and *farewell* (cf. the explications for these words in Wierzbicka 1987:217, 222-3). What one has instead is the notion that the speaker is in some kind of unspecified situation which means that he or she can say something to the other person (d). This is not necessarily because they are together – they could be many miles



apart, but they nevertheless have an opportunity to communicate. Component (c) refers to the nature of *salutare* as a means of delimiting an encounter between two people. It is done either after a period of time has passed when two people have not been able to say things to each other ('say hello' in English), or it is used when such a period is about to begin ('say goodbye'). *Salutare*, therefore, is a means of taking an opportunity while we have it of saying something to a person, knowing that we cannot do this at all times. It can be performed not only by speaking, but also by means of a gesture (such as a wave), so we must remember, when reading this explication, that the prime SAY need not necessarily involve spoken words. It is also not necessary to know a person to *salutare* him or her, which is why the explication contains no component like "I know you". One might easily *salutare* someone on an afternoon walk in the country, or if one sat next to them on a train, even if one had never met this person.

Naturally, not everyone who performs the speech act of *salutare* does so genuinely, because they really do feel something good about the other person, as captured in component (e). In example 2, when Settimio "greet" people coming to a film festival he has organized, it is above all because he wants to make the right impression, that is, he wants them to think he feels good things when he thinks about them. Nevertheless, such examples not change the meaning of the word *salutare*. Component (e) expresses the message conveyed by *salutare*, regardless of whether this message is exploited by an insincere speaker to give a false impression of "good feelings".

There is considerable cultural significance attached to the speech act *salutare*. One can easily think up scenarios of people being offended because the *salutare* ritual was not carried out when it should have been.

- 7) L'ho vista in città ieri e non mi ha neanche salutato.  
'I saw her in town yesterday and she didn't even say hello to me.'
- 8) È andato via senza neanche salutarmi.  
'He left without even saying goodbye.'

Italian even has an expression *andarsene all'inglese* (literally, 'to leave English-style'),

meaning to leave *senza salutare* 'without *salutare*', something that is considered quite rude. There is also something reciprocal about *salutare*. In doing it one assumes the addressee will do the same in return (f). I have used the words "if you can" in this component, since it would not always be possible for someone to return a *saluto* (for example, if it is expressed in a letter). Normally, though, one is expected to do so, and if one failed to, this too would be an affront, as is expressed by this Venetian proverb:

- 9) Saludar xe creanza, risponder xe obbligo (Salutare è educazione, rispondere è obbligo).

(Gianduzzo

1987:172)

'Salutare is polite, replying is one's duty.'

Thus, an examination of the speech act verb *salutare* not only gives us an insight into a new and different semantic structure, it also gives us an idea of certain Italian cultural norms which go along with it. In many cultures, including, for example, Australian Aboriginal culture, there is no particular norm stipulating that one should greet or farewell people, in fact, it is quite rare to do so (Hargraves 1992:29, 35). In contrast to this, *salutare* is a very important cultural ritual for Italians.

## 5. raccomandare

*Raccomandare*, too, has no exact English translation. It has a number of different senses, only two of which (the second a reflexive form) will be explicated here. The first sense we will examine is sometimes translated as 'recommend' or 'entrust', but these are rather inadequate glosses. *Raccomandare* involves saying to someone that you would like them to help a certain other person in need of some kind of assistance or protection. Often this assistance may be in the form of lenience regarding a punishment, or favour in a search for work, with exams, or with some complicated bureaucratic process. The following examples of this sense of *raccomandare* come from a large Italian dictionary, *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*:

- 10) Francesco Crispi [...] vorrebbe, recandosi in Jersey, far la vostra conoscenza e per mezzo vostro quella di qualch'altro buono. Io ve lo raccomando

caldamente.

'Francesco Crispi [...] would like, in going to Jersey, to make your acquaintance and through you, to meet some other good men. I warmly recommend/entrust him to you.'

- 11) ...dovette ricevere nel suo ufficio una vecchia donna che gli presentava e raccomandava una fanciulla, la propria figlia.  
'...he had to receive in his office an old woman who introduced and recommended/entrusted to him a girl, her own daughter.'

"Recommend" is clearly an inadequate gloss here – it sounds a little odd in English to recommend a person (unless you are explicitly recommending their services, for example, as a tradesperson), and it doesn't give the full sense of what is meant by the Italian. Replacing "recommend" with "entrust" does not help a great deal either.

One final example uses *raccomandazione*, the nominal form of the speech act verb. In his autobiographical film *Caro diario* [Dear Diary], Moretti (1994) says that he was finally able to get an appointment with Rome's most highly regarded and sought-after dermatologist "*grazie alla raccomandazione di un amico*" ('thanks to a friend's *raccomandazione*'). In this case, the friend used some kind of influence to get Moretti the necessary appointment as quickly as possible, so that he didn't have to wait as long as everyone else. In NSM, the meaning of *raccomandare* could be expressed along the following lines:

## **RACCOMANDARE**

***ti raccomando la persona X* – 'I recommend/entrust to you person X'**

- a) I say to you:
- b) I know this person (X)
- c) I think that X is a good person
- d) I think that you can do very good things for X
- e) I can't do good things like this for X
- f) I want you to do good things for X
- g) I think that you think good things about me
- h) I think that if you know that I think X is a good person

you will think that X is a good person

- i) I think that because of this you will want to do good things for X

As can be seen from this explication, it is usual to *raccomandare* a friend or acquaintance to a third person who has some kind of superiority and is thus in a position to offer the friend something which one cannot offer oneself (components d and e). In the example from *Caro diario*, Moretti's friend is unable to cure his skin condition himself, but he does know a good dermatologist who can help. One makes a *raccomandazione* precisely because one cannot help oneself, at least not directly. Instead one uses one's good standing with someone who can help. This involves saying, or at least leading the addressee to believe, that the friend is a good person (c). *Raccomandare* is not concerned with giving *proof* that the friend is a good person, the understanding is rather that the friend must be good simply because the trusted person making the *raccomandazione* says so (h). *Raccomandare* is to do with persuading the addressee to have faith in one's judgement, on the basis of some kind of prior trust or respect: "I think that you think good things about me" (g). This is a speech act firmly rooted in a society based around notions of family, friendship, acquaintances (*conoscenze*) and favours (cf. e.g., Barzini 1964:190; Ginsborg 1990:2; Parks 1996:109-110; Richards 1994, Ch.7). These are concepts which are considerably more salient in Italy than in Anglo society, which is undoubtedly why there is no English speech act verb corresponding closely to this sense of *raccomandare*.

#### 6. raccomandarsi (mi raccomando)

The reflexive form, *raccomandarsi*, also has a number of different senses, one particularly common one being the form *mi raccomando*. This works as a kind of exhortation to do something, because the speaker knows how important this is (something the addressee may not have considered). For example, a friend's father once gave me the following warning about Bologna train station, a place he considered very dangerous for a naïve overseas visitor:

- 12) Stai attenta alla stazione, mi raccomando.  
'Make sure you're very careful at the station.'  
[Lit. Be careful at the station, mi raccomando.]

Another example of the way the phrase is used is in this excerpt from a novel, in which the writer describes the chaotic making of an amateur film in the expensively furnished lounge room of a friend's unknowing parents.

- 13) Ci muovevamo in un'alternanza assurda di gesti incuranti e gesti cauti, schiocchi e schianti e "Piano, piano" e "Mi raccomando, mi raccomando" e "Certo, certo". (De Carlo 1997:65)
- 'We moved in an absurd alternation of careless gestures and cautious gestures, of cracks and crashes and "Keep it down" and "Careful, careful" [mi raccomando, mi raccomando] and "Sure, sure".'

One final example, from a tutorial about interpreting:

- 14) Dovete tradurre tutto. Mi raccomando.  
'You have to translate everything. It's very important [mi raccomando].'

There are no obvious ways of translating *mi raccomando* into English. It essentially serves to reinforce the speaker's words and the authority they have because of their awareness of the "bad thing" that might happen if the addressee doesn't follow their advice. In English, of course, this has to be done quite differently, so the glosses above really only go a short way to conveying the meaning of the Italian. A clearer idea can be gained from an explication expressed in simple and universal concepts:

## **RACCOMANDARSI**

### ***mi raccomando***

- a) I know that something bad can happen
- b) I think that you do not know this
- c) I want you to know this
- d) I think that if you know this, you will do something
- e) I think that if you do this, maybe this bad thing will not happen
- f) because of this I say to you:
  - something bad can happen
  - you have to think about this
  - you have to do something because of this
- g) I can't not say this

The illocutionary purpose of the expression *mi raccomando* is to make the addressee realize that something bad can happen, effecting a change in their behaviour which will hopefully avert such an outcome (components d and e). There is an expectation that one's message will be heard and acted upon ("if you know this, you *will* [not just "can"] do something"). The speaker feels so strongly about the potential danger that s/he feels almost forced to bring it to the addressee's attention. This is expressed by the final component of the explication.

The person who says *mi raccomando* is effectively putting their own knowledge, wisdom and judgement forward, quite strongly, in order to convince another person to think hard about what will be the best thing to do. This is a powerful way of providing advice (cf. Parks 1996:151-152 on the importance in Italian culture of giving others advice). It is not surprising that English has no speech act corresponding to this, since in English, as Wierzbicka (1991:31) has noted, advice tends to be given rather tentatively. This is because in Anglo culture it is generally unacceptable to "impose" one's ideas on another person (even if it might be for their own good). As a result, English speakers go to great pains to avoid "putting pressure" on others (cf. Wierzbicka Forthcoming), generally trying to acknowledge, when giving advice or making suggestions, that the addressee does not have to do what they say, for example, by proffering advice in the form of a question, such as "Why don't you speak to your boss about it?"

## 7. Conclusion

One can see, then, that even a relatively brief examination of some Italian speech act verbs can provide an insight into some semantic, pragmatic, and cultural aspects of the Italian language. Even two quite closely related languages, such as English and Italian, differ considerably in the kinds of speech acts they require, and it is important that we are able to understand the exact meanings of these speech acts. Looking at the semantic composition of speech act verbs piece by piece, avoiding any reliance on complex culture-specific concepts, we gain not only a clearer insight into their meanings, but also into how speech acts can reflect cultural practices.

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