

The Contrastive Analysis Concerning the Forms of Congratulations in English and Montenegrin



Linguistics

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Milena Mrdak Mićović – Nikšić

University of Montenegro, Montenegro.

Abstract

The question of politeness in language has been one of the most popular ones in linguistic studies since the second half of the twentieth century, intriguing and motivating numerous authors to compare the English language system with those of many other languages. Interesting and complex at the same time, mainly because of the intersection of grammar, psychology and sociolinguistics, the theme of this paper has been a huge challenge for its author, since it required both theoretical study and the review and comparison of the results obtained in practice.

The objective of this paper is to describe the expressions of congratulations in English and Montenegrin, which are common linguistic resources for the realisation of speech acts. Since these expressions have not been described in detail, we thought that they should be systematically researched in order to complete their descriptions in both English and Montenegrin and their contrasting with each other.

Introduction

The phenomenon of politeness in language has been studied since the late 1970s, and the authors who have dealt with it agree that the studies published by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1987) and John Watts (2003) represent a milestone in the study of politeness in languages all over the world. Etymologically, it can be assumed that the word *polite* was derived from the Greek word *poli* meaning city or *politizmos* meaning *civilization* (Tegopoulos - Fitrikis, 1993) while the Latin language also contains the form *politus* within the meaning of the verb *polished* or *well-behaving* (Tzartanos, 1997). Thus, the basic meaning of the term would be *polite*, *genteel* and *beautifully mannered*. (Sifianou, 2000)

Recent linguistic researches have shown that communication is not only the way in which a piece of information is transmitted from the speaker to an addressee, but also “an equally important mean of establishing, maintaining, and even terminating social relationships with other people.” (Sifianou, 2000, p.12) While spoken communication, according to Robin Tolmach-Lakoff (1975), has been characterised as spontaneous, it is often seen as unclear and confusing with numerous ambiguous forms and reiterations, whereas written communication is almost always well-planned and organised, so it can be said that while the written form of expressing congratulations is a very convenient one, the spoken form is more spontaneous and “warm”. For this reason we decided to divide the corpus into spoken and written, formal and informal types to enlighten the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features of expressions of congratulations, believing that the obtained results would be transparent to the readers of this paper.

Forms of politeness differ from each other on the lexical, syntactic and communicative levels and their selection depends on the context. Native speakers are keen to produce them spontaneously since they are able to identify polite and impolite forms and use them in a specific situation, so that it can be said that they are intuitively aware of their existence. The objective of this paper is to provide a precise contrastive analysis of the forms of expressing congratulations since a non-native speaker cannot rely on intuition while using them.

Review of Literature and Theoretical Background

There are not many studies published so far dealing with the subject of cross-cultural analysis of ways of congratulating except for the studies published by Murata (1998) and Can (2010), since the authors have

usually examined this speech act from the standpoint of the context (Khatib, 1997), or differences and similarities in the meanings of the messages of congratulations in a specific culture (Can, 2010, Turkish culture; Milosavljević, 2007, Serbian culture; Tsilipakou, 2001, Greek culture; Wierbitzka, 1986, Australian culture).

The speech act of congratulation has been chosen due to the fact that there are no academic studies concerning contrastive analysis of this speech act between English and Montenegrin. In fact, the papers concerning the languages spoken in the region of the Balkans mainly deal with an inventory of these forms without a systematic description (Milosavljević, 2007; Mrazović and Vukadinović, 1990; Polovina, 1984).

The first studies dealing with the speech act of congratulation were those published by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) in *Speech Act Theory*. The speech act of congratulations is a “behabitive” in Austin’s classification of illocutionary act, while Searle defines it as an “expressive” referring to expressions of feelings and emotional states.

Using a speech act of congratulation, a speaker expresses satisfaction with an important situation or event related to the addressee. The event may or may not be directly connected with the other party or any of its merit (with some personal or business success) – it may also be related to holidays (such as Christmas). Therefore, congratulations are said to be “intrinsically polite” (Leech, 1983) while some authors (Can, 2011, p. 22) have noticed that: “the expressions of approval are aimed at strengthening social relations and intimacy (Tsilipakou, 2001) and they make communication interactional (i.e. social in nature) and *culture linked* rather than transactional (i.e. message-oriented) (Corbet, 2003)”. Jakubowska (2003) defines congratulations as supportive rituals, performed to establish a mutual support between the speaker and the addressee in comparison to remedial rituals aimed at maintaining again a disrupted situation between the speakers.

Reasons for congratulating can be one of the following:

- An event associated with the addressee and some of his success;
- Congratulations on the occasion of a holiday;
- An event that is associated with the addressee and one of its merits with a wish of a personal nature, while a cultural script offered by Wierbitzka (1985, p. 229) reads as follows:

I know that something good has happened to you.

I think it wouldn't have happened if you hadn't done something.

I assume you feel something good because of that.

I want to say that I feel the same because of that.

I say: I feel something good because of that.

I say this because I want to let you know how I feel because of it.

I assume that you would want me to say this.

The corpus of this study encompasses sentences selected from various situations found in the spoken and written language, which we recorded in both languages as well as dialogues from TV series and talk shows, sentences taken from magazines and the British National Corpus¹.

The Speech Act of Congratulations in Written Formal Discourse

¹ The **British National Corpus** (BNC) is a 100-million-word [text corpus](#) containing samples of written and spoken [English](#) from a wide range of sources.

This type of discourse consists of the forms oriented towards the speaker, so called “explicit performative utterances“ and those oriented toward the addressee. These forms usually consist of the lexeme *congratulations* like in the following example:

(1) *Congratulations to Francene Kaplan on earning her doctorate and to Peter Knap and to Russ Kerr on winning the awards in the 1994 Outdoor California Photo Contest...*
(from the BNC)

or of the modal verbs MAY and WOULD, very often followed by the verbs *offer* and *like*:

(2) We would like to congratulate Michael Calvin on his excellent article ‘Olympians in all but name’.
(from Cosmopolitan)

(3) *May we offer our sincere congratulations to the nominees of this prestigious award.*
(from Cosmopolitan)

The Montenegrin language offers the forms consisting of the present tense of the verb *čestitati* which are frequently preceded by the terms *najsrdahnije*, *najiskrenije* (examples 5 and 6), or those consisting of the plural of the noun *čestitka* (example 7) usually used in the form of a polite request. There are also the forms consisting of the modal verbs HTJETI or ŽELJETI used in the present, perfect or forms of potential², as well as the verb MOLITI (examples 7, 8 and 9):

(4) *Čestitam vam u ime crnogorskog naroda na postignutom uspjehu.*
(from the speech of the President of Montenegro, Montenegrin newspaper *Pobjeda*)

(5) *Svim srećnim dobitnicima najsrdačnije čestitamo, a ostalima želimo više sreće u sljedećem izvlačenju.*
(from the newspaper *Pobjeda*)

(6) *Povodom izbora u zvanje docenta, molim vas da primite najiskrenije čestitke...*
(from an e-mail)

(7) *Primiti iskrene čestitke povodom šezdeset pet godina rada.*
(from an e-mail)

(8) *Draga Aleksandra,*
Željela bih od srca da Vam čestitam na uspješno odbranjenoj disertaciji...
(ibid.)

(9) *Htjeli bismo od srca da Vam čestitamo na postignutom uspjehu.*
(ibid.)

(10) *Molim Vas da primite moje iskrene čestitke povodom stečenog akademskog zvanja.*
(ibid.)

The formal expressions of congratulating are usually those made in written form addressed to family members and friends since this speech act is always associated with stereotyped, habitual behaviour. The English language provides forms consisting of the modal verb MAY+ direct object + bare infinitive or LET + direct object + bare infinitive (examples 11 and 12).

² Potential in Montenegrin refers to verbal mood used for the expression of desire, ability or intention to perform an action.

Although these forms are mainly oriented towards the speaking person, in Montenegrin they contain the performative *željeti* in the third person singular or plural (example 16) or the adjective *srećan* followed by a wish for the addressee. Forms consisting of the term *neka* followed by the present form of the main verb are also frequent (example 14):

(10) Merry Christmas and may you enjoy good health!

(from *Hello!* magazine)

(11) Happy New Year! *May your wishes come true!*

(from *Cosmopolitan* magazine)

(12) Merry Christmas, may peace and prosperity come to you and your family!

(from an e-mail)

(13) U svoje i ime Studijskog programa za engleski jezik i književnost *čestitam* vam na jubileju uz želju da nastavimo plodnu saradnju.

(from the newspaper *Pobjeda*)

(14) *Srećan Božić, mnogo zdravlja i ljubavi žele ti Batrićevići.*

(from a greetings card)

(15) Mnogo sreće u budućem životu *žele ti* Milena i Maša.

(ibid.)

(16) *Neka* vam život bude pun radosti i sreće!

(ibid.)

(17) U ime Vlade Crne Gore i svoje lično ime *želim* vam srećne novogodišnje i božićne praznike *uz želju da ih provedete u zdravlju i veselju.*

(from a formal announcement of congratulations)

It is evident that in Montenegrin are very frequent the forms with the performative *željeti* in the form of the 3rd person singular or plural used at the end of the sentence providing the information about the name of the speaker:

(18) Srećno rođenje kćerke, *žele ti* kumovi Nina i Slavko sa djecom.

(from a greetings card)

(19) Srećan prvi rođendan malenoj Maši *žele* Zlata, Stojan i Nađa Popović.

(ibid.)

(20) Mladencima Ivani i Goranu mnogo sreće *želi* porodica *Andrijašević iz Amsterdama.*

(ibid.)

The Speech Act of Congratulations in Spoken Formal Discourse

The speech act of congratulations in spoken formal discourse contains forms with expressions of praise and compliments which are more expressive than those sent in written discourse, and are perceived by the addressee as being more sincere. In this formal medium of communication, as well as in communication performed in written form, congratulating forms are usually oriented towards the person speaking. The forms performed on the occasion of a situation resulting from the recipient's merit consist of the performative *congratulations/ čestitam(o)* with a special emphasis on the addressee (examples 21, 24 and 25):

- (21) *I congratulate you. You've done a fine job, John!*
(from the TV series *Desperate Housewives*)
- (22) That was excellent. *Congratulations!*
(from Oprah Winfrey's talk-show)
- (23) *Congratulations* on passing your Master's test.
(conversation between colleagues)
- (24) *Čestitamo* nagrađenim kolegama.
(ibid.)
- (25) Koleginice Marković, *čestitamo*.
(ibid.)

In addition to these, the imperative forms can be found in Montenegrin which are not typical for the English language except in situations where the speaking person is addressing a third party usually using the verbs *give* or *send* in English and *primiti* in Montenegrin:

- (26) *Give* my compliments to the cook.
(from Oprah Winfrey's talk-show)
- (27) *Primate cestitke!*
(conversation between colleagues)
- as well as the forms performed by a polite request:
- (28) *Please* accept my *warmest congratulations* on your Master's degree.
(ibid.)
- (29) *Molim* vas da *primate iskrene cestitke* povodom sticanja diplome.
(ibid.)

The forms of congratulating in both language systems are often covered by the nominal forms such as *my heartfelt/sincere* congratulations, frequently in superlatives such as *warmest/sincere/most sincere* or *najsrdačnije/najiskrenije*:

- (30) Please accept my *most sincere congratulations* on your promotion.
(ibid.)
- (31) Koleginice, moje *najsrdačnije čestitke!*
(ibid.)

The forms of the formal and informal style very often contain the expressions *Bravo! Good for you! Well done!* in English and *Bravo!, Sjajno!, Odlično!, Svaka (ti) čast!, Neka ti (vam) je sa srećom!* in Montenegrin

- (32) *Bravo*, young colleague!
(ibid.)
- (33) Good for you, colleague!
(ibid.)
- (34) *Sjajno! Bravo! Odličan odabir literature.*
(a teacher to a student)

Nominal forms, preceded by the adjective *happy/srećan* which can be followed by wishes expressed by the constructions *let+ direct object +bare infinitive* in English and the performative *želim* are also very frequent:

(35) Happy birthday! *May your wishes come true!*

(from the TV series *Desperate Housewives*)

(36) First of all, *let me wish* the young couple happy times...

(ibid.)

(37) *Srećan* rođendan! *Želim* ti da ti se sve želje ostvare!

(a conversation between friends)

The Speech Act of Congratulations in Written Informal Discourse

Although it is very hard to make a clear distinction between the expressions found in written communication of an informal style since they have rather stereotypical structure, they can be distinguished by means of the choice of the illocutive forms, the words, the manner of addressing as well as the length of the greeting text. English speakers are keen on using the form *congratulations* which is often followed by the structures *to be happy for you/ your success*, or found in an abbreviated form *congrats* (example 39). When it comes to Montenegrin, it can be said that the written forms of the informal expression of congratulating very often lack the verb *čestitati* in the present tense and that they often consist of the adjective *srećan* which can be followed by phrases containing the performative *želim*. Both languages contain the forms consisting of the additional wish referred to the addressee and English speaker often expresses congratulations using the present participle of the verb *to wish* (40). The forms *neka + present* of the main verb or *da + present* of the main verb are very common ones:

(38) *Congratulations* on your superb work. *May* this year bring you happiness and prosperity!

(from the BNC)

(39) You took a chance and it has worked out and I am so happy for you, *congrats!*

(ibid.)

(40) Happy Easter! *Wishing* you happiness and love!

(ibid.)

(41) *Draga* moja, *srećna* godišnjica! *Da ste* svi zdravi i veseli!

(taken from a private e-mail)

(42) *Draga* Nataša, *neka* ti ova godina *bude* divna i prepuna sreće i radosti. *Srećan* rođendan.

Tvoja Milica.

(from a greetings card)

The Speech Act of Congratulations in Spoken Informal Discourse

The results of our research showed that there is no sharp line between expressions of congratulations performed in formal and informal language, since those used in informal spoken communication are said to be mainly stereotypical. While English speakers usually use the forms *congratulations*, *well done*, *bravo*, *good for you*, *full marks to you* or *nice work* those whose mother tongue is Montenegrin use the forms *čestitam(o)*, *svaka čast*, *skidam kapu*, *sretno bilo*, *adj' sa srećom* etc...:

(43) *Good for you*, dear!

(from the TV series *Desperate Housewives*)

(44) Daddy, I came second in History!

Well done, my boy, well done!

(from the BNC)

(45) *Svaka čast*, bila si sjajna!

(conversation between colleagues after an exam)

(46) *Bravo! Bravo! Ponovo poeni za Vas!*(from the TV show *Slagalica*)(47) O, direktore, vratio si se živ i zdrav, *sretno bilo!*(from the movie *U ime naroda*)

(48) Položio si ispit? 'Ajd nek' je sa srećom!

(conversation between colleagues)

Table showing the distribution of the polite forms of congratulations in English and Montenegrin:

| Type of Discourse | Formal (English) | Informal (English) | Formal(Montenegrin) | Informal (Montenegrin) |
|-------------------|---|---|--|---|
| Written | <p>1.Lexeme <i>congratulations</i>.</p> <p>2.Modal verbs MAY i WOULD followed by the verbs <i>offer</i> i <i>like</i>.</p> <p>3.Formulae consisting of the modal verb MAY+ direct object + bare infinitive or LET+ direct object+ bare infinitive.</p> <p>3. Forms containing superlatives: <i>sincerest/kindest</i>.</p> | <p>1. Lexeme <i>congratulations</i> which is often followed by the structures <i>to be happy for you/ your success</i>.</p> <p>2. Formulae consisting of the adjective <i>happy</i> followed by the object of congratulating (birthdays and holidays) often followed by a wish related to the addressee expressed by the modal MAY followed by direct object and bare infinitive.</p> <p>3.Formulae consisting of the present participle of the verb <i>wish</i>.</p> | <p>1.Forms oriented towards the speaker: <i>čestitam(o), želim(o), želi/žele</i>.</p> <p>2.Modal verbs <i>htjeti</i> i <i>željeti</i> in the first face of singular or plural, followed by the structure <i>da+ čestitam(o)</i>.</p> <p>3. Forms oriented towards the addressee: imperative of the verb <i>primiti</i> followed by the plural of noun <i>čestitka</i>.</p> <p>4. Nominal forms preceded by the adjective <i>srećan</i> and expressions transmitting wishes towards the addressee.</p> <p>5. Forms containing superlatives: <i>najiskrenije, najsrdahnije</i></p> | <p>1. Expressions transmitting the wishes towards the addressee containing nominal form preceded by the adjective <i>srećan</i> referred to a special occasion etc...</p> <p>2.Sentences including formulae <i>neka+ present of the verb</i> or <i>da+present of the main verb</i>.</p> |

| | | | | |
|--------|---|---|---|--|
| Spoken | 1.The performative <i>congratulations</i> with a special emphasis on the addressee. 2. Forms containing superlatives: <i>sincerest/kindest/warmest</i> | 1. Lexeme <i>congratulations</i> 2. Forms <i>well done, bravo, good for you, full marks to you or nice work.</i> | 1.Forms oriented towards the speaker: <i>čestitam(o), želim(o)</i> 2.Forms oriented towards the addressee: imperative of the verb <i>primiti</i> . 3. The expressions performed to give praise to the addressee: <i>bravo, sjajno...</i> 4. Forms containing superlatives: <i>najiskrenije, najsrdačnije, najtoplije..</i> | 1.Forms oriented towards the speaker containing the present of the verb <i>čestitati</i> . 2.Sentences including formulae <i>neka+ present of the verb or da+present of the main verb</i> 3.The expressions performed to give praise to the addressee: <i>bravo, sjajno. čestitam(o), svaka čast, skidam kapu, sretno bilo, adj' sa srećom, neka je sa srećom...</i> |
|--------|---|---|---|--|

Conclusion

The forms of congratulations, researched in written and spoken discourse of the formal and informal styles can be divided into two basic groups: those oriented towards the speaker and congratulations oriented towards the interlocutor. There are also forms expressing praise, admiration and blessing oriented towards the addressee in both language systems.

The forms found in the written formal English usually consist of the lexeme *congratulations*, or the modal verbs MAY and WOULD, very often followed by the verbs *offer* and *like*, while the Montenegrin language offers forms consisting of the present tense of the verb *čestitati*, used in the first person singular and plural forms which are frequently preceded by the terms *najsrdačnije, najiskrenije*, or those consisting of the plural of the noun *čestitka* usually used in the form of a request. There are also formulae containing the modal verbs HTJETI, or ŽELJETI used in the present, perfect or the forms of potential, as well as the verb MOLITI. Written formal expressions of congratulations are mainly oriented towards the speaking person, containing the performative *željeti* used in the first and third person of singular or plural, or the adjective *srećan*, usually followed by a wish for the addressee. The form *neka* + present form of the main verb is frequently used in Montenegrin, while the English language provides forms consisting of the modal verb MAY+ direct object + bare infinitive or LET+ direct object+ bare infinitive.

Formal spoken discourse of both languages contains forms with expressions of praise and compliments which are more expressive than those usually used, and are perceived by the addressee as being particularly sincere. In this formal medium of communication, as well as in that performed in written form, forms of congratulation are in the English language usually oriented towards the speaking person, while Montenegrin speakers often use imperative formulae which are in English always formulated like polite requests. The forms performed on the occasion of a situation resulting from the recipient's merit consist of the performative *congratulations/ čestitam(o)* with a special emphasis on the addressee.

Although it is very hard to make a clear distinction between the expressions found in written discourse of an informal style since the speech act of congratulating has a rather stereotypical structure, they can be distinguished by means of the choice of illocutive forms, the words, the way of addressing as well as the length

of the greeting text. English speakers are keen on using the form *congratulations* which is often followed by the structure *to be happy for you/ your success*. When it comes to Montenegrin, it can be said that the written forms of informal expressions of congratulation very often lack the present tense of the verb *čestitati* and that they often consist of the term *srećan* which can be followed by a phrase containing the performative *željeti*. The forms *neka + present tense of the main verb* or *da + present of the main verb* are very common ones.

The results of our research, carried out on spoken informal discourse, showed that there is no sharp line between expressions of congratulations performed in the formal and informal language, since those used in informal spoken communication are said to be mainly stereotypical. While English speakers usually use the forms *congratulations, well done, bravo, good for you, full marks to you* or *nice work*, those whose mother tongue is Montenegrin use the present tense of the verb *čestitati*, as well as the phrases: *svaka čast, skidam kapu, sretno bilo, (ajd'neka je) sa srećom*. Generally speaking, it can be said that the Montenegrin speakers are offered a wider choice of expressions of congratulations, probably due to the fact that their cultural code enables them to be more direct and less formal in the process of communication.

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