

Gender Differences in the Use of Apology Strategies in English by Japanese University EFL Learners

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Abstract

It is well known that gender is a widely recognised factor in understanding many aspects of behaviour (Stewart and McDermott, 2004), and the influence of gender differences have an influence on apologising in Japanese (Ito, 1998), but to what extent they differ in terms of strategies used in apologies among EFL learners is lesser known. The aim of this study therefore, is to investigate the strategies used by EFL learners of English of the speech act of apology, which is based on Holmes (1990) and Blum-Kulka (1989) apology speech act sets, and to find out how the strategies used differ between male and female learners. A Discourse Completion test (DCT) containing 8 apology scenarios was conducted among 100 university students (50 males and 50 females), and it was found that not only do Japanese EFL learners lack knowledge and communicative competence for most of the strategies of apology in both genders, but there were notable, but not significant differences in the strategies used between gender; that males used an equal amount of apology to females, but slightly less strategies than females.

1. Introduction

To some degree, every culture has different ways in which men and women use language. Thus, it has been argued that women have a different way of speaking from men that reflects and produces a subordinate position in society which is imposed on them by societal norms (Lakoff, 1975). Therefore, it is assumed that women are more polite than men (Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1991; Holmes, 1995), and with this in mind, it has been claimed that women apologise more than men (Holmes, 1989; Tannen, 1994; Engel, 2001; Lazare, 2004).

An apology is a communicative strategy used primarily to remedy an offence caused by the apologizer to the person that they have offended (Wilson, 2016). It is an essential component of the maintenance of social harmony as it communicates awareness and acceptance of moral responsibility for offensive behaviour and initiates the process of negotiating absolution (Goffman, 1971; Holmes, 1990). The act of apologising resolves various types of conflict ranging from uncomfortable moments in conversation, through serious breaches of social or cultural norms by an individual, to incidents of national or international political significance (Wilson, 2016). Apologising is considered by sociolinguists as an important speech act in social interaction as it relates to the notion of 'face needs' or basic wants of the individual concerned (Olshtain, 1989). Brown and Levinson (1987) have distinguished two kinds of 'face needs' for which people generally show concern in their social behaviour: positive face needs – the need to be admired, liked and appreciated; and negative face needs – the need not to be imposed upon.

Communicative competence has been the goal of teaching a second/foreign language and has gained importance in recent years since its introduction by Hymes in the 1970s. English foreign language (EFL) teachers are trying to improve English learners' language competence comprehensively, so that English learners can communicate effectively with English speakers. Although Japanese EFL learners achieve a relatively high level of L2 competence in grammar, they lack any command of sociolinguistic rules of speaking English. Students in Japan have 8 years of compulsory English education, however, it is a common observation that English teachers in Japan hardly try to teach communicative

competence in their classrooms, especially pragmatic competence. In the classrooms, the focus of English teachers is directed toward linguistic competence and there doesn't appear to be a realization on the importance of pragmatic competence. Thus teachers in school settings emphasize the denotative meanings and not the connotative ones, and this will lead to learners' inability to use language appropriately in different contexts, such as for apologising (Wilson, 2016).

The aim of this study therefore is to investigate whether the use of apology strategies in English used by Japanese university students are different according to gender, and to find out how much students need to develop L2 pragmatic ability.

2. Review of literature

The effects of gender on apologies have been investigated by many researchers (Fraser, 1981; Schlenker and Darby, 1981; Holmes, 1989; Blum-Kulka et. al., 1989; Mattson Bean and Johnston, 1994; Tannen, 1996; Aijima, 1995; Tajvidi, 2000; Engel, 2001; Lazare, 2004; Bataineh and Bataineh, 2005), however, there seems to be little consensus among these scholars. Holmes (1989), and Tannen (1994) found wide gender differences in the apologetic behavior of native speakers of English in New Zealand and the United States respectively. However, other scholars, such as Schlenker and Darby (1981), in American English, Aijima, (1995) in British English, and Tajvidi, (2000) in Persian, failed to confirm any gender differences in the use of apology in different languages. Schumann (2011: 2) rationales it thus: "despite widespread acceptance of the stereotype that women apologise more than men do, there is little compelling evidence of a gender difference in Apology behavior".

The act of apologizing is called for when there is some behaviour which has violated social norms (Olshtain and Cohen, 1983:20), to restore social harmony after an infraction of a social rule (Kasanga and Lwanga-Lumu, 2007:654), or as Leech (1983:104) explains: a redressive speech act for a face-threatening act, a "convivial speech act". To emphasize its role as a remedy to what is or what might have been seen as an offensive (speech) act, it has also been labeled by Goffman (1971) as a "remedial exchange". An apology is, thus, a prime example of 'face-work', which is, as Goffman states (1967:12), "the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face".

Different measures have been adopted to determine apology strategies. These measures mostly depend upon the speaker, the addressee or both (Olshtain and Cohen, 1983). The social distance, sex, power, social status, age and situation also play their respective part in this regard. Apology speech acts are performed by individuals when they commit any offence to others who may have a different kind of relationship with the speaker in terms of social distance and power, and this will reflect on whether their apology is formal or informal (Majeed and Janjua, 2014). Therefore, apologies may vary ranging from highly apologetic to least apologetic depending on the intensity and type of offence.

For measuring and calculating apologies different frameworks have been proposed, particularly by western linguists. However more recently, Japanese, Chinese, African and Middle Eastern researchers have also explored the field of politeness and apology. The fundamental notion of such studies of apology speech acts is to draw pragmatic rules that govern the use of speech acts in different socio-cultural backgrounds (Majeed and Janjua, 2014). In an attempt to analyse apology speech acts across a range of languages and cultures, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) devised a project they termed as Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns (CCSARP), which was aimed at investigating the existence of any possible pragmatic universals and their characteristics (Afghari, 2007). Moreover, sociolinguists who have studied apologies in other different languages and cultures have developed this system further (see Olshtain and

Cohen, 1983, and Holmes, 1990), and a summary of these strategies reported in literature are as follows:

1. An explicit expression of apology (illocutionary Force Indicating Device IFID)
2. An explanation or a justification
 - a. An explanation, excuse or account
 - b. Expressing lack of intent
 - c. Expressing feeling
 - d. A denial of responsibility
3. An acknowledgement of responsibility for the offence
 - a. Accepting the blame or expressing regret for the offence
 - b. Stating what has happened
4. An offer of redress or repair
5. A promise of forbearance
6. Consideration for the hearer
 - a. Consideration of the offended person's feelings or condition
 - b. Acknowledgement of understanding the situation
 - c. Appreciation for the offended person's action
7. Keeping silent (non-verbal behaviour)

Apology speech acts have been investigated cross-culturally in order to find similarities and differences between the languages. The studies have mostly been carried out in situations in which learners learn the target language as their second language. The results are varied and have shown that some learners employ language transfer from their L1, some learners approximate native speaker norms, or some learners use completely different strategies than they would otherwise use in either their L1 or L2.

Olshtain and Blum-Kulka (1984) carried out a study on requests and apologies with native speakers of Hebrew and learners of Hebrew. They found that learners of Hebrew approached native speaker norms when they had the same rules in their native languages and deviated from native speakers when they had language-specific rules. Erçetin (1995) carried out a study on the use of apologies by Turkish EFL learners and claimed that EFL learners exhibited transfer from Turkish.

3. Methodology

Data was collected from Japanese university EFL learners to explore the use of apology strategies in English by Japanese university EFL learners and to determine whether there are any gender differences in their use. A Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was developed that contained 8 items, and was thoroughly explained and administered to the participants. All participant responses were analyzed using frequencies, an Independent Samples t-Test, and summary narrative methods in order to present a realistic description of the use of apology strategies in English by Japanese university students in Japan. The significance of the results was then analysed using a One-Way ANOVA test.

There were 100 participants in total, consisting of 50 males and 50 females who were studying English in their 1st and 2nd years of University. The participants were selected randomly and volunteered willingly. The sample was relatively homogeneous in terms of their cultural and linguistic background (Japanese) and academic experiences. Respondents were asked to rate their speaking ability in English by themselves in the questionnaire (DCT) and a majority of

respondents (76 out of 100) rated themselves at a good level.

The Discourse Completion Test (DCT) was developed by Wilson (2016), and consisted of 8 apology scenarios, which were adapted from other DCTs used in literature (Cohen and Olshtain, 1981; Tillet and Bruder, 1985; Eisenstein and Bodman, 1986; and Bergman and Casper, 1993). It was developed in order to collect information from the Japanese English students about their use of apology strategies in English. Following a brief introductory part explaining the purpose of the study, the participants were then invited to complete questions relating to Apology Scenarios (see Appendix A). The first part was intended to collect certain necessary demographic information, such as name of institution, discipline and semester, gender, student status, and level of English. The second part consisted of eight apology situations designed to elicit apology strategies by modifying those situations used in the previous apology speech act studies of Olshtain and Cohen (1983). In the design of the apology situations, sociolinguistics status (high, equivalent and low) of the respondents and their interlocutors were also considered. The participants were asked to write responses in English, specifically what they would say in a particular situation as detailed or stated in the DCT, keeping in mind that they would be in a real-life situation.

All responses were coded and compiled separately in different MS Excel files and sheets. Descriptive statistics were run before any of the subsequent analyses to check normality of data. The data sets were analyzed in light of the research questions using frequencies, descriptive statistics, an Independent Samples t- Test and the One-Way ANOVA test. A mix of summary narrative, tables with numerals and figures were used for the description and discussion of results and findings. The elicited data was categorized according to Holmes (1990) apology speech act sets (twelve possible realizations) and Blum-Kulka's (1989) classifications, as shown below.

Table 1.

Apology Strategies and Possible Realizations

Strategy code	Possible Realization
A	Explicit expression of apology; sorry
A1	An offer of apology e.g. I beg pardon
A2	An expression of regret e.g. I'm sorry; I'm afraid.
A3	A request for forgiveness e.g. Can you excuse me please?
B	Explanation or account e.g. there was terrible traffic.
C	Acknowledgement of responsibility e.g. Oh, I made a mistake.
C1	Accepting the blame e.g. It is my fault.
C2	Expressing self-deficiency e.g. I got upset/confused.
C3	Recognizing Interlocutor as deserving apology e.g. you're right.
C4	Expressing lack of intent e.g. I did not mean to break it.
C5	Offering repair/ redress e.g. I'll buy you a new camera.
D	Promise of forbearance e.g. I promise, I'll not do it next time.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of the data obtained from the discourse completion questionnaire to ascertain what apology strategies were used by Japanese university students of English and to determine whether there was any gender difference in their use. In order to do this, the frequencies of use and non-use of specific apology strategies were obtained and calculated using the One-Way ANOVA Test. As stated earlier, using Holmes (1990) and Blum-Kulka's

(1989) classifications of strategies, Table 2 below presents the results of the use and non-use of the specific apology strategies shown according to gender, and is further illustrated in Graph 1 which shows the gender variance.

Out of a total of 100 respondents, 50 were male (M) and 50 female (F). Overall, 93 (M=49, F=44) used the ‘explicit expression of apology’ sorry, and 97 (M=44, F=49) used an ‘explanation or account’ “there was terrible traffic”, which was a great majority. On the other hand, there was a majority not using ‘an offer of apology’ “I beg your pardon” (M=33, F=31), ‘an expression of regret’ “I’m sorry” (M=33, F=27) and ‘request for forgiveness’ “Can you excuse me please?” (M=39, F=37). Interestingly, none of the respondents reported using the apology strategy ‘expressing lack of intent’ “I did not mean to break it” (M=0, F=0), and almost all did not use ‘acknowledgement of responsibility’ “Oh, I made a mistake” (M=0, F=1). This strongly suggests that participants lack knowledge of these apology strategies.

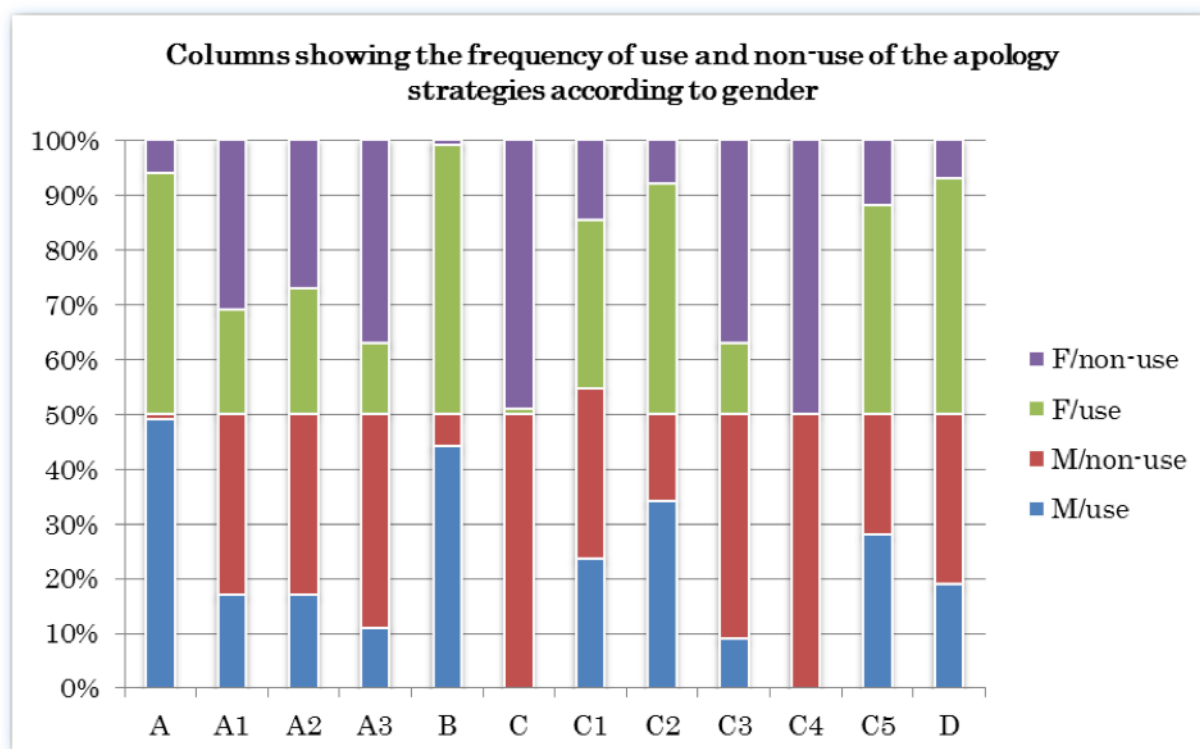
Table 2.

Frequency of use of the apology strategies according to gender

Strategy code	Males/50		Females/50		Totals/100	
	use	non use	use	non use	use	non use
A	49	1	44	6	93	7
A1	17	33	19	31	36	64
A2	17	33	23	27	40	60
A3	11	39	13	37	24	76
B	44	6	49	1	97	3
C	0	50	1	49	1	99
C1	26	34	34	16	60	40
C2	34	16	42	8	76	24
C3	9	41	13	37	22	78
C4	0	50	0	50	0	100
C5	28	22	38	12	66	34
D	19	31	43	7	62	38
Totals	254	356	319	281	577	623
Percentage	41%	59%	53%	47%	47%	53%

The study shows that a total of 41% of the apology strategies were used by male students, whereas 53% were used by females. Therefore, it can be concluded that even though females have slightly more knowledge of apology strategies than males, there is no significant difference between them. The f-ratio value is 0.64371 and the p-value is .430954. So, the result can be considered not significant at $p < .05$.

Graph 1.



Though there are only marginal differences in the strategies of apologies by male and female participants, the expression of apologies with close friends reveals some interesting results. Females express an apology of repair (15%) more than males (3%), which may show that females are more conscious of their relationship and want to pay the price of their offence to their friends. However, males used less strategies to their friends and would either be direct in their apology or remain silent so as not to cause conflict.

This non-use of as many as six different types of apology strategies by a great majority or majority can be attributed to respondents' (1) lack of knowledge or proficiency in using apology strategies in English, and (2) different cultural values and norms. Because language is so much associated with its culture, naturally there would be some difficulties for learners of English in Japan in acquiring the nuances of the English language that are so culture-bound. This indicates that Japanese learners of English have never heard of these strategies and thus were unable to use these strategies.

This study has shown that females apologise marginally more than men and have a slightly better understanding and use of apology strategies than males, although overall, there was not a major difference. The most notable differences were that females used the strategies 'accepting the blame' (M=26, F=34), 'expressing self-deficiency' (M=34, F=42), and 'offering repair' (M=28, F=38). However, the most significant difference was in 'a promise of forbearance' (M=19, F=43), in which females had more pragmatic knowledge and were able to use this strategy far more than males. One of the most popular comments from female participants was "I promise I'll not do it next time" when referring to missing a crucial meeting with their boss (see appendix 1, situation 1).

6. Conclusion

Apology is important for English language learning as speech acts should be integrated into the classroom to help learners develop pragmatic competence in the L2 target language. Japanese English language learners lack knowledge of the social rules of speaking English and this can therefore effect their communication skills. Successful communication is therefore possible when English Foreign Language (EFL) learners have pragmatic competence which exhibits the ability to use language forms suitable in a socio-cultural context.

The present study examined the use of apology strategies in English by Japanese university students of English in Japan in relation to gender. Out of twelve different apology strategy types, respondents were found using mainly four apology strategies only in English, such as an 'explanation or account' "there was terrible traffic", 'an explicit apology' "sorry", 'expressing self-deficiency' "I got upset", and 'intensifiers of apology' "I'm extremely sorry; I'm terribly sorry about it". Particularly, this study has shown that there are no significant differences in relation to gender use of the strategies, but females showed that they have a slightly better understanding and knowledge of using different apology strategies than males. Overall, this shows a lack of knowledge from both genders about the different types of apology strategies in different contexts, and explicitly reveals the need for developing the L2 English pragmatic ability of learners of English in Japan.

Further studies on gender differences in the use of apology strategies need to be further explored, especially other social variables, such as social distance, social status, and age, which all seem to have a key role in the use of language.

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Appendix A

Discourse Completion Test (DCT) as developed by Wilson (2016)

This questionnaire aims to investigate Japanese EFL learners of English apology strategies. There are some scenarios below that require an apology. Please read each of the scenarios carefully and try to provide as close a response as possible to what would be your natural response to the situation.

1. You completely forget a crucial meeting at the office with your boss. An hour later you call him to apologize. The problem is that this is the second time you've forgotten such a meeting. Your boss gets on the phone and asks: Boss: "What happened to you?"

You: _____

2. You forget a get-together with a friend. You call them to apologize. This is really the second time you've forgotten such a meeting. Your friend asks over the telephone: Friend: "What happened?"

You: _____

3. Backing out of a parking place, you run into the side of another car. It was clearly your fault. You dent the side door slightly. The driver gets out and comes over to you angrily.

Driver: "Can't you look where you're going? See what you've done!"

You: _____

4. You promised to return a textbook to your classmate within a day or two, after photocopying a chapter. However, you held onto it for almost two weeks.

Classmate: I'm really upset about the book because I needed it to prepare for last week's class.

You: _____

5. You accidentally bump into a well-dressed elderly lady at an elegant department store, causing her to spill her bags all over the floor. You hurt her leg, too. It's clearly your fault and you want to apologize profusely.

You: _____

6. Spending an evening at a friend's apartment, you accidentally break a small vase belonging to her.

You: _____

7. Rushing to get to class on time, you run round the corner and bump into one of your fellow students who was waiting there, almost knocking them down.

You: _____

8. You have forgotten to return the book you borrowed from your professor. In the staff corridor you come across your professor.

You: _____