

# The Differences in the Concept of Self and the Use of Apology Between British and Japanese Cultures

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## Abstract

The concept of self is realized as being the sum total of a person's knowledge and understanding of his or her self. This is determined by culture and society, and is influential on peoples' interpersonal relationships. The speech act of apologising seeks to maintain, restore and enhance interpersonal relationships. Most of the existing studies of apology in different languages and cultures follow the Brown and Levinson (1987) approach and describe apology as a 'negative politeness' strategy. This paper studies the use of apology by people from Japanese and British cultural backgrounds, in conjunction with an examination of the cultural conception of 'self'. Using both the Twenty Statements Test (TST) and questionnaire data, it will demonstrate that important differences exist in the self concept of the two groups, and these differences are reflected in and impact on people's use of apologies in social interaction.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background

It seems that both Japanese and Westerners hold similar ideas in regards to the behaviour of apologising in each other's cultures, particularly that the Japanese apologise more frequently than native speakers of English, and that apology in Japanese does not necessarily mean that the person is acknowledging a wrong doing. In Japan, apologies carry considerable moral weight, and historically, this stems from feudal times in which society was so confined by the rigorously enforced rules of etiquette that it was virtually impossible for a person to get through any day without breaking at least one rule or upsetting somebody (Boye Lafayette, De Mente, 1993). The ritualized and sanctified manners also made the Japanese extremely sensitive to any deviation from this code of conduct and ready to take offense at the slightest hint of an insult. This sensitivity meant that when opening up a conversation with someone other than a family mem-

ber they were creating some kind of obligation or invading the other person's privacy. It therefore became customary for people to apologise in advance of a comment or action, just in case they may inadvertently upset someone or make a mistake. (Boye Lafayette, De Mente, 1993).

A couple of years ago the author was on holiday in Japan and was at a restaurant with his wife's Japanese family when her brother knocked a glass of red wine all over the white tablecloth. Although this was an accident for which he mildly apologised, the mother saw that it was her responsibility to apologise on behalf of her son who, incidentally, at the time was 38 years old. This kind of situation is highly unusual in western countries, such as Britain, where if the same incident were to happen the mother or indeed any other family member would not apologise on the offender's behalf, as they feel that they should be responsible for their own actions.

An incident such as this, points towards possible cultural differences in how people behave in certain circumstances. Moreover, for the communicative function of apology, people use different strategies depending on their sense of self, role and status in society as well as their culture.

## **1.2 Aims and key questions**

An apology is a communicative strategy used primarily to remedy an offence caused by the apologisee to the person that they have offended. 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. 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.

There are a number of cross-cultural studies that have been carried out by researchers that follow the Brown and Levinson approach (Beebe-Takahashi, 1989; Holmes, 1990; Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper, 1989; Olshtain, 1989). Olshtain (1989) compared apologies in four different

languages and ascertained that there are universal manifestations of strategy selection, and Beebe-Takahashi (1989) examined the use of apology by Japanese and American English speakers and observed that Japanese speakers used the utterance “I’m sorry” much more frequently, both in Japanese and English than Americans.

Studies such as these point to the fact that the notion of ‘face’, which lies at the heart of Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory has been criticised for being unable to avoid an ethno-centric bias towards western languages and the western cultural perspective. They argue that while the aspects of ‘the face’ are central to social interaction in societies where individualism is a basic cultural trait and where self-identity and self-esteem are highly valued, ‘face’ has a very different implication in societies where role and group membership are crucial (Okumura and Wei, 2000).

The aim of this study therefore is to examine the application of apology by speakers of the two distinct linguistic and cultural backgrounds of Japanese and English. This paper will argue that the Japanese and the British have very different conceptions of the ‘self’ and that the different cultural notions of ‘self’ are influential in the way that they employ different strategies for apologising. Thus, the key question I want to address is not whether ‘face’ influences people’s politeness behaviour in social interaction, but what ‘face’ means in different cultures for different people. I shall examine the context and motive of the act of apologising in the two cultural groups by using data from a questionnaire study, interviews, and a Twenty Statements Test (TST).

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Cultural identity**

The concept of self has been documented as varying greatly across different cultural groups. While all cultures recognise the individual as an important empirical agent, most cultures do not retain the individualistic conception of the person that is emphasised in North American and Western European cultures. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (2000: 381) explains that the modern western conception of a person is that s/he is a reflective responsible agent which derives many of its characteristics from ancient Greece and Rome. Marcel Mauss (2000: 341) also contends that Classical Latin and Greek methods of thought influence the western moral conscience. The latter introduces consciousness and meaning and this, according to Mauss, is a sense of

being independent, autonomous, free and responsible as well as having the moral functions of honour, obligation and rights.

Theories of identity, relevant to the self, typically distinguish between personal (individual) and social (group or collective) identities (Giddens, 1994). Individual identity refers to self-definition as a unique individual, and relates to the western notion of the self, whereas collective identity refers to self-definition as a group member and is linked with East Asian ideas of the self. Certain characteristics of identity have more 'collective potential' than others (for example a person's gender, ethnicity, religion, etc.), but as Simon (2004) explains, in reality it depends how people experience a given self-aspect. For example, in many circumstances religious denomination may be just a feature of a person's individual identity, yet in other situations it may be a feature that construes his/her collective identity.

Scholars from a wide range of practices have undertaken systematic comparisons of the notions of self in different cultures. In a study by Triandis, McCusker and Hui (1990), students from USA, Hawaii, Greece, Hong Kong and mainland China, were asked to provide 20 answers to the question "Who am I?", a procedure known as the Twenty Statements Test (TST). They discovered that the students from China and Hong Kong made more references to themselves as members of existing social groups than those from elsewhere. In a similar study of Japanese, Hong Kong and American students, Bond and Cheung (1983) found that the American students were more likely to complete the "I am" statement with individual attributes (*e.g. I am from LA; I am fit*) than the Japanese or Hong Kong students who tended to complete the statement with group identities. This evidence reinforces our belief that the self in 'eastern' cultures is defined in a more contextual, multiple-shaped group-based manner (Marsella, De Vos and Hsu 1985).

Many non-western cultures support what Markus and Kitayama (1991) call the 'independent self', which is embedded in, and partly defined by, social memberships. Thus the goal of social life is not so much to enhance one's individual self but to harmonise with and support one's communities. Takeo Doi (1985: 80) defines Japanese identity as containing two meanings: to identify with someone or something, and to identify something as such. The former refers to the binding of oneself to another (thing or person), and the latter to identifying a thing as that thing. Simply put, identity is to be aware of oneself and oneself as part of something. This feeling of 'oneness' is demonstrated by Lebra (1976: 25) who explains that the Japanese concern for belonging relates to the tendency toward collectivism, which is expressed by an individual's iden-

tification with the collective goal of the group to which they belong. Kimura (1972) identifies that selfness in Japan is not a unitary notion to be found within the person, but a social entity whose meaning is closely linked to relationships with others and to the situation one is in. This is reflected in the Japanese word for self, *jibun*, meaning 'mine' or more appropriately 'one's share', implying the share of a given context that is oneself.

## 2.2 The speech act of apologizing

The act of apologizing is called for when a person's behaviour 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". Goffman (1967: 5), in his definition of face, points out that people only make face claims in relation to positively valued social attributes, and thus states "The term *face* may be defined as the positive social value of a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact".

Moreover, Goffman (1967: 5), also points out that people only make face claims in relation to positively valued social attributes, and states that "The term *face* may be defined as the positive social value of a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact". Spencer-Oatey (2006: 643) asserts that face is not associated with negative attributes, except in so far as we claim NOT to possess them. In this respect, there is a clear distinction between face and identity. A person's identity attributes include negatively and neutrally evaluated characteristics, as well as positive ones, whilst the attributes associated with face are only positive ones.

The work of Brown and Levinson (1987) has been enormously influential in the area of politeness theory particularly their conceptualization of the notion of 'face', which perceives apologies as primarily a 'negative politeness' strategy communicating a speaker's reluctance to violate negative face wants. Brown and Levinson (1978: 70) illustrate that positive politeness is oriented toward the positive face of a hearer and the positive self-image that he claims for himself. Negative politeness is orientated mainly towards partially satisfying the hearer's negative face, his

basic want to maintain claims of territory and self-determination. However, most apology research, which is largely empirically based, reveals the apology to be a much more complex speech act than Brown and Levinson's analysis would suggest. Olshtain and Cohen (1983: 22) usefully attempt to identify the main structural components of an apology, for instance, 1) as an expression of responsibility/blame, as general strategies, with three further situation-specific strategies involving 2) an explanation or account of the situation 3) an offer of repair and 4) a promise of forbearance. Ide (1989) and Matsumoto (1993) share the aim of showing the inadequacy of Brown and Levinson's model by focusing on the role of Japanese honorifics, which can convey face and politeness but are motivated by different speaker needs. These needs, they submit, do not correspond to internal factors such as the positive and negative aspects of an individual's face that Brown and Levinson proposed, but to external factors such as the mandatory social norms and a notion of an individual 'self' more embedded in social constraints than Brown and Levinson's model person is. Also, Bargiela-Chiappini (2003: 1, 454) points out that Brown and Levinson's interpretation of 'face' is based on Western assumptions, such as the existence of a predominantly rational actor and the strategic, goal-oriented nature of 'face-work' and of social interaction.

Any definition of what constitutes an apology is likely to be greatly influenced by the research aims and perspective of the particular study. Some authors (Holmes 1998 and Lakoff 2002) attempt to establish which 'felicity conditions' are fundamental criteria for the functioning of an apology, whereas others, such as Olshtain and Cohen (1983), and Okumura and Wei (2000) perceive it as primarily a speech act, consisting of a particular set of strategies. These approaches clearly overlap. Lakoff (2002), for instance, considers the nature of public apologies (such as President Clinton's apology for the Monica Lewinsky affair) and analyses how a speaker can manipulate the felicity conditions of a speech act so as to give the impression of an apology while maintaining a 'get-out' clause, if admitting responsibility becomes politically dangerous.

### **3. Methodology Rationale**

#### **3.1 Subjects**

The study was conducted and samples collected from subjects in Britain and Japan, and consists of 12 Japanese males and 13 Japanese females and 12 British males and 13 British females. The Japanese subjects were, at the time of data collection, residing in different areas of Japan,

are all middle class and either in full or part-time employment or working as a housewife. The British subjects come from different areas of Great Britain, are either working full-time or as a housewife, and also have middle class backgrounds. The subjects in the Japanese sample were mostly in the age range of 23 to 40, however, there were two adults, one male and one female, who were aged 70 and 68 respectively. In the British sample, all the ages ranged from 26 to 48 except two older adults, one male and one female, who were aged 77 and 74. In comparable cross-cultural studies on identity and apology strategies, Cousins (1989) conducted a study comprising of 54 Japanese and 42 American subjects, Olshtain and Cohen (1983) used 32 native Hebrew speakers and 12 native English speakers, and Okumura and Wei (2000) managed 14 Japanese and 13 British participants for their study.

### **3.2 The Twenty Statements Test (TST)**

The data, on which this paper is based, was collected by the author. The study consists of two parts. In Part One, subjects were given the Twenty Statements Test (TST), which aimed at revealing their conceptions of 'self'. In Part Two of the study, subjects were given a questionnaire on the use of apologies. Both parts were originally prepared in English and were translated into Japanese by two bilingual individuals who are both Japanese and have lived in England for more than ten years.

The instructions to the TST were written at the top of the answer sheet as follows:

"In the spaces below, please give twenty different answers to the question, "who am I?" Give these as if you were giving them to yourself, not to somebody else. Write fairly rapidly, for time is limited".

These instructions were followed by twenty blank lines for the subjects to write their answers on.

There may be an assumption that the order of responses on the TST implies that there is salience of those responses in the subject's self-concept, therefore, subjects were asked to choose the five responses most important to their concept of themselves. At the bottom of the answer sheet were written the instructions:

"Now go back through your answers and place a check mark against the five responses that

are ‘most important’ to your overall evaluation of yourself”.

An example of the TST is presented in Appendix A.

The present study made use of a TST coding scheme developed by McPartland, Cumming, and Garretson (1961), and later revised by Hartley (1970). Although not originally intended for this purpose, this coding scheme offers a highly suitable method for the cross-cultural comparison of the self-concept along the concrete-abstract spectrum and has been used in past studies, such as Cousins (1989), Markus and Kitayama (1991) and Okumura and Wei (2000). Known as the A-B-C-D fourfold method, it consists of four basic categories of self-concepts, each representing a different level of abstraction from the physical, phenomenal realm (Hartley, 1970):

- A. *Physical.* References to observable, physical attributes of self, which do not imply social interaction, such as the information one finds on a passport (e.g. “date of birth” or “height”).
- B. *Social.* References to self as social role, institutional membership, or other socially defined status (e.g. “a college student,” “a ballerina”).
- C. *Attributive.* References to self as a situation-free agent characterized by personal styles of acting, feeling, and thinking (e.g. “friendly,” “moody,” “ambitious”). The references include the subcategories of preference (C1. e.g. “one who likes ice cream”), wishes (C2. e.g. one who wishes to be a doctor), and activities (C3. e.g. one who often takes a walk).
- D. *Global.* Self-references that are so comprehensive or vague as to transcend social role and social interaction, and therefore do not convey individual characteristics of the respondent (e.g. “a human being”).

Although no simple conclusions and generalisations will be made on the basis of one particular test, this study will hope to discern a difference in the two cultural groups with regards to the notion of self. The main goal in this study, therefore, is to examine the impact of the cultural concept of self on language and in particular the different strategies people use to apologise.

### **3.3 The Questionnaire Study**

The questionnaire was constructed by the author and adapted from a similar questionnaire

devised by Okumura and Wei (2000). The questionnaire lists five occasions in which an incident occurs and an apology is possible. For each occasion, there were three or four potential offenders in the given incident, and subjects were asked to state: (1) on a five-point scale of 1 to 5 how obliged they would feel to apologise; (2) what would they do in such a situation; and (3) if they apologised verbally, what would they say. The occasions presented in the questionnaire are shown in Appendix B.

The occasions presented in the questionnaire are of course hypothetical but could perhaps occur. All of them relate to what has been known as 'possession offences', damaging or forgetting to return someone's property. Holmes (1990) studied six types of offences for which an apology is required (inconvenience, space, talk, time, possession, and social gaffe) and reveals that speakers use different apology strategies for different offences. This study, however, will limit the interactive effect of different kinds of offences on apology strategies and concentrate instead on offences caused by different people, and thus will examine the obligation index of apologies.

Sociolinguists who have studied apologies in different languages and cultures have devised systems to classify the various strategies used (Olshtain and Cohen, 1983, and Holmes, 1990). The following is a summary of the strategies reported in literature that will also be incorporated in the analysis of answers (2) and (3) of the questionnaire study:

1. An explicit expression of apology
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)

In answer (1) of the questionnaire, the five-point scale, this study will establish whether there is a significant difference between Japanese and English uses of apology using the methodology of the parametric 'T-Test'. This test will be used in order to calculate and compare the mean between the two groups of Japanese and English. Once this has been accomplished, the analysis of the individual occasions (5 groups) in three different conditions (A1, A2, A3, B1, B2, B3 etc.) will be analysed using the 'one-factor between subjects ANOVA' test. This test is important because we can then understand the overall mean for each of the conditions and thus establish whether the differences between the two sets of subjects for each of the conditions are significant or not.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 The Twenty Statements Test

The TST that was given to the subjects asked them to complete statements that began with

**Table 1.** Proportion of category use by two cultural groups for TST (%)

Type of statement	Japanese	British
A. Physical	8.2	7.4
B. Social	24.6	16.8
C. Attributive		
C1. Preference	14.6	21.4
C2. Wish	8.8	1.6
C3. Activity	21.2	17.4
C4. Qualified psychological attributes	2.8	4.6
C5. Pure psychological attributes	18.4	29.2
D. Global	1.2	0.6
E. Others	0.2	1.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

the question “Who am I?” The instruction simply stated ‘in the spaces below, please give twenty different answers to the question, “Who am I?” Give these as if you were giving them to yourself, not to somebody else. The results are shown in Table 1.

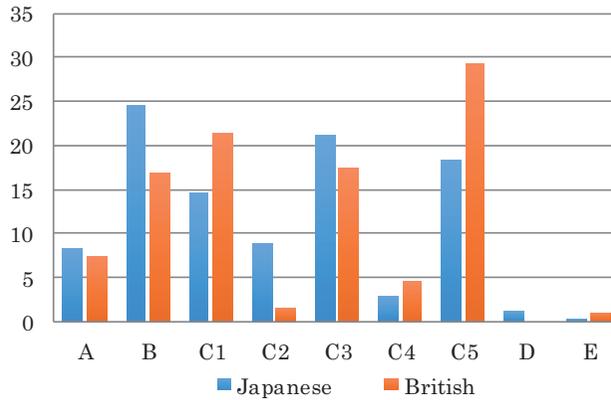
As we can see from Table 1 below, the Japanese subjects made more references to social categories (e.g. *I am married with two children*, or *I am a male from Hiroshima*) and wishes (e.g. *I wish my children are happy* and *I wish my son will get married soon*) than did the British subjects who referred more to preference, such as, “I like cats”, and regular activities, such as “I am a fisherman”, and specifically pure psychological attributes, such as “I am honest”, “I am ambitious”, and “I am confident” etc. These can be seen to reflect a sense of the independent and interdependent self. Markus and Kitayama (1991) suggest that the social category (i.e. family, ethnicity, occupation, religious group, or gender) responses can be seen to reflect a sense of the ‘interdependent self’. The statements by the Japanese and British subjects seem to indicate that the Japanese have a much more interdependent self than the British and that the British are more independent.

Moreover, Markus and Kitayama indicate that if no reference is made to an entity outside the person (e.g. *I am 35 years old*), the statement can be considered as reflecting a sense of the ‘private self’. If, on the other hand, the generalised other is mentioned (e.g. *I am liked by most people*), it reflects a sense of the ‘public self’. It is interesting that there were very few responses to ‘public self’ (2.8%) in the Japanese subjects’ statements, but with the British subjects, there was a slightly higher response (4.6%). Further, the British subjects tended to describe themselves predominantly in highly abstract terms (e.g. *I am a happy*, *I am a worrier*) (29.2%) compared with the Japanese (18.4%). The Japanese statements were more detailed, specific and very highly socially orientated (24.6%) compared with a lesser response by the British subjects (16.8%). These results seem to concur with Markus and Kitayama’s (1991) findings (see also Cousins 1989, and Okumura and Wei 2000).

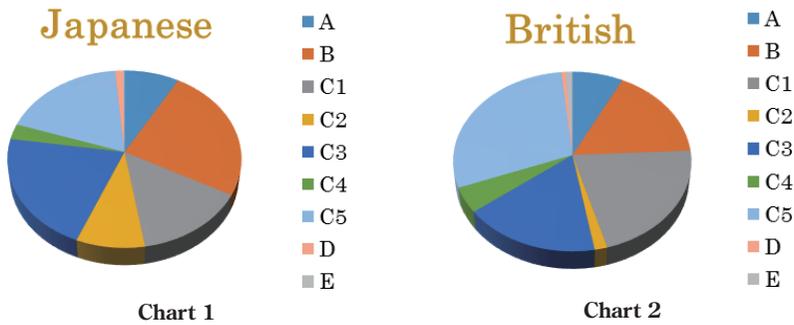
Graph 1 and the charts below demonstrate that by organizing the results of the TST into graph or pie chart form we can compare and see more clearly the proportions of use of the different types of statements by Japanese and British subjects.

It is clear that there are some important differences between the two cultures in this study. For example, the Japanese scored significantly higher than the English in B ( $F = 5.724$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ), and C2 ( $F = 8.362$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), whereas the English scored higher than the Japanese in C1 ( $F = 2.856$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and C5 ( $F = 9.800$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ). Although no simple conclusions and

**Proportion of category use of two cultural groups for TST (%)**



**Graph 1**



generalisations can be made on the basis of one particular test, we can discern a difference in the two cultural groups with regard to the notion of the self. The picture that emerges from the TST is a Japanese self that is group-orientated and private, while a British self is more independent and public. The main goal of this study is to examine the impact of the cultural concept of the self on language and communication behaviour.

**4.2 The Questionnaire Study**

In Part two of the study, the subjects were given a questionnaire on their use of apologies. Question one of this asked them to indicate on a five-point scale (1–5), how obliged they would feel to apologise for each given incident (see appendix B). The results gave us an obligation index, which is shown in Table 2 below. As Table 2 below suggests, both groups of subjects

that were studied felt more obliged to apologise for actual damages caused to someone else's property, as in occasions A, B, and C, than for potential damage and inconvenience as in occasions D, and E. Generally, people consider an offence involving damage to someone's possession to be more serious than one involving failure to return someone's possession. These findings confirm that the more serious the offence, the more obliged the offender feels to apologise.

**Table 2.** Obligation level index of apologies (figures are means)

Japanese	Mean
A. (Plate/best friend) Self-4.54 = child 4.54 > partner 4.2	<b>4.42</b>
B. (Glass/boss's wife) Self-4.72 = child 4.72 > partner 4.25	<b>4.56</b>
C. (Book/colleague) Self-4.04 > child 4.01 > partner 3.8	<b>3.95</b>
D. (Trolley/stranger) Self-3.96 > child 3.84 > partner 3.64	<b>3.81</b>
E. (File/business contact) Self-3.96 > junior colleague 3.44 > senior colleague 2.92 > colleague 2.84	<b>3.29</b>
British	Mean
A. (Plate/best friend) Self-4.28 > child 4.08 > partner 2.16	<b>3.51</b>
B. (Glass/boss's wife) Self-4.72 > child 4.36 > partner 1.96	<b>3.68</b>
C. (Book/colleague) Child 4.24 = partner 4.24 > self 3.32	<b>3.93</b>
D. (Trolley/stranger) Self-3.96 > child 3.92 > partner 2.12	<b>3.33</b>
E. (File/business contact) Self-3.76 > junior colleague 2.72 > senior colleague 2.48 > colleague 2.4	<b>2.84</b>

It is interesting to note that the two groups of subjects differ on a number of points in their reported obligation level. Firstly, the Japanese subjects in my sample felt more obliged to apologise for incidents occurring with their partner's boss than at a close friend's home, suggesting a possible link between the obligation level of apology and interpersonal relationship. It seems that for Japanese subjects, offences caused to someone who is more distant socially from the offender and is of a higher social status is likely to call for more apologies than those caused by

someone of equal status or is closer to the offender. The British subjects in my data do not show such a difference in their reported obligation level of apology.

Secondly, a noticeable difference between the two cultures is that for the Japanese group, the obligation level is exactly the same for both the informant themselves and their child in occasions A and B, which are the two more serious offences. In other words, the Japanese subjects felt equally highly obliged to apologise for offences caused by themselves or by their children. The British subjects, on the other hand, felt more obliged to apologise for offences caused by themselves than those by their children or partners. However, the British subjects in my data seemed to feel more obliged to apologise for offences caused by their children than for those caused by themselves in less serious occasions, such as C and D, while the Japanese still seem to feel more obliged to apologise for themselves first than for offences caused by their children and partners. For occasion C (spilling coffee on the book), the obligation level reported by the British subjects is the same for the children and the partners, which is higher than that for themselves. For occasion E, (failing to return a file to a business contact), both Japanese and British subjects in my data felt more obliged to apologise for themselves and the least for their colleagues of similar status.

The overall obligation level for all occasions is higher for the Japanese subjects, who have a total index mean of 4, than the British subjects, whose total index mean is 3.45. Therefore the result of this test is significant with an outcome of  $F = 60.365$ ,  $p < 0.0001$  (see below).

ONE-WAY ANOVA TEST

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	76.880	1	76.880	60.365	.000
Within Groups	1016.315	798	1.274		
Total	1093.195	799			

Parts (2) and (3) of the questionnaire particularly relate to apology strategies employed by the subjects for each of the five occasions presented in the study. Sociologists who have studied apologies in different languages in the past (Olshtain and Cohen 1983, Holmes 1990) have devised systems that classify the various strategies observed. The following is a summary of the typical strategies reported in their literature and I have provided some examples from Japanese (data translated) and British subjects for each strategy that have been collected in my study.

1. An explicit expression of apology  
e.g. “I am/we are sorry”, or “I don’t know how to apologise enough to you”.
2. An explanation or a justification
  - a. An explanation, excuse or account, e.g. “It just slipped from my hands”.
  - b. Expressing lack of intent, e.g. “I don’t know why it happened”.
  - c. Expressing a feeling, e.g. “I feel awful”
  - d. A denial of responsibility, e.g. “it wasn’t my fault”
3. An acknowledgement of responsibility for the offence.
  - a. Accepting the blame or expressing regret for the offence, e.g. “it is my fault”.
  - b. Stating what has happened, e.g. “I dropped it”.
4. An offer of redress or repair e.g. “Let me buy you a new one” or “I will check it for you”.
5. A promise of forbearance  
e.g. “I will promise it will never happen again”
6. Consideration for the hearer.
  - a. Person’s feeling or condition, e.g. “are you alright?”
  - b. Acknowledgement of understanding the situation, e.g. “I understand what you are saying”.
  - c. Thanking the offended person’s action, e.g. “I am glad that you mentioned it”.
7. Inviting or compelling an apology.
  - a. Keeping silent/ looking at the offender (non-verbal apology)
  - b. Making the offender apologise, e.g. “I will make my child apologise”
8. An interjection  
e.g. “Oh dear!”

Overall, both the Japanese and the British subjects in my sample reported making use of the same range of apology strategies, though with different frequencies. The explicit expression of apology as outlined in strategy 1, appears to be the most frequently occurring strategy for both groups. The second most frequently used strategy is 4, an offer to redress or repair. The third most frequently used strategy for the Japanese subjects in my data is Strategy 3, an acknowledgement of responsibility for the offence, while the British subjects use Strategy 2, an explanation or a justification. Interestingly, the Japanese subjects used this latter strategy much less.

One of the most noticeable differences in the reported use of strategies between the two

groups of subjects is the use of Strategy 6, softening the offence. In my data, 24% of the Japanese subjects reported using it in one form or another as opposed to only 6% of British subjects, a significance value of  $F = 5.631$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ . Interestingly, this particular strategy seemed to be used most often for occasions D (trolley/stranger) and E (file/business contact).

In Strategy 3, an acknowledgement of responsibility, there are two main types of realization. One is to accept the blame implicitly, and the other describes what the offender has done or what has actually happened. Most of the examples reported by the subjects belong to this latter type, however; overall the Japanese subjects use this strategy more often than the British, but this did not show any significance in my data.

Strategy 4, an offer of redress or repair, is commonly found in possession offences. On occasion D (trolley/stranger), the British subjects in my data reported using this strategy much more frequently than the Japanese group ( $F = 3.276$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), specifically with the expression "let me help you." I am reliably informed that the Japanese language does not have an equivalent phrase, except on very formal occasions. This could partly account for the significant difference between the two groups' reported frequencies of use of this particular strategy. In further research of my study in the form of interviews of both Japanese and British subjects this particular subject was addressed, and it was revealed by one Japanese interviewee that she thought "the Japanese would apologise with an explicit expression and help to collect the offended person's things straight away".

It is worth mentioning here that in offering a replacement for the damaged items, the British subjects in the interviews reported that they would try and find out how valuable the items were or ask whether or not they were presents from somebody. The value and significance of the damaged items often influence the offender's actions and words. The Japanese subjects in the interviews, on the other hand, would never try to find out the value of the damaged items but would acknowledge responsibility and make redress, no matter what the items were.

Strategy 7, inviting or compelling an apology, includes examples like "I will tell him to say sorry," and also remarks such as "I would be annoyed with my partner and make them explain," or "I would say nothing and just look at my partner to make them apologise". Many of the examples offered by the subjects are not verbal behaviours. However, some subjects seem to assume that their silence says something more important. The British subjects tend to use this particular strategy for both their partner and children's offences except on occasion B (glass/boss's wife) where they would simply leave their partner to deal with the situation. An

interesting point to note here is that the Japanese subjects sometimes use pejorative references to their children like *uchino baka na ko* 'my stupid child' as an apology strategy in conjunction with their order to the child to apologise.

### 4.3 Discussion

A number of interesting patterns emerge from the data I have described thus far. In terms of the obligation level of apology, the more serious the offence, the more obliged the speaker feels to apologise. Both the Japanese and British subjects in my data appear to feel more obliged to apologise for actual damage or inconvenience. In terms of the apology strategies outlined by Olshtain and Cohen (1983), and Holmes (1990), both groups reported making use of the same range of strategies, although the frequency of use differs from one occasion to another. Some strategies, such as explicit expressions of apology and an offer of redress or repair, are used by both groups on all occasions, while others are favoured more by one group than the other. These findings are very similar to the ones reported by Holmes (1990, 1998), Olshtain (1989) and Okumura and Wei (2000). They confirm that the use of apology is closely linked to the kinds of offence caused and that an explicit expression of apology (i.e. saying sorry) is the most frequently used strategy.

There are significant differences both in the obligation level of apology and in apology strategies as reported by the two groups of subjects. The Japanese subjects felt equally highly obliged to apologise for offences caused by themselves and by their children, while the British subjects tended to apologise mainly for what they themselves had done and made their children and partners apologise for their own offences. Earlier in this study, I discussed the cultural conceptions of the 'self', and it is apparent that apologies used by the two groups of subjects seemed to suggest that the Japanese consider their children as part of themselves and consequently a child's offence is their own fault. Yet, the British subjects tend to encourage their children's autonomy and self-reliance by making their children apologise for their own offences. Studies of childbearing practices in different cultures (Damon and Hart 1988) show a variety of parental attitudes towards children. Generally speaking, in East Asian cultures, children are regarded as part of the parents' 'selves' (Kim and Choi 1994). The model behaviour for a child is 'do what parents tell you to do' and a well-behaved child is a good reflection on good 'family training'. The parents therefore take full responsibility for their children's actions and words and, furthermore, such interdependence between parents and child is expected to last well into adulthood.

The apology use reported by the Japanese subjects in my data provides another example of how parents take responsibility for what their children do.

For both the Japanese and British subjects in my data, vertical relationships (e.g. mother-child) seem to take priority over horizontal relationships (e.g. friend-friend), in the sense that the speaker feels more obliged to apologise for offences caused by a junior relation than by a peer. Although subtle cultural differences have been observed in some societies, many social psychologists and anthropologists contend that interpersonal autonomy and independence are highly valued in peer relationships. Vertical relationships based on power or seniority (e.g. age), tend to foster interdependence.

Another interesting pattern that has emerged from my study is that the Japanese subjects reported using more combinations of apology strategies than the British subjects, and they do so particularly when the offended is a close friend. As has been mentioned earlier, the Brown and Levinson (1987) politeness model predicts that the greater the social distance between the interlocutors, the more politeness is required in the interaction. The data from the British subjects in my study do seem to generally support this claim. The data from the Japanese subjects, however, seem to contradict Brown and Levinson's argument. Part of the reason for this apparent cultural difference may be due to the fact that the Japanese maintain a sharp distinction between 'us' and 'them' and they pay less attention to relations beyond their immediate circle of family and close friends. They do not normally want to be involved in any meaningful social exchange and invest a considerable amount of time and energy in developing friendship ties with a selected few and strive to maintain those friendships at all costs.

Zhu et al. (1998) have studied the many different ways of offering and accepting gifts amongst Chinese speakers. They argue that the cultural motivation for the extremely elaborate organisation of gift offer and acceptance is the belief by the Chinese people that interpersonal harmony cannot be assumed even among friends and must be 'achieved' through explicit and often complex communicative strategies. The use of different types of apology strategies reported by the Japanese subjects in this study provides a supporting example. The British subjects, on the other hand, seem to prefer simple and explicit expressions. For example, two British subjects stated that they employ intensifiers, such as "terribly" and "awfully" with their apologies in the questionnaire interview when the offeree is socially distant.

In my research, the differences in response between Japanese and British may be related to whether the subject has an independent or interdependent notion of the self. If one's actions

are dependent on, determined by, or made meaningful by one's relationships and social situations, it is reasonable to expect that subjects with interdependent selves might focus on the motivation of the person administering the question and on the nature of the current relationship with this person. Consequently, in the process of responding, they might ask themselves, "What is being asked of me here? What does this question expect of me or require from me? What are the potential ramifications for answering one way or another way in respect of my relationship with this person?" (Lebra 1976: 67). To respond to these types of questions requires temporarily ignoring the constituted social situation and also the nature of one's relationship with the other. Markus and Kitayama (1991: 234) assert that a person's actions are made meaningful by reference to a particular set of contextual factors, and if these are changed or ignored, then the self that is determined by them also changes.

One of the fundamental aspects of a collective or group identity is the emphasis on form and the order of process. This has a specific meaning in Japanese and is translated into the word *shikata*, or *kata*, which it is now shortened to, which means 'ways of doing things' and has at its root the meanings 'support' and 'serve' (Boye Lafayette, De Mente, 1993: 1). Cultural conditioning based on the *kata* system made the Japanese extremely sensitive to any thought, manner, or action that did not conform perfectly to the appropriate *kata*. In formal as well as many daily situations every action was either right or wrong, natural or unnatural, and there were no shades of grey that accommodated individualistic thought or preferences. According to Boye Lafayette, De Mente, (1993: 2), for Japanese there was an inner order (the individual heart) and a natural order (the cosmos), and these two were linked together by form, or *kata*, and it was *kata* that linked the individual and society. In Japan, the apology has become so important in the conduct of business that companies are employing managers who are skilled at apologising. Besides having polished verbal skills, these expert apologisers also must be good at performing the proper kinds of bows and in selecting consolation gifts or money. The *kata* of the apology are therefore also critical to the complex conditioning that goes into the moulding of a Japanese (Boye Lafayette, De Mente, 1993: 39).

## 5. Conclusion

While 'face' influences people's politeness behaviour in social interaction, what 'face' actually means in different cultures for different people is an empirical question. The Twenty

Statements Test that has been carried out with the amassed subjects in this study seems to suggest that the Japanese self is group-orientated and private, while the British self is more independent and public. The use of apology strategies, as reported by the Japanese and British subjects, reflects the two different cultural selves. Apologising not only for what one has done oneself, but also on behalf of one's children and partner, and using elaborate combinations of strategies when addressing close friends, as reported by the Japanese subjects in this study, are all good examples of the interdependent Japanese self. Using explicit and simple expressions of apology and making their children and husbands apologise for themselves for what they have done, as reported by the British subjects in this study, depicts the more independent British self.

Apology is an important act of politeness whose function of maintaining, restoring and enhancing interpersonal relationships has been highlighted by sociolinguists. Most of the existing studies of apology in different languages and cultures follow the Brown and Levinson (1987) approach and describe apology as a 'negative politeness' strategy. This study has investigated the use of apology in conjunction with an examination of the cultural concepts of 'self' by two groups of subjects from a Japanese and British cultural background. It has demonstrated that there are important differences in the self conception of the two groups, which are reflected in their use of apologies. For convenience, the scope of the study has been limited to possession offences in a small range of scenarios and situations, which are hypothetical. As Holmes (1995) reveals, in principle the act of apologising can be realised in a number of ways, verbally or non-verbally, depending on the type of offence, physical context of the offence, and, most importantly, the interpersonal relationship between the people involved.

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**Appendix Appendix A:**

TWENTY STATEMENT TEST

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Ethnic Origin: \_\_\_\_\_ Job Status: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Have you ever lived abroad? \_\_\_\_\_

In the spaces below, please give twenty different answers to the question, "WHO AM I?" Give these as if you were giving them to yourself, not to somebody else. Write fairly rapidly, for time is limited.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_
11. \_\_\_\_\_
12. \_\_\_\_\_
13. \_\_\_\_\_
14. \_\_\_\_\_
15. \_\_\_\_\_
16. \_\_\_\_\_
17. \_\_\_\_\_
18. \_\_\_\_\_
19. \_\_\_\_\_
20. \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix B:**

QUESTIONNAIRE STUDY

This questionnaire lists five occasions on which an incident occurs. For each occasion please state (1) how obliged you would feel to apologise, on a five-point scale; (2) what you would do in such a situation; and (3) if you apologised verbally, what would you say?

The five-point scale numbers are categorized as:

- 1, no apology – a refusal to say anything or a denial of the offence;
- 2, mild/moderate apology, which is insincere or matter-of-fact;

3, general apology i.e. just sorry;

4, strong apology i.e. I am very sorry; or

5, fervent apology – whole-heartedly and repeatedly say sorry (maybe with enthusiasm).

A1. You and your family are invited to a party at your best friend’s house. When you are helping your friend with the dishes, you accidentally drop one of the best plates. The plate is smashed to pieces.

(1) How obliged would you feel to apologise?

No apology ←	→	Strong apology		
1	2	3	4	5

(2) What would you do in such a situation? \_\_\_\_\_

(3) If you apologised verbally, what would you say? \_\_\_\_\_

A2. In the same setting, your partner breaks the plate

(1) How obliged would you feel to apologise?

No apology ←	→	Strong apology		
1	2	3	4	5

(2) What would you do in such a situation? \_\_\_\_\_

(3) If you apologised verbally, what would you say? \_\_\_\_\_

A3. In the same setting, your child breaks the plate

(1) How obliged would you feel to apologise?

No apology ←	→	Strong apology		
1	2	3	4	5

(2) What would you do in such a situation? \_\_\_\_\_

(3) If you apologised verbally, what would you say? \_\_\_\_\_

B1. You and your family are invited to dinner at a restaurant with your partner’s boss. When you are reaching for your glass you knock it over spilling red wine over the boss’s wife.

(1) How obliged would you feel to apologise?

No apology ←	→	Strong apology		
1	2	3	4	5

(2) What would you do in such a situation? \_\_\_\_\_

(3) If you apologised verbally, what would you say? \_\_\_\_\_

B2. In the same setting, your partner knocks over the glass.

(1) How obliged would you feel to apologise?

No apology ←				→	Strong apology
1	2	3	4	5	

(2) What would you do in such a situation? \_\_\_\_\_

(3) If you apologised verbally, what would you say? \_\_\_\_\_

B3. In the same setting your child knocks over the glass.

(1) How obliged would you feel to apologise?

No apology ←				→	Strong apology
1	2	3	4	5	

(2) What would you do in such a situation? \_\_\_\_\_

(3) If you apologised verbally, what would you say? \_\_\_\_\_

C1. You have borrowed a book from a work colleague and you have accidentally spilt some coffee on to the book.

(1) How obliged would you feel to apologise?

No apology ←				→	Strong apology
1	2	3	4	5	

(2) What would you do in such a situation? \_\_\_\_\_

(3) If you apologised verbally, what would you say? \_\_\_\_\_

C2. In the same setting, your partner has spilt coffee on to the book.

(1) How obliged would you feel to apologise?

No apology ←				→	Strong apology
1	2	3	4	5	

(2) What would you do in such a situation? \_\_\_\_\_

(3) If you apologised verbally, what would you say? \_\_\_\_\_

C3. In the same setting, your child has spilt coffee on to the book.

(1) How obliged would you feel to apologise?

No apology ←				→	Strong apology
1	2	3	4	5	

(2) What would you do in such a situation? \_\_\_\_\_

---

(3) If you apologised verbally, what would you say? \_\_\_\_\_

---

D1. In a crowded supermarket, your trolley hits a woman's shopping bag and the contents fall to the floor

(1) How obliged would you feel to apologise?

No apology ←	→	Strong apology		
1	2	3	4	5

(2) What would you do in such a situation? \_\_\_\_\_

---

(3) If you apologised verbally, what would you say? \_\_\_\_\_

---

D2. In the same setting, your partner's trolley hits the woman's bag and the contents fall to the floor

(1) How obliged would you feel to apologise?

No apology ←	→	Strong apology		
1	2	3	4	5

(2) What would you do in such a situation? \_\_\_\_\_

---

(3) If you apologised verbally, what would you say? \_\_\_\_\_

---

D3. In the same setting, your child is pushing the trolley, which hits the woman's bag, and the contents fall to the floor.

(1) How obliged would you feel to apologise?

No apology ←	→	Strong apology		
1	2	3	4	5

(2) What would you do in such a situation? \_\_\_\_\_

---

(3) If you apologised verbally, what would you say? \_\_\_\_\_

---

E1. Imagine that you meet a business contact by chance at a meeting and they remind you that you have borrowed a file from them that should have been returned by now. You have completely forgotten it.

(1) How obliged would you feel to apologise?

No apology ←	→	Strong apology		
1	2	3	4	5

(2) What would you do in such a situation? \_\_\_\_\_

---

(3) If you apologised verbally, what would you say? \_\_\_\_\_

---

E2. In the same setting, the business contact reminds you that a junior colleague of yours has borrowed a

file but forgotten to return it.

- (1) How obliged would you feel to apologise?

No apology ←                      →                      Strong apology  
1            2            3            4            5

- (2) What would you do in such a situation? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- (3) If you apologised verbally, what would you say? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

E3. In the same setting, the business contact reminds you that a colleague of yours (of similar status to you in the company) has borrowed a file but forgotten to return it.

- (1) How obliged would you feel to apologise?

No apology ←                      →                      Strong apology  
1            2            3            4            5

- (2) What would you do in such a situation? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- (3) If you apologised verbally, what would you say? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

E4. In the same setting, the business contact reminds you that a senior colleague of yours has borrowed a file but forgotten to return it.

- (1) How obliged would you feel to apologise?

No apology ←                      →                      Strong apology  
1            2            3            4            5

- (2) What would you do in such a situation? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- (3) If you apologised verbally, what would you say? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_