

## Are Men More Apologetic Than Women?

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### ABSTRACT

Apologies are common utterances. When an individual has violated a social norm, apologetic utterances are offered. This study investigates how apologies are used in relation to gender. A total of 120 ESL learners were asked to respond to a Discourse Completion Test that had 4 apology situations. Their responses were categorised into different speech act strategies. The results suggest that women tend to apologize more than men. Men and women also differ in the order of primary strategies used. There is a difference in the frequencies and the type of apology strategies used when the respondents apologized to their own gender compared to the opposite.

*Keywords:* Apology, apology strategies, ESL learners, gender, speech act

### INTRODUCTION

Olshtain (1989) defines an apology as ‘a speech act which is intended to provide support for the hearer who was actually or potentially malaffected by a violation’ (pp. 156-157). The speech act of apology aims at maintaining good relation between participants (Holmes, 1990, p. 156). Two speakers carry the role of an ‘apologizer’ and

an ‘apologizee’ (Istifci, 2009). Apology is used as remedial interchanges to re-establish social harmony between an apologizer and an apologizee (Goffman, 1971; Leech, 1983). One will receive an apology only when the person who causes the offence perceives herself or himself as an apologizer (Istifci, 2009).

According to Olshtain and Cohen (1983), the act of apologizing requires an utterance which is intended to ‘set things right’. Hence, apology is seen as a remedial act, especially when the purpose is to change the meaning of an action; from what could be seen as offensive into what can be seen as acceptable (Goffman, 1971).

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When an apology is made, the apologizer has to act politely and pay attention to the apologizee's face needs (Holmes, 1990; Brown & Levinson, 1978). When offering an apology, 'one shows willingness to humiliate oneself to an extent that makes an apology a face-saving act for the hearer and a face-threatening act for the speaker' (Bataineh & Bataineh, 2006, p. 1903). For the apology to have an effect, it should reflect true feelings.

The speech act of apology is complex in nature (Olshtain & Cohen, 1990), where a variety of possible strategies may be employed. Olshtain and Cohen (1983, p. 22) asserted that an apology could comprise one or more components, and each is a speech act in its own right. Some examples of the components are an apology or Illocutionary Force Indicating Device (IFID), "I'm sorry;" an acknowledgement of responsibility, "It's all my fault;" an offer to compensate, "I'll replace it;" a promise of forbearance, "It will never happen again;" or an explanation, "It was an accident." These semantic formula has been the basis of many studies on apology.

Sugimoto (1997) explained that 'findings from existing empirical studies on apology do not lend themselves easily to a clear comparison' (p. 351). Previous research has categorized apology according to various strategies. Their list is not mutually exclusive, and can be overlapping with one another. Nevertheless, the list is not exhaustive.

In the research of apology, gender is one of the main variables used. Holmes (1995)

investigated gender differences in apologies and found that women used significantly more apologies compared to men. Women also used more apologies for apologizees of equal power, i.e., when apologizing to their female friends of equal status. On the other hand, men apologized more to socially distant women, specifically to women of higher status.

Holmes (1989), in a study conducted on New Zealanders, found that women apologized more than men. Women also apologized more to other women than to men. On the other hand, men apologized to women more than to men. It was also found that women apologized more for offences of space and speaking rights, as compared to men who apologized more for offences involving possessions and time.

According to Bataineh and Bataineh (2006), women tend display statements of regret (e.g., I'm sorry, I apologize) in most situations, compared to men. This finding is found to be consistent with Holmes (1995) who found that women apologize more for their mistakes. Women do so consistently, not only to females but also to males. Women were also found to be assigning responsibility to themselves, i.e. clarifying the situation 'to ensure the offended's understanding of the issue for which they are apologizing' (p. 161). Furthermore, women tend to avoid face-to-face confrontation as compared to men.

In the second and foreign language context, studies on apology are associated with sociopragmatic competence (Istifçi, 2009). Sociopragmatic competence is

the ability to adjust speech strategies appropriately according to different social variables such as the degree of imposition, social dominance and distance between participants of conversation, and participants' rights and obligations in communication (Harlow, 1990). Speakers of second or foreign language may face difficulties to apologize in the target language. The ESL learners may also use their own social or cultural rules to those of the target language. In other words, an appropriate way to apologize in one language could be recognized as inappropriate in another language.

An example is provided by Olshtain (1994) in her talk presented at the 1994 Nessa Wolfson Memorial Colloquium at the University of Pennsylvania, where an intermediate Chinese student, studying in the United States, accidentally took someone else's umbrella. When he was told that the umbrella was not his, he apologized profusely and provided an explanation, when a simple 'sorry' was entirely sufficient.

Eslami-Rasekh and Madani (2010) mentioned that the ability to interpret deliver an appropriate response when apologizing is a social skill which can add greatly to the language learners' opportunities to enter into friendly relationship with native speakers. They also noted that teaching speech acts of apology to language learners will enable them to become aware of sociolinguistic conventions of language use and cultural differences which constitute appropriate use when apologizing in English (p. 96).

In the Malaysian context, there are limited studies carried out with regards

to apologizing in English. Among them is Marlyna (2006) who explicates the production of apologies by adult Malay speakers in Malaysia. She found that the apologies pattern by Malay speakers displayed their L1 linguistics and sociocultural rules, negatively affecting their sociopragmatic competence in the production of apologies in English. For example, the respondents confused the formulae "I'm sorry" with "Excuse me" in utterances, such as "Excuse me, I don't like the cake". In the Malay language, there is only one form for "Excuse me" and "I'm sorry", which is "*Maafkan saya*" (Marlyna, 2006). These errors occurred because of the influence of the speakers' native language (Borkin & Reinhart, 1978; Marlyna, 2006). According to Borkin and Reinhart (1978), the inappropriate usage of these formulae is also common among Thai and Japanese ESL learners.

In another study, Farashaiyan and Amirkhiz (2011) compared the apology strategies used by Malaysian ESL and Iranian EFL learners. The study reported similarities and differences in the types of apology strategies used by both groups. For example, both Iranians and Malaysians displayed an expression of regret in most situations. However, the Malaysians used this strategy at a higher frequency as compared to the Iranians.

The Iranians also used a wider range of apology strategy types as compared to the Malaysians. There were four types of apology strategies which were used by the Iranians but not the Malaysians. They were expressions of embarrassment, denial of

responsibility, blame the hearer, and pretend to be offended. The researchers suggested that these could be due to individual differences such as personality-related style preferences, language-learner strategies, and sociopragmatic competence.

The apology strategies used most frequently by the Malaysian respondents were expression of regret, offer of repair and explanation. The authors asserted that this might be due to their L1 linguistic and sociocultural influence on their sociopragmatic competence.

## CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

According to Allan (2011, p. 5), language is a representation of culture and it is a culturally specific form of communication. Therefore, it is important to study how different speech acts are used in different cultures. The present study comes with the purpose of identifying the strategies used by the Malaysian respondents in apologizing and their frequency of occurrence in relation to gender. The study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. Do men and women differ in their use of apology strategies?
2. Do women differ in the types of apology strategy used when apologizing to a man compared to a woman?
3. Do men differ in the types of apology strategy used when apologizing to a man compared to a woman?

## METHODOLOGY

### *Design*

The present study employed a qualitative method. Fryer (1991) noted that qualitative method is often associated with the collection and analysis of written or spoken texts. Qualitative procedures were previously employed to investigate apology strategies (Olshtain & Cohen, 1983; Holmes, 1990; Sugimoto, 1997; Bataneh & Bataneh, 2006) through the use of Discourse Completion Tests (DCT). Following the works of the researchers aforementioned, the present study utilized the qualitative design for the purpose of discovering the differences of the respondents' realization of apology when apologizing to the same and opposite gender.

### *Sample*

The respondents were 120 students, comprising 60 males and 60 females, from a public higher learning institution in Malaysia, and aged between 22 and 55. The respondents, drawn from education courses in the same faculty, included 20 first-year students, 20 sophomores, 35 juniors, 20 seniors and 25 graduate students. A stratified random sampling was employed, where subjects were selected at random from the population strata (i.e., males and females).

### *Instrument*

The instrument used in this study is the Discourse Completion Test (DCT). According to Mackey and Gass (2005), DCT

is the most common method in pragmatic-based research and particularly useful if one wants to investigate speech acts such as apologies, invitations and refusals (p. 89). The DCT used is adapted from Cohen and Olshtain's Discourse Completion Test (1981) in the study of apology. It consists of four (4) prompts which were adapted from Olshtain (1983). These prompts suggested scenarios of apologizing to another individual of different or the same gender. The descriptions in each of the prompts are as follows:

1. Apologizing to a female elderly.
2. Apologizing to a male stranger.
3. Apologizing to a female stranger.
4. Apologizing to a male elderly.

An example of prompt 1 in the DCT is:

You accidentally bump into an elderly lady at a department store, causing her to spill her packages all over the floor. You hurt her leg, too.

Her: "Ow! My goodness!"

You: (participants' response)

#### *Data Collection Procedure*

Respondents were contacted in their classes where permission has been asked from the respective instructors before hand to allow the research to be carried out personally by the researchers. During data collection, the respondents were first told the purpose of the research. They were asked to write what they would say based on the provided situations.

The respondents took about 15-25 minutes to complete the DCTs. The respondents handed in the DCT questionnaires to the researchers as soon as they had completed it.

#### *Data Analysis*

Firstly, the researchers identified the strategies used by the respondents, and categorised them according to their types of apology strategies. The list of strategies was found to be similar to that of Marlyna's (2006). They are as follows:

1. Direct Apology (DAp)  
e.g. I'm sorry.
2. Explanation (E)  
e.g. I didn't see you.
3. Acceptance (A)  
e.g. It's my fault.
4. Offer to repair (O)  
e.g. Let me help you to pick them up.
5. Promise (P)  
e.g. I'll never do it again.
6. Justification (J)  
e.g. I was just too busy.
7. DAp-A or Direct Apology-Acceptance  
e.g. I'm so sorry. It's totally my fault.
8. DAp-O or Direct Apology-Offer  
e.g. I'm sorry. Let me help you to your car.
9. DAp-P or Direct Apology-Promise  
e.g. I'm so sorry. There won't be next time.
10. DAp-J or Direct Apology-Justification  
e.g. I'm sorry. I really didn't see you.

11. DAp-DAp or Direct Apology-Direct Apology  
e.g. I'm sorry. So so sorry.
12. DAp-DAp-A or Direct Apology-Direct Apology-Acceptance  
e.g. I'm sorry. Very sorry, it's my fault.
13. DAp-DAp-O or Direct Apology-Direct Apology-Offer  
e.g. I am sorry. I am apologizing to you. Please let me know what I can do to compensate to you.
14. DAp-DAp-P or Direct Apology-Direct Apology-Promise  
e.g. I'm sorry. So sorry. I'll not do that again.
15. DAp-DAp-J or Direct Apology-Direct Apology-Justification  
e.g. I'm sorry. I really am sorry. I really didn't see you.
16. DAp-DAp-A-P or Direct Apology-Direct Apology-Acceptance-Promise  
e.g. I am so sorry. So sorry, I know it's my fault, I promise I'll not do it again.

Four new categories were also identified; these are DAp-J-O or Direct Apology-Justification-Offer; DAp-A-O or Direct Apology-Acceptance-Offer; DAp-J-A or Direct Apology-Justification-Acceptance; and finally A-O or Acceptance-Offer. That also means that a total of 20 categories were identified.

Secondly, the overall frequencies of occurrence of each apology strategies in all four situations were calculated. Finally, the types of apology strategies used by both men and women when apologizing to the same

gender and the opposite were also identified, and their frequencies were calculated. The information was used by the researchers to explain the results.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented according to the research questions mentioned earlier. The data in Table 1 presented the various patterns of apology strategies and their frequency used by both men and women in the present study.

The figures in Table 1 indicate that overall, women apologize more than men, with a total number of 255 as compared to 229, respectively. This is consistent with the findings of Holmes (1989) who reported that women apologized more than men. The difference in terms of the overall number of apology produced by men and women in the present study coincides with the findings of some previous studies that present gender as an important factor in people's use of apology (Bataineh & Bataineh, 2006; Holmes, 1989). According to Schumann and Ross (2011, p. 1651), women apologize more as compared to men because both genders perceive offences differently, and women have a 'lower threshold of what constitutes offensive behaviour'. In other words, the severity of the offence is perceived more seriously by women compared to men. Men tend to apologize when they believe that they have actually offended someone.

The results also indicate that there is a difference in the number of strategy types used by men and women. The type

of apology strategy mostly used by men in the present study is DAp – DAp (e.g., I’m sorry. I’m terribly sorry), with 40 occurrences. This is found to be consistent with Meier (1998) who reported that the males in his study were responsible of 84% of the use of the word ‘terribly’. Meanwhile, women were found to use DAp-A followed closely by DAp-O. Women tend to assign responsibility to themselves, and then offer compensation to the offended more than men did.

Women used more variety of apologetic strategies (17 types) as compared to men with only 14 types. Both men and women

used the same apologetic strategies, but women used 3 additional types, which are DAp-DAp-A (e.g. I’m sorry, I’m very sorry. It’s my fault); DAp-DAp- J (e.g., I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. I really didn’t see you); and A-O (e.g. It’s my fault. Let me help you).

The three types of apology strategies mentioned indicated that women tend to assign responsibility to themselves, while expressing regret about the situation. Apart from that, women also tend to justify themselves. According to Bataineh and Bataineh (2006), this is because women wanted to clarify the situation to ensure the offended’s understanding of the situation

TABLE 1  
Type and frequency of apologetic strategies used by men and women

Type of strategy	Men	Women
DAp	22	26
E	11	1
A	2	3
O	14	11
P	0	0
J	2	5
DAp- A	32	33
DAp-O	33	31
DAp-P	4	11
DAp-J	22	27
DAp-DAp	40	18
DAp-DAp-A	0	11
DAp-DAp-O	16	11
DAp-DAp-P	0	0
DAp-DAp-J	0	1
DAp-A-O	13	15
DAp-J-A	5	4
DAp- J – O	13	9
A-O	0	10
Total of frequency of Strategies	229	255
Total strategy types	14	17

which they had apologized for. Holmes (1995) also mentioned that ‘women use language to establish, nurture, and develop personal relationships’ (p. 2). This explains the preference of the type of apology strategies used by women in the present study.

Table 2 presents the strategies mostly used when women apologize to a man and a woman. Out of 20 types of apology strategies, only the top five are presented. The total numbers of apologies made by women when apologizing to the same gender and the opposite were also included in the table, as Table 2.

Based on the list of apologetic utterances preference by women, the results indicated that the women use different apologetic utterances when apologizing to the same gender and the opposite. Women tend to use DAp-DAp the most when apologizing to another woman. On the other hand, when they apologize to a man, women prefer using DAp-O. This is followed by DAp-A, which is the only apology strategy when apologizing to both the men and women,

as the second preference. According to Schumann and Ross (2010), women are more concerned with others’ emotions and maintaining harmony among speakers. That explains the selection of strategy of women in the present study who used DAp-A, showing that they feel sorry about the offence committed, and they admit that it is their fault. The findings also indicated that women apologized more to woman as compared to man. This is found to be consistent with the finding of Holmes (1995).

On the other hand, men responded to the situations given in the questionnaire using the following strategies (Table 3).

From the results obtained, men did not seem to use the same apologetic utterances when apologizing to different genders. When apologizing to a man, the male respondents tended to use DAp-J the most. This is followed by the use of DAp-O, DAp, and DAp-A. In contrast, when apologizing to a woman, they tended to use DAp-A the most, followed closely by DAp-DAp. Engel (2001) argued that men have difficulty

TABLE 2  
Apologetic Utterances Preference of Women

Apologetic Utterances Preference of Women	GENDER OF APOLOGIZEE			
	Man		Woman	
	Type of apology strategy used	Number of occurrence	Type of apology strategy used	Number of occurrence
Apologizer = WOMEN	DAp – O	22	DAp – DAp	18
	DAp – A	20	DAp – A	14
	DAp	16	DAp-A-O	13
	DAp-DAp – O	12	DAp – O	10
	DAp – J	7	DAp	10
Total	115		140	



admitting that they are wrong. However, this can only be seen when they are apologizing to another man. It contradicts their nature of not wanting to apologize when an offence is done to a woman. Men in the present study admitted and accepted their mistake when the apologizee is a woman. Hence, the results suggest that the gender of the apologizee does influence the choice of apologetic utterances used by men. This is found to be consistent with the finding of Holmes (1989) who concluded that apology may function differently for men and women.

Another finding which is worth discussing is the total number of apologies made by men when apologizing to the same and different gender. The result shows that men apologized to both man and woman to the same frequency. This differs from the women in the present study who apologized to woman to a far greater frequency as compared to man.

### SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

The results suggest that women in the present study tend to apologize more than men do. There is also a difference in the choice of apologetic strategies when the respondents apologize to their own gender compared to the opposite. Both men and women use more apologetic strategies when apologizing to the same and opposite gender. The researchers have also discovered 4 new categories; namely, DAp-J-O or Direct Apology-Justification-Offer; DAp-A-O or Direct Apology-Acceptance-Offer; DAp-J-A or Direct Apology-Justification-Acceptance; and finally A-O or Acceptance-Offer.

The present research is significant because it explores the area of sociolinguistics and pragmatics, which to the best of the researchers' knowledge, have not been adequately researched for this topic and target group. Hence, it is hoped that the research findings may contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the research of speech act in general, and specifically, research on apology.

TABLE 3  
Apologetic Utterances Preference of Men

		GENDER OF APOLOGIZEE			
		Man		Woman	
Apologizer = MEN	Type of apology strategy used	Number of occurrence	Type of apology strategy used	Number of occurrence	
		DAp- J	44	DAp - A	20
		DAp - O	23	DAp-DAp	17
		DAp	13	DAp-A- O	13
		DAp - A	12	DAp- J - O	13
		DAp - DAp - A	8	DAp	9
Total		116		113	

Since research on apology within the Malaysian context can be considered limited, future studies should explore this topic further. Firstly, future research may use a bigger sample size. Secondly, the instrument used in the present study, which is DCT (Discourse Completion Test), could be improved by using other instruments that can measure real utterances. Instead of obtaining responses in which the subjects think they may say, it is better if the responses are those which they actually say in real-life situations. Written responses give them time to think and reflect what they want to say, whereas in a situation which they need to respond to instantly, the responses can be considered more genuine.

Thirdly, the way one apologizes is very much culturally influenced. Hence, a study to compare the way people in different cultures in Malaysia apologize would be interesting. There are more than 200 races in Malaysia. Future research may want to examine how people of different races react when someone from another race apologizes or does not apologize. Fourthly, it would also be interesting to compare apology strategies of different speech communities - different regions; royalties vs. commoners; people from different hierarchy in the social structure, or even power distance (boss-employee, parents-children).

Finally, it is important to note that the researchers did not address the pragmatic or the grammatical appropriateness of the responses in the questionnaire. Future research may also want to look at these issues as to examine whether ESL learners

in the Malaysian context are socio-pragmatically competent in producing apologies in English.

## CONCLUSION

The current work is a descriptive study on apology in the Malaysian context. The results suggest that gender does affect the way one apologizes. People of different genders have the tendency of using different apologetic strategies when apologizing. A better understanding in gender differences may help individuals to improve communication with others, and to avoid misunderstanding while interacting.

On that note, several pedagogical implications can be discussed. Firstly, ESL students' should be made aware of the socio-cultural rules for apologizing. Since their cultural background and L1 have some influence on the production of apology (Marlyna, 2006; Borkin & Reinhart, 1978), being aware of other cultures may help students to apologize appropriately. This will ensure that the apologies produced by the students are grammatically and pragmatically correct. Secondly, in terms of ESL teaching, teachers should be more concerned in helping the students to identify the appropriate apology strategies to be used when apologizing to a man and a woman since both genders perceive apology differently. For instance, comparing and contrasting the similarities and differences in the apologetic strategies used by men and women may be a helpful way to raise their pragmatics and gender differences awareness. Besides that, teachers

may also help to develop students' ability to identify potential sources of offences so that misunderstandings can be avoided. With a better understanding on how different individuals interact, we are able to produce a more socially and pragmatically competent learners.

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