

## Apology across Culture and Gender

文化間及び異性間における謝罪の仕方について

apology strategies / cultural differences / gender differences

伊藤 幸恵

ITO Sachie

### I. Introduction

An apology is a speech act that is used to restore relationships between a speaker (S) and a hearer (H) after S has offended H intentionally or unintentionally. About this point, Olshtain (1983) states that “the act of apologizing requires an act or an utterance which is intended to ‘set things right’” (p. 235). Moreover, Holmes (1995) refers to apology as an example of “face-supportive acts” (FSAs) (p. 364). Once we reconsider our daily conversations, we notice easily that we apologize or are apologized to in various ways for different reasons according to different situations.

Also, it is well known that culture and gender differences have an influence on the selection of formulas for the realization of apology. Then, to what extent are apology strategies different and are there any similarities among people in different cultures and genders? This paper will investigate how American and Japanese males and females apologize in certain situations to capture the similarities and differences in realization patterns of apologies among them.

### II. Previous Studies of Apology

Olshtain and Cohen (1983, p.22) suggest the notion of “the speech act set of apology” to encompass the potential range of apology strategies. It includes the following five strategies:

1. an IFID (Illocutionary Force Indicating Device; e.g. be sorry; apologize; regret; excuse me etc.)
2. an expression of the speaker’s responsibility for the offence
3. an expression or account of the cause which brought about the violation
4. an offer of repair
5. a promise of forbearance

The first two of them are general and explicit ways of apology, and the other three are situation-specific and will reflect the content of the situation (Olshtain, 1989). Vollmer and Olshtain (1989) further comment that “either one of them (the first two), or both in

conjunction with one another are likely to occur in almost any kind of apology situation...the other strategies which can be used instead of the main ones...are much more situation-dependent" (p.198).

In addition to the main five strategies that make up the speech act set, speakers can modify their apologies by intensifying or downgrading them. According to Olshtain (1989), common intensifiers usually used in our conversations are "very" and "really", and a common expression that contains a speaker's intention to downgrade an apology is something like: "I'm sorry, but you really shouldn't get insulted by such remarks."

Empirical investigations of apologies have been carried out by many scholars in the past decades. Olshtain (1983) investigated how native speakers of English and native speakers of Russian, both learners of Hebrew, apologized in Hebrew and their native languages. She used the same procedure used in an earlier study in Cohen and Olshtain (1981) which examined realization patterns of apology by native speakers of Hebrew to compare native usage and nonnative usage. Taking the results into consideration, she concluded that "the data indicates an overall higher level of use for all five semantic formulas of the apology speech act set for speakers of English than for speakers of both Hebrew and Russian, and an overall lower level of frequency for speakers of Hebrew" (p. 245). Moreover, she found that the English speakers, who apologized most often in their native language, actually tended to apologize considerably less in Hebrew, while the Russian speakers apologized more in Hebrew.

Another study done by Olshtain (1989) compared strategy preference of apology by speakers of four different languages (English, French, German and Hebrew) and found remarkable similarities in selection of IFIDs and expression of responsibility. Taking the result together, she concluded that at the global level of analysis, "different languages will realize apologies in very similar ways" (p. 171).

Vollmer and Olshtain (1989) researched apology realization preference of speakers of German (N=200) focusing on the relationship between their realization patterns of apology and social/situational parameters such as social status, social distance the hearer's expectation of an apology and severity of offence. Mainly they found the following two points: First of all, the subjects used IFIDs and responsibility in all situations in rather high percentages. Secondly, the use of intensification of apology was highly related to situational parameters (e.g. the lower the speaker's social status, the more he/she used intensifiers).

Holmes (1995) looked at gender differences in apologies and found both similarities and differences between males and females. The most obvious differences that this study found were the following three points:

1. Women used significantly more apologies than men did.
2. Women used most apologies for the hearers of equal power, while men apologized to women of different status.
3. Women used most apologies for female friends whereas men used most for socially distant women (pp.379-380).

Overall, these previous studies introduced here seem to indicate the following four points. Firstly, many of them found many similarities of realization patterns of apology across cultures and genders in global level of analysis, even though there were several differences among them. Secondly, choice of apology strategies in certain situations is closely related to social/situational parameters. In other words, we change our strategies according to hearers or situations. Thirdly, language learners tend to transfer their sociopragmatic strategies in their first language to apologies in second languages. And finally, language learners tend to apologize differently in their target languages (e.g., English speakers less apologized in Hebrew than in English).

### III. Research Design

#### A. Research Questions

A number of questions underlie this study are presented here:

1. What kinds of apology strategies do subjects use most often?
2. How does the distributions of the apology strategies vary across seven situations?
3. In what way is a choice of an apology strategy related to social distance, social power, severity of offence, and obligation of apology?
4. Are apology intensification and downgrading related to these four factors?

This study investigates the similarities and differences among American and Japanese males and females from these four points of view.

#### B. Subjects

The subjects of this study were 40 students of San Francisco State University. They were 10 American males, 10 American females, 10 Japanese males and 10 Japanese females.

#### C. Procedures

- (1) Questionnaire A: Evaluation of social distance, social power, severity of offence, and obligation of apology in the seven situations (see Appendix A)

The subjects were given the full descriptions of the apology situations and were asked to evaluate each factor on a scale:

1. social distance on a scale of 1 to 3; (1=strangers, 2=acquaintances, 3=friends)
2. social power on a scale of 1 to 3; (1=S lower than H, 2= S and H are equals, 3=S higher than H)
3. severity of offence on a scale of 1 to 2; (1=low, 2=high)
4. obligation of S to apologize on a scale of 1 to 2; (1=low, 2=high)

(2) Questionnaire B: Discourse completion test on apology (see appendix B)

I rearranged the seven apology situations of the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) and asked the subjects to write their responses as realistically as possible according to how they would actually respond in the given situations. I used the questionnaires written in Japanese for Japanese students to get their answer without any language difficulties. The analysis of apologies used in this study was based on the five strategies in the speech act set of apology (Olshtain and Cohen, 1983). Each utterance was classified according to what speech act strategies it contained. In case when an utterance included more than two of them, they were assigned to both categories.

#### IV. Results

##### A. Questionnaire A

The weighted means of the responses are presented in Table 1. Since there was no significant difference among the four groups of subjects, mean scores of 40 subjects are presented here.

Table 1. Evaluation of the Four Factors  $\bar{x}$ = Weighted Means of Each Scale (N=40)

Factors	Situations						
	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7
1. Distance scale:1-3	1.85	2.05	1.10	1.13	2.83	1.08	2.28
2. Power scale: 1-3	2.83	1.20	2.78	1.28	2.03	1.90	2.00
3. Severity: high/low	1.26	1.56	1.20	1.58	1.40	1.95	1.45
4. Obligation: high/low	1.43	1.85	1.50	1.93	1.68	1.90	1.75

The data presented in Table 1 indicates the following points. Firstly, the evaluation of the level of social distance (familiarity) between S and H varies from a high of 2.83 in S5 (a friend is late for a meeting with a classmate) to a low of 1.10 in S3 (a manager is late for an interview), where it is clear that the interactors are totally strangers. Also, it is interesting to note that the subjects perceived the level of familiarity as slightly higher in S2, where a student apologized to a professor for forgetting the book, (2.05) than in S1 where a professor apologized to a student for not reading the paper.

Secondly, the perception of power between interactors varies from a high of 2.83 in

S1 (a professor apologizes to a student) to a low of 1.20 in S2 (a student apologizes to a professor). Also, the data indicates that the subjects evaluated social power between a waiter and a customer (S4) quite similarly as that between a student and a professor.

Thirdly, the severest offence that the subject perceived is a car accident in S6 (1.95) and the data is quite high compared with the other six situations. Furthermore, it can be said that the lower the social power of a speaker, the higher the severity of offence. In other words, the subjects perceived that offences by speakers of low social status should be more serious than those by speakers of high status. And finally, the results of obligation of apology are very similar to those of severity of offence. That is to say, if severity of offence is high, obligation is also high.

## B. Questionnaire B

Table 2. Choice of Strategies in Seven Situations (%) (N=40)

Strategies		Situations						
		S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7
IFID	AM	90	100	90	90	60	80	90
	AF	80	<50>	<40>	<60>	<20>	<30>	<30> [80]
	JM	60	<30>	<10>	<60>	<30>	<30>	<10> [70]
	JF	<10>	<50>	<40>	<70>	<20>	<10>	[30]
	JF	70	90	90	100	100	60	80
Responsi- bility	AM	--	10	--	--	--	30	30
	AF	--	--	--	--	10	40	10
	JM	--	--	--	--	10	10	10
	JF	--	--	10	--	--	--	--
Explanation	AM	60	10	100	20	20	--	--
	AF	60	10	100	20	60	10	--
	JM	20	10	80	10	10	10	10
	JF	50	--	90	--	20	--	--
Offer of Repair	AM	70	70	20	90	--	70	--
	AF	100	100	40	100	--	80	--
	JM	30	50	20	100	10	40	--
	JF	20	80	10	100	--	20	--
Promise of Forbearance	AM	--	--	--	--	10	--	10
	AF	--	--	--	--	30	--	10
	JM	10	20	--	--	40	--	10
	JF	--	--	--	--	50	--	20

AM---American males, AF---American females, JM---Japanese males, JF---Japanese females  
 < >---Intensifying, [ ]---Downgrading

The results of the first analysis of the apology data collected from 40 subjects are presented in Table 2. They indicate the percentages of the subjects' choice of each strategy. Each percentage represents the number of choices made out of the total

number that is potentially possible, so if all American males (10) use IFIDs, it is presented as 100%. Furthermore, regarding IFIDs, intensifying and downgrading were also investigated.

From examining the data presented in Table 2, I found that IFIDs appeared in all situations in rather high percentages. The use of IFIDs varies from high percentages- in S2 (a student, a professor) and S4 (a waiter, a customer) where speakers of lower social status have to apologize- to a low percentage in S6 (a driver, a driver) even though the subjects perceived that severity of offence and obligation of apology in this situation were very high in Questionnaire A. Also, by comparing S1 to S2, it is clear that the professor doesn't use IFIDs as often as the student does. This result seems to imply that a speaker of higher social status apologizes less by using IFIDs than a speaker of lower status does. From these results, it can be said that I got similar results as Vollmer and Olshtain (1989).

The use of intensifier relates to social power between a speaker and a hearer: The lower the speaker's status, the more he/she intensifies his/her apology by using words like "really" and "very". From the data in Table 2, it is clear that the subjects used intensifiers most frequently in S4 (a waiter, a customer). On the other hand, the subject downgraded their utterances only in S7 where S insulted H.

Generally speaking, all four groups of subjects realized their apology strategies in very similar ways. However, at the same time, some cross-cultural differences appeared. For example, in S5, where S was late again for the meeting with a classmate, more Japanese subjects chose IFIDs than American subjects, but the contrary was found in S6 (a driver, a driver).

Regarding explanations or accounts, the data indicates that the speakers of higher social status (like S1 and S3) tend to use this strategy more often than the case when the speakers' status is equal or low. Actually, the manager who was late for the job interview (S3) explained why he/she was late in order to make a good excuse. From the data, I found that almost all of the subjects used this strategy.

Also, the data indicates that the subjects chose an offer of repair in high percentages in S2 (a student, a professor) and S4 (a waiter, a customer) where the subjects perceived that the speaker's social status was low. This tendency became clear when I compare S1 and S2. Also, it should be noted that in S6 (a driver, a driver) many subjects gave their insurance or telephone numbers and addresses to offer a repair.

About the fifth strategy of apology, promise of forbearance, it can be said from the data that the subjects used this strategy in high percentages in S5 where a student had to

apologize for being late for a meeting with his/her friend. The data especially indicates a more frequent Japanese use of this strategy (Japanese males: 40% and Japanese females: 50%).

To capture cultural and gender differences in terms of apology realization patterns, I analyzed the same data from a different point of view. Table 3 presents percentages of strategy selection out of the total potential number of possibilities across seven situations.

Table 3. Percentage of Strategy Selection from Total Number of Possibilities

Subjects	Across Seven Situations (N=40) % < >...Intensifiers				
	IFID	Responsibility	Explanation	Repair	Forbearance
American males	86 <33>	10	30	46	2
American females	80 <24>	7	37	60	6
Japanese males	79 <29>	4	21	36	11
Japanese females	84 <37>	1	23	33	10

From the data presented in Table 3, it is possible to point out the following three results. First of all, American males realized their apologies using IFIDs the most frequently (86%) and Japanese females used intensifiers most often among the subjects (37%). As the previous studies mentioned earlier indicated, I had originally expected that Japanese would use IFIDs more often than Americans would do and females would use a greater number of intensifiers than males would do; however, judging from the data, my hypotheses were rejected.

Secondly, I found that both American males and females chose the strategies such as expression of responsibility, explanation or account, and offer of repair when they apologized to a hearer. However, in contrast, both Japanese males and females used promises of forbearance in higher percentages than American did. From this result, it has become clear that the Americans apologized by using more strategies than the Japanese did and the Japanese preferred to choose a promise of forbearance.

Finally, as the data mentions, I didn't find any clear difference between males and females. This result seems to indicate that cultural difference has an influence on the choice of apology strategy more greatly than gender difference does.

## V. Conclusions

This study has investigated the similarities and differences of realization patterns of apology among four groups of subjects. With the small sample of subjects, I cannot generalize the results I have mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, some interesting results were found.

Firstly, the results of this study seem to reinforce the notion that at a global level of analysis, we can identify universal manifestations of strategy selection (Olshtain, 1989). In other words, it can be expected that in very similar situations, given the same social factors, the same contextual features, and the same level of offence, people will realize apologies in similar ways no matter what languages they speak. However, at the same time, I found several differences among subjects and these findings indicated very interesting points. The most obvious difference I found in this study was that the Americans used more strategies than the Japanese did.

Secondly, from examining the results of Questionnaire A and B, it became clear that sociopragmatic factors, such as social distance and severity of offence, are closely related to the subjects' realization patterns of apology. And finally, from this study, I learned that it was very important to know when and how we should apologize in a target language because sometimes an appropriate way of apology in one language could be recognized inappropriately in another language. Overall, sociolinguistic ability is one of the most important strategies that language learners should acquire.

#### References

- Holmes, J. 1995. "Sex differences and apologies: One aspect of communicative competence." In H.D. Brown & S. Gonzo (eds.), *Readings on Second Language Acquisition*. pp.362-385. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Olshtain, E. 1983. "Sociocultural competence and language transfer: The case of apology." In S., M. Gass. & L. Selinker (eds.), *Language Transfer in Language Learning*. pp. 232-249. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Olshtain, E, & Cohen, A.D. 1983. "Apology: A speech-act set." In N. Wolfson & E. Judd (eds.), *Sociolinguistics and Language Acquisition*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House. pp. 18-35.
- Olshtain, E. 1989. "Apologies across languages." In B. Kulka, S., J. House, & G. Kasper (eds.), *Cross-cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. pp. 155-173. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Vollmer, H., J. & Olshtain, E. 1989. "The language of apologies in German." In B. Kulka, S., J. House, & G.Kasper (eds.), *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. pp. 197-217. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Appendix A: Questionnaire A

Gender: Male/Female

#### Instruction

Please read carefully the following seven descriptions of the apology situations and indicate how you evaluate social distance, social power, severity of offense, and obligation of the Speaker (S) to apologize to the hearer (H).

1. social distance on a scale of 1 to 3; (1=strangers, 2=acquaintances, 3=friends)
2. social power on a scale of 1 to 3; (1=S lower than H, 2= S and H are equals, 3=S higher than H)
3. Severity of offence on a scale of 1 to 2; (1=low, 2=high)
4. Obligation of the S to apologize on a scale of 1 to 2; (1=low, 2=high)

Situation 1: A university professor promised to return the student's paper that day but didn't finish reading it.

Social distance 1-----2-----3

Social power 1-----2-----3

Severity of offence 1-----2

Obligation of apology 1-----2

Situation 2: A student borrowed her professor's book, which she promised to return that day, but forgets to bring it.

Social distance 1-----2-----3

Social power 1-----2-----3

Severity of offence 1-----2

Obligation of apology 1-----2

Situation 3: A staff manager has kept a student waiting for half an hour for a job interview because he was called to an unexpected meeting.

Social distance 1-----2-----3

Social power 1-----2-----3

Severity of offence 1-----2

Obligation of apology 1-----2

Situation 4: The waiter in an expensive restaurant brings fried chicken instead of beefsteak to a surprised customer.

Social distance 1-----2-----3

Social power 1-----2-----3

Severity of offence 1-----2

Obligation of apology 1-----2

Situation 5: A notoriously unpunctual student is late again for a meeting with a friend with whom she is working on a joint paper.

Social distance 1-----2-----3

Social power 1-----2-----3

Severity of offence 1-----2

Obligation of apology 1-----2

Situation 6: A driver in a parking lot backs up into someone else's car.

Social distance 1-----2-----3

Social power 1-----2-----3

Severity of offence 1-----2

Obligation of apology 1-----2

Situation 7: The speaker offended a fellow worker during a discussion at work. After the meeting, the fellow worker mentions this fact.

Social distance 1-----2-----3

Social power 1-----2-----3

Severity of offence 1-----2

Obligation of apology 1-----2

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Appendix B: Questionnaire B

Gender: Male/Female

Instruction

You will be asked to read seven brief situations calling for an apology. In each case, the person who you owe the apology to will speak first. Please respond as realistically as possible.

Situation 1: You are a university professor. You promised to return the student's paper that day but didn't finish reading it.

Student: "Did you read my paper?"

You:

Situation 2: You borrowed your professor's book, which you promise to return that day, but forgot to bring it.

Professor: "Did you bring the book?"

You:

Situation 3: You are a staff manager and you have kept a student waiting for half an hour for a job interview because you were called to an unexpected meeting.

Student: "What happened?"

You:

Situation 4: You are a waiter who works in an expensive restaurant. You brought fried chicken instead of beef steak to a surprised customer.

Customer: "I ordered beef steak."

You:

Situation 5: You are a notoriously unpunctual student. Today you are late again for a meeting with a friend with whom you are working on a joint paper.

Friend: "Oh. You are late again!"

You:

Situation 6: You are in a parking lot and back up into another person's car.

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

You:

Situation 7: You offended a fellow worker during a discussion at work. After the meeting, the fellow worker mentions this fact.

Worker: "I feel that your last remark was directed at me and I take offense."

You:

Thank you very much for your cooperation.