

## Apology in Use

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**Abstract:** *There have been many researchers (Holmes, Brown and Levinson, Olshtain, Blum-Kulka, House, Kasper) who have devoted themselves to the analysis of one of the basic units of human linguistic communication - the act of apologizing. An apology, as argued by Holmes (1989), is seen as a face-supportive act. As such, it does not impose on the hearer's face. It has been understood that the act of apologizing serves as a social goal of maintaining harmony between the speakers, and in order to make it convincing and workable it has to be used with appropriate strategies. Olshtain (1989) claimed that apologies do not differ drastically across languages and therefore it could be said that they are mostly universal. Interestingly enough, what Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989: 21) noticed is that apologies are used with different degrees of intensity. Speakers may use intensifiers or upgraders to increase the power of their apology ('I'm so sorry', 'I'm really sorry'), but they may also use other modality markers such as downgraders to avoid the use of apology and minimize their guilt (ex. I didn't know you'd be eager to go out tonight.).*

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*Moreover, an act of apologizing might not accompany the set of realization patterns typical for apologizing and does not have to coincide with the speaker's pragmatic intention. 'Sorry 'bout that!' is an example that one may find in contexts in which a speaker is not apologizing for something s/he did, but s/he is sarcastic or just superficially using the pattern to avoid a sincere apology. In other words, meaning does not have to be tightly connected to the pragmatic intention whatsoever. Still, the aim of this paper will be to analyze the structure of an apology using data-collection instruments, such as the discourse completion test (DCT), rating scales and role-plays, in order to elicit apologetic data produced by non-native speakers who are highly proficient in English and who are responsible for teaching and guiding young generations. The paper will examine teachers' apologetic competences as a type of knowledge that everyone needs to acquire, process, develop, use and display on a daily basis. The analysis of teachers' contextual perceptions and choices of apology strategies openly indicates their socio-pragmatic performance through written and oral tasks, and their pragmatic linguistic performance as well.*

## Definition and Strategies of an Apology

There are many definitions of apologies as most frequently studied expressive speech acts. Goffman (1971) defined an apology as a remedial interchange that is used to restore social equilibrium after the violation of social norms. It is clear that ‘an apology is called for when there is some behavior that violates social norms, ... when an action or an utterance (or the lack of either) results in one or more persons perceiving themselves as deserving an apology, the culpable person(s) is (are) expected to apologize...’ (Cohencited in McKay, S.L., Hornberger, N.H., 1995:386). Moreover, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984: 206) proposed the three preconditions that evoke the act of apologizing:

1. the apologizer committed a violation or abstained from committing a violation (or is about to commit it);
2. a violation is perceived by the apologizer only, by the hearer only, by both the apologizer and the hearer, or by a third party as a breach of a social norm;
3. a violation is perceived by at least one of the parties involved as offending, harming, or affecting the hearer in some way.

It is evident that the apologizer shows readiness to accept the guilt and responsibility to restore social harmony and in that way an apology becomes a face-saving act or remedial interchange.

Once there is a need for the act of apologizing, an apologizer may choose one or more apology strategies to restore social harmony. Fraser (1981: 263) proposed a systematic classification of apology strategies into:

1. announcing that you are apologizing: *‘I apologize for ...’*
2. stating one’s obligation to apologize: *‘I must apologize for ...’*
3. offering to apologize: *‘I offer my apology for ...’*
4. requesting that the hearer accept my apology: *‘Please accept my apology for ...’*
5. expressing regret for the offence: *‘I am (truly / so / very / deeply) sorry for ...’*
6. requesting forgiveness for the offence: *‘Please excuse me for...’*
7. acknowledging responsibility for the offending act: *‘That was my fault ...’*
8. promising forbearance from a similar offending act: *‘I promise you that will never happen again ...’*
9. offering redress: *‘Please, let me pay for the damage I’ve done ...’*

Dealing with the apology speech act set, Cohen, Olshtain and Rosenstein (1986) perfected five apology strategies:

1. an expression of apology, whereby the speaker uses a word, expression, or sentence that contains a relevant performative verb such as *apologize, forgive, excuse, be sorry*;
2. an explanation or account of the situation that indirectly caused the apologizer to commit the offence and that is used by the speaker as an indirect speech act of apologizing;
3. acknowledgement of responsibility, whereby the offender recognizes his or her fault in causing the infraction;
4. an offer of repair, whereby the apologizer makes a bid to carry out an action or provide payment for some kind of damage that resulted from the infraction;
5. a promise of nonrecurrence, whereby the apologizer commits himself or herself not to let the offence happen again.

In her study, Trosborg (1987, 1995) categorized apology speech-act sets in seven categories, and she also added one additional, the Zero strategy, in which a complaineé does not take responsibility at all (opting out through implicit or explicit denial of responsibility, evading responsibility completely, blaming someone else or attacking the complainer). The classification of the other seven apology speech-act sets is as follows:

Evasive strategies – (minimizing; querying preconditions; blaming a third party);

Indirect strategies –

- a) acknowledging responsibility (implicit and explicit acknowledgement; expression of lack of intent; expression of self-deficiency; expression of embarrassment; explicit acceptance of blame);
- b) providing an explanation or account (implicit or explicit explanation);

Direct strategy – (expression of regret; offer of apology; request for forgiveness);

Remedial support –

- a) expressing concern for the hearer;
- b) promise of forbearance;
- c) offering repair or compensation.

The most influential classification of apology strategies is still the one developed by Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper in 1989.

1. Illocutionary Force Indicating Devices (IFIDs): e.g. *sorry*;

2. Taking on Responsibility (explicit self-blame: e.g. *my mistake*; lack of intent: e.g. *I didn't mean to upset you*; justify hearer: e.g. *you're right to be angry*; expression of embarrassment: e.g. *I feel awful about it*; admission of facts but not of responsibility: e.g. *I forgot about it*; refusal to acknowledge guilt: e.g. *it wasn't my fault*);
3. Explanation or Account: e.g. *the traffic was terrible*;
4. Offer of Repair: e.g. *I'll pay for the damage*;
5. Promise of Forbearance: e.g. *This won't happen again*;
6. Distracting from the Offence: (query precondition: e.g. *are you sure we are supposed to meet at 10?*; pretend not to notice the offence: e.g. *am I late?*; future/task-oriented remark: e.g. *let's get to work!*; humour: e.g. *if you think that's a mistake, you should see our fried chicken!*; appeaser: e.g. *I'll buy you a cup of coffee!*; lexical and phrasal downgraders (politeness markers: e.g. *please*, understater: e.g. *a bit*, hedge: e.g. *somehow*, subjectivizer: e.g. *I'm afraid, I wonder*, downtoner: e.g. *possibly, perhaps*, cajoler: e.g. *you know*).  
(Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper, 1989: 289)

As mentioned in the introduction, apologies are used with different degrees of intensity. Speakers acquire the knowledge of how to increase the power of their apology as well as they acquire the knowledge of how to evade a sincere apology. Trosborg (1995: 385-6) also identified some of the most common internal apology modifications, which she grouped into:

1. upgraders (intensifiers: *I'm terribly sorry; I didn't mean to cause you any pain*);
2. downgraders(downtoners, understaters, hedges and subjectivizers: *just, simply, maybe; a little bit, not very much; kind of, sort of; I think, I suppose, I'm afraid*);
3. cajolers and appealers (*you know, you see, I mean; okay, right, see*);

## Methodology

The present paper compared the results on the speech act of apology obtained through the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) and role-plays (RPs) that the Master's-level English-language students took at the beginning of the academic year 2013/2014 within their master's-degree studies. The DCT data contained 10 different situations, whereas the RPs had six situations. For this study only six situations were selected within the DCT as to be easier to compare them with the results obtained via the RPs. A description of every situation was given to a student who then needed to put down apologetic responses s/he thought to be the most adequate for the given context. In a similar way, the data was obtained from the RPs, in which respondents were

provided with a role card and then were asked to role-play the situation and reply in a way that would be the most typical, natural and spontaneous with respect to the real-life situation.

As far as informants are concerned, there were 40 native speakers of Bosnian examined. All of the speakers were highly fluent in English (80% of them were advanced EFL learners – C1, C2; 20% were pre-advanced – B2.). Most of them were employed as teachers of primary and/or secondary school children in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or giving private English lessons to friends and family members. The data included 20 males and 20 females. Their age range is from 24 to 37, and all of them started learning English at the age of 12 in primary school.

The data in the present paper were collected through the DCT and RPs, offering situations that call for apologies for the purpose of investigating apologies. The corpus consisted of almost 960 apologies and apology responses over a variety of contexts, some reflecting heavy, some medium-weighted and some light offences. The paper also put emphasis onto the degrees of apology intensity presented within the apology responses through the use of upgraders, downgraders, cajolers and appealers. What is more, the differences in apology responses between male and female respondents were also addressed as well as the overall willingness or reluctance in expressing an apology explicitly through written and oral tasks.

## **Results and Discussion**

It must be emphasized that the results revealed interesting and vivid differences between the two methods, DCT and RP. Namely, what had been anticipated was that the DCT data would not differ too much from the RP data. However, the results proved different. First of all, within the DCT all respondents were asked to rate the contexts on a five-point rating scale for four context-internal factors (severity of the situation, offender's obligation to apologize, difficulty of such obligation and likelihood for the apology to be accepted). They expressed that the possibility of them apologizing remained high no matter how severe the situation (more than 80% said there was a high probability of them apologizing). They argued that expressing apologies is never problematic, especially if they are expected to apologize to someone they have offended. What is more, they pinpoint that an apology is never difficult to express and that they do not mind apologizing. They also strongly hold that the likelihood of the apology being accepted by the complaine is relatively high (more than 54% believe that their apology response bears qualitative characteristics and is sufficient to be accepted and to not let the complaine down). As far as gender differences are concerned, it could be said that both male and female respondents say that apology-strategy implementation is important and they do not find it difficult to use. Still, in contrast to the male respondents, the female respondents found apologies a

bit more important for restoring social harmony, regardless of whether they were apologizing for light, medium-weighted or heavy offences.

On the other hand, the RP data revealed that the possibility of respondents apologizing is not as high as was evident within the DCT data. Namely, less than 65% have not showed reluctance to apologize despite the nature of the specific apology situation (see Table 1). Generally speaking, it seems that respondents thought these situations to be less severe and therefore their performance on apology was generally poor or totally omitted. Therefore, it could be stated that there is evident minimization of the severity of offence in the RPs rather than on the DCT. At times, it seemed difficult to say the apology out loud, and it was crystal clear that respondents behaved differently when engaging in the RPs. On several occasions, respondents did not employ an apology at all. To be more precise, they successfully tried to evade responsibility, or to blame or attack somebody else instead. With respect to gender differences, the females' perception of how to apologize again became vivid and more common and colourful than the males' perception. In addition, female respondents used apologies explicitly, but only when there was a high severity of offence that influenced their performance on apology. Male respondents proved unwilling to offer apologies, especially when they were apologizing to a male acquaintance or male friend.

Needless to say, some intriguing results were discovered within the RP sessions. Namely, on a few occasions it was noticed that respondents, when assuming the role of a complaine, understood the offence to be graver and therefore required not just an expression of apology, but also an additional explanation of the situation and a more thorough acknowledgement of responsibility. It was noticed that on several occasions neither an offer of repair nor a promise of forbearance were workable strategies. However, this paper could not provide a meticulous description and analysis of these situations for all examinees who acquired both the role of apologizer and complaine within this limited study; this should be included in further qualitative analyses of apology data. **← Is the edit correct?**

**Table 1.** Comparison of context internal factors in DCT and RP data

<b>Context internal factors:</b>	<b>DCT</b>	<b>RP</b>
severity of the situation	light, medium-weighted and heavy	light, medium-weighted and heavy
the possibility of you apologizing	80%	65%

difficulty of apology	no	questionable
likelihood of the apology accepted is	54%	50%

Having reviewed the issue of context internal factors between the DCT and RP methods, it is now high time to focus on the differences and similarities of the apology strategies obtained from the DCT and RPs. A close examination of the distribution of strategies is needed in order to make a detailed comparison between the two approaches. As mentioned above, the corpus consisted of almost 960 apology strategies over a variety of contexts. Furthermore, it is significant to mention that 960 apology strategies is a total number of apology strategies found across six situations of the DCT and six of the RPs. The results indicate that examinees tended to use at least two times the number of the apology strategies in the RPs than on the DCTs. It is quite clear that examinees behaved differently when engaged in RPs, probably because they reflected real, face-to-face interactions. In other words, there was no place for additional turns on the DCT due to its non-dynamic nature. In contrast, the RPs involved dynamics and thus created a lot of space for numerous apology strategies. Here are several examples on the distribution of apology strategies:

- (1) Situation: Knocking over a cup of coffee and burning a lady sitting next to you:

DCT: I'm sorry. I'll pay for the dry-cleaning.

or:

I'm deeply sorry. I didn't mean to. Is there a chance to compensate?

ROLE-PLAY: A: Oh, my God!

B: Come on, look what you've done!

A: I feel really bad now. I'm so clumsy.

B: Yeah, my new white coat is stained now. I don't believe

it.

A: Is there a chance to compensate in some way? I'll do

anything.

B: It's OK, you don't have to worry.

A: Are you sure? Can I pay for the dry-cleaners'?

B: No, no, it's ok.

A: At least, let me buy you a drink.

B: No, no, it's ok.

A: Please, forgive me. OMG, what a clumsy person I am!

(2) Situation: You accidentally dropped your friend's new phone and it broke.

DCT: I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have touched it.

or:

Sorry. It was an accident.

ROLE-PLAY: A: Oh, don't kill me.

B: I cannot believe that you dropped my new phone.

A: I really don't know how I dropped it, it just slipped off.

B: How did you let it happen? What were you trying to do?

A: Please, forgive me, I don't know what happened. One second I am holding it, the other I just lose it. Like these hands are not mine. I don't know what is wrong with me all day, I am having a bad day, really.

B: Yeah, well, I will see whether I could repair the display.

A: If there is anything I could do, let me know. I am willing to pay.

B: We'll see to it.

Once again, the interactive nature of the RPs brought a great number of apology strategies to the surface. However, if a closer attention is paid to apology-strategy preference, one may perceive that not all the apology strategies are equally distributed on the DCTs and in the RPs. The total number of apology strategies on the DCT is three; specifically, strategy 4 - Direct Apology, as an expression of apology (*I apologize; I am sorry, Please, forgive me*), followed by strategy 2 - as an indirect strategy referring to Acknowledgement of Responsibility, and strategy 7 - strategy of Offering Repair or Compensation. On the other hand, the total number of apology strategies in the RPs is five: strategy 7 - strategy of Offering Repair or Compensation, followed by strategy 2 - as an indirect strategy referring to Acknowledgement of Responsibility, strategy 5 - Expressing Concern for the Hearer, and strategy 4 - Direct Apology and the last being strategy 1 - Evasive Strategy. It is of high importance to mention that the Zero Strategy is also very common (up to 9.5%) when examinees show implicit or explicit denial or responsibility, evading responsibility completely or even attacking the complainer. Needless to say, the Zero Strategy was a rarity within the DCT data.

**Table 2.** Apology strategies distribution

STRATEGIES	DCT	ROLE-PLAY
Strategy 0: opt out	0%	<b>9.5%</b>
Strategy 1: evasive strategy	1%	<b>12%</b>
Strategy 2: acknowledgement of responsibility	<b>17%</b>	<b>17%</b>



Strategy 3: providing explanation	4%	6.5%
Strategy 4: direct apology	<b>54%</b>	<b>15%</b>
Strategy 5: expressing concern for the hearer	3%	<b>16%</b>
Strategy 6: promise of forbearance	2%	1%
Strategy 7: offering repair or compensation	<b>19%</b>	<b>23%</b>

It is worth mentioning that examinees almost never employed a single apology strategy, but a combination of strategies within a first or single response, both on the DCT and in the RPs. The most workable strategies within the DCT were: Direct apology (54%), Offering Repair or Compensation (19%) and Acknowledgement of Responsibility (17%). In addition, those were the strategies common in the RPs as well. However, there is a different distribution of the strategies within the RPs, the most frequent being: Offering Repair or Compensation (23%), Acknowledgement of Responsibility (17%), Expressing Concern for the Hearer (16%), Direct Apology (15%) and Evasive Strategies (12%). What is more, the use of Opt-out or Zero Strategy seems to be quite interesting for this study, as one could witness that the examinees were at times minimizing the severity of the offence, or regarded it as a light one, so they would not implement any apology at all.

Next, the preference order of apology strategies is evidently different on the DCT and in the RPs. Direct Apology was indeed the most preferred strategy within the DCT, but not particularly favoured within the RP approach. Examinees showed reluctance to explicitly apologize in the oral tasks, which was never the case in the written tasks. Both tasks, written and oral, did not affect the examinees' selection of apology strategies in general. However, when it comes to the preference order of these eight strategies, the differences came to the surface. The factors influencing the preference order of the strategies might be various; generally speaking, one may conclude that the major differences are due to the nature of the RPs and face-to-face conversations. Such contexts allow speakers to offer a response that looks like a real response formed in real contexts with real interlocutors. As a matter of fact, written contexts might appear far away from spontaneous and natural conversations, so speakers perceive a written task as a more formal task that requires a more formal language in order to show politeness and restore social harmony. Let's now take a look at the distribution of apology strategies within the above-mentioned examples:

- (1) Situation: Knocking over a cup of coffee and burning a lady sitting next to you:

DCT: I'm sorry. I'll pay for the dry-cleaning.

**(Direct Apology + Offer of Repair or Compensation)**

or:

I'm deeply sorry. I didn't mean to. Is there a chance to compensate?

**(Direct Apology + Acknowledgement of Responsibility + Offer of Repair)**

RP: A: Oh my God!  
**(Opt out)**  
B: Come on, look what you've done!  
A: I feel really bad now. I'm so clumsy.  
**(Acknowledgement of Responsibility + Providing Explanation)**  
B: Yeah, my new white coat is stained now. I don't believe it.  
A: Is there a chance to compensate in some way? I'll do anything.  
**(Offer of Repair + Offer of Repair)**  
B: It's OK, you don't have to worry.  
A: Are you sure? Can I pay for the dry-cleaners'?  
**(Expressing Concern for the Hearer + Offer of Repair)**  
B: No, no, it's ok.  
A: At least, let me buy you a drink.  
**(Offer of Repair)**  
B: No, no, it's ok.  
A: Please, forgive me. OMG, what a clumsy person I am!  
**(Direct Apology + Providing Explanation)**

(2) Situation: You accidentally dropped your friend's new phone and it broke.

DCT: I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have touched it.  
**(Direct Apology + Acknowledgement of Responsibility)**  
or:  
Sorry. It was an accident.  
**(Direct Apology + Providing Explanation)**

ROLE-PLAY: A: Oh, don't kill me.  
**(Acknowledgement of Responsibility)**  
B: I cannot believe that you dropped my new phone.  
A: I really don't know how I dropped it, it just slipped off.  
**(Providing Explanation)**  
B: How did you let it happen? What were you trying to do?  
A: Please, forgive me, I don't know what happened. One second I am holding it, the other I just lose it. Like these hands are not mine. I don't know what is wrong with me all day, I am having a bad day, really.

**(Direct Apology + Providing Explanation + Providing Explanation + Providing Explanation + Acknowledgement of Responsibility)**

B: Yeah, well, I will see whether I could repair the display.

A: If there is anything I could do, let me know. I am willing

to pay.

**(Offer of Repair + Offer of Repair)**

B: We'll see to it.

When addressing gender differences one may witness that the act of apologizing is common for both male and female respondents on the DCTs and in the RPs. Female examinees find an apology to be significant and valuable for re-establishing social equilibrium, as do male examinees. Still, when it comes to general use of apology strategies, the results show that female examinees have a tendency to use a combination of at least three apology strategies for every situation on the DCT and in the RPs, whereas male examinees use up to two strategies. As the results reveal, both male and female examinees use the same common strategies on the DCT (Direct apology, Offer of Repair or Compensation and Acknowledgement of Responsibility). Role-play data clearly display that the implementation of preferable strategies is different for males and females. Namely, male examinees are in favour of strategy 7 – Offer Repair or Compensation, as opposed to females, who prefer strategy 2 – Acknowledgement of Responsibility, strategy 5 – Expressing Concern for the Hearer and strategy 3 – Providing Explanation or Account. The most surprising fact is that both male and female apologizers used the Zero Strategy on certain occasions, denying or evading responsibility completely.

There is also an evidently greater use of modality markers by female examinees on both the DCT and in the RPs. Male examinees rarely used upgraders, unlike their female colleagues (intensifiers: *I'm terribly sorry; I'm awfully sorry; I deeply apologize*; emotional expressions: *Oh, no; OMG*;). Downgraders, cajolers and appealers were also more frequent with female apologizers (hedges: *My hands were kind of slippery*; downtoners: *I simply dropped the phone*;). The use of modality markers becomes greater when there is a high severity of offence in question, especially in the RPs. Bearing in mind that this study covered a small number of examinees, future research should be based on a more relevant number of examinees in order to address gender differences in apology performance, including apologizer gender and complainee gender. In addition, certain social parameters, like distance, power and age might also contribute to clarification and intensification of the issue of apology within every culture. In that way, more reliable and valid conclusions might be drawn.

## Conclusion

To sum up, this pilot study focused on a comparison between the apology data obtained from theDCT and theRPs. Similarities as well as differences have been established in the general use of apologies, context-internal factors found across six situations on theDCT and in theRPs and the preference order of apology strategies in both approaches. It is worth mentioning that, when performing an act of apology, respondents almost never employed a single apology strategy, but a combination of strategies. What is more, several important preliminary conclusions can be made at this point:

1. Act of apologizing is always a combination of several apology strategies;
2. The three most common strategies on theDCT and in theRPs are Direct Apology, Offer of Repair or Compensation and Acknowledgement of Responsibility; in addition, theRP data pointed to the use of other strategies such as Expressing Concern for the Hearer and Evasive Strategies;
3. Direct Apology is preferable on theDCT, whereas Offer of Repair or Compensation is the most favoured in theRPs;
4. The use of theZero Strategy seems to be quite an extraordinary discovery, as it was employed exclusively in the RPs;
5. Frequency of explicit Direct Apologies is higher on the DCT than in theRPs;
6. Female examinees have a tendency to use a combination of at least three apology strategies for every single situation, as opposed to male examinees who use up to two strategies; thus, female apologizers are more expressive than male apologizers;
7. Male examinees are in favour of strategy 7, while females prefer strategy 2, strategy 5 and strategy 3;
8. Female examinees are eager to use modality markers, especially in RPs, in order to maximize and strengthen the power of their apologies.

What future research needs to resolve is the issue of Direct Apology in everyday, natural and spontaneous conversations. A more detailed examination and analysis is required in order to address the notion of offence and apology performance in every culture. Also, further analysis of apologetic responses obtained from everyday conversations is something that needs to be taken into consideration so as to demonstrate actual culture-specific aspect(s) of apologies in the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina and culture-specific way(s) of dealing with offensive situations.

Needless to say, this pilot study has raised a list of questions related to the understanding of the act of apologizing. It is essential to comprehend that apologizing cannot be truly understood without taking reference to cultural values and attitudes into consideration. The aspect of culture is highly important and deeper than the norms of politeness and therefore apologies themselves. Thus, one must raise

awareness about different socio-culturally determined behaviours that exist and operate above the explicit norms of politeness.

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