

“You are fine”: Examining the Impact of Gender and Nativeness on Responses to Apologies

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Abstract

We aimed to explore the most and least used strategies of apology responses, as well as the differences between native and non-native speakers of English in formulating such responses. Additionally, we investigated the role of gender in the formulation of apology responses. The participants were 100 native and non-native speakers of English at an American university, who had to respond to two volunteers' apologies for blocking their path. The results regarding both genders indicate that the acceptance strategy was used the most frequently, while the evasion strategy was least used. Moreover, native speakers used more words than their non-native speaker counterparts. Furthermore, the syntactic structures of non-native speakers' apology responses were less sophisticated than those of native speakers. In terms of gender differences, men utilized the acceptance strategy more frequently than did women, whereas women showed a higher tendency to use the rejection strategy. Finally, the average number of words used by women in apology responses aimed at non-native and native speakers differed significantly, whereas this was not significant in the case of men. Based on our results, teachers and students should pay more attention to pragmatic competency learning in addition to conventional learning.

Keywords: *Apology response, cross-cultural studies, EFL, gender, pragmatic transfer*

Introduction

Foreign language teachers have begun to recognize that teaching just the vocabulary and grammar of the target language is insufficient for successful communication. Learners of foreign languages should also be taught the cultural competence of those languages. In addition, grammatical as well as sociolinguistic proficiency is required for effective communication (Canale & Swain, 1980; Richards, 1980).

One of the most obvious characteristics of any culture is the language. Moreover, one of the aspects of each language is its speech acts. Speech acts are defined as the actions performed through

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utterances in a real situation of language use, broaching the actions the speaker desires the hearer(s) to take or to interpret. Speech acts have been extensively researched in the discipline of pragmatics (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1975). The term encompasses all actions, such as requesting, commanding, informing, and complaining (Yule, 1996).

The literature is replete with studies conducted to explore different speech acts; for example, responding to compliments (Chen, 1993; Chen, 2003; Golato, 2002), requests (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; Blum-Kulka, 1987), complaints (Sauer, 2000), and apologies (Alhojailan, 2019; Demeter, 2006). Apologies are one of the most frequently examined speech acts, since they serve an important role in sustaining societal peace and interpersonal relationships (Goffman, 1971; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). Apologies are a common phenomena found throughout cultures, with people using diverse techniques to show sorrow, accept responsibility, and restore social balance after an incident (Wierzbicka, 1991; Leech, 2007).

While the act of apologizing has garnered a lot of attention, responses to apologies have been relatively underexplored (Grainger & Harris, 2007). Inappropriate or poor apologetic responses might result in unintentional offense and communication breakdown (Dhami, 2016). This gap in the literature is noteworthy because knowing the dynamics of apologetic reactions is critical for effective intercultural communication. Furthermore, the role of gender in the formation of apology responses has sparked interest, with some research indicating that men and women use different tactics (Holmes, 1989, 2013; Waluyo & Sutiyatno, 2020). However, the findings on gender differences have been varied, and further study is needed to better understand the intricacies of gender-based communication patterns in the context of apologies.

Therefore, we seek to address these gaps by exploring the following research questions:

- 1- What are the most and least used apology response strategies employed by native and non-native speakers of English?
- 2- What are the differences, if any, between native and non-native speakers in producing apology responses?
- 3- What is the role played by gender in the production of apology responses?

By exploring these features of apology responses, the study advances our knowledge of intercultural communication and the impact of language and gender on social interactions.

Literature Review

Speech Acts

Austin (1962) is credited with developing the core concept of Speech Act Theory. He points out that “by saying something we do something.” That is, while they make utterances, speakers in a discourse execute specific acts and fulfill particular tasks. Additionally, speech acts, according to Blum-Kulka et al. (1989, p.1) are considered “one of the most compelling notions in the study of language use”. This, according to Searle (1975), is due to the fact that speech acts have long been viewed as a fundamental mode of human connection.

Moreover, speech acts are an important component of pragmatics that learners of English as a second or foreign language need to understand to master pronunciation (Waluyo, 2017). According to Wierzbicka (1991), persons from varied cultural backgrounds frequently recognize that communication operates differently, employing distinct language patterns, social norms or conventions, and speech styles. Variations have frequently been blamed for unintended societal repercussions (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989), as well as communication breakdowns and misunderstandings in communities (Cohen, 2006; Spencer-Oatey, 2008).

Speech actions are diverse (e.g., requests, praises, and promises). They are thought to be “a critical factor that determines the processes of resolution of the problems and reconciliation between the parties” (Ohbuchi et al., 2008, 55). Among the speech acts in which individuals participate in everyday settings, the apology response is commonly employed because it maintains harmony (Saleem & Anjum, 2018; Waluyo, 2017; Wu & Wang, 2016).

Apology as a Speech Act

Bataineh and Bataineh (2008) claimed that “apology is the speech act through which the wrongdoer acknowledges responsibility and seeks forgiveness for what he/she has done” (p. 793). Apology is recognized as one of the therapeutic tools for restoring social peace among interactants (Goffman, 1971), and a face-threatening act (FTA) (Brown & Levinson, 1987), which “pays attention to the addressee’s negative face” (Coates & Cameron, 1988, p. 30).

According to Lakoff (2005), the apologetic speech act serves social duties by helping the speaker save face. Lakoff (2005) regards the stated apology as a social behavior indicating a face-threatening conduct. While performing an apology, the apologizer recognizes their responsibility

for committing an offense, according to Leech (2007). As a result, when apologizing, the speaker tries to limit praise for themselves.

When compared to other speech acts, the apologetic speech act has received far greater attention and interest from sociolinguistics and pragmatics experts (Grainger & Harris, 2007). This is probably due not only to its important social role (Lakoff, 2005), but also to the fact that it is one of the most frequently occurring speech acts in society (Cordella-Masini, 1989).

Responding to Apology

Su (2020) defines an apology response as “a speech act which is intended to provide support for the hearer who actually apologizes as a result of an offense” (p. 16). Apology responses, according to Agyekum (2006), have the potential to perform basic functions in order to sustain and restore societal harmony achieved via apologies. Responses to apologies could differ from one person to another by cultural background (Wu & Wang, 2016). Wierzbicka (1991) pointed out that “different cultures find expression in different systems of speech acts, and that different speech acts become entrenched, and, to some extent, codified in different languages” (p. 26).

Holmes (2013) stated that apology responses could be put in a variety of techniques, covering from silence to numerous types of language manifestations. She then categorizes apology responses into four main groups: Acceptance (AC) (That's OK), Acknowledgement (AK) (That's OK, but please don't do it again), Evasion (EV) (Let's make it another time), and Rejection (RJ) (silent).

Studies on apology responses have reported various findings. Holmes (2013), for example, pointed out that native speakers of New Zealand English use the acceptance strategy more than others. In addition, Saleem and Anjum (2018) claimed that British English speakers have a tendency to use acceptance and evasion strategies more than do Pakistani Urdu speakers, and that acknowledgement is the least used strategy.

Moreover, exploring the responses of twenty undergraduate non-native speakers (NNSs) of English, Waluyo (2017) pointed out that acceptance and rejection seemed the most common strategies employed, while acknowledgement was the least common. The widespread use of acceptance was attributed to the fact that participants and addressees had a relationship that was genuinely equal in all respects, and that they desired to preserve their friendships, healthy connections, and the atmosphere of positivity surrounding them (Waluyo, 2017).

Similarly, An et al., (2022), who explored apology responses strategies in spoken British English, claimed that acknowledgement strategy was the least used. Finally, Chung and Chen (2022) claimed that acceptance is one of the most used strategies among L1-English L2-Chinese learners and L1-Chinese L2-English learners.

Effect of Gender on Apology Responses

Several studies have explored the effect of gender on the strategy used for apology responses. Holmes (2013), for example, pointed out that female native speakers of New Zealand English use acceptance more than do their male counterparts. On the contrary, men were found to use the rejection strategy more than women.

Moreover, Chunlin (2013) investigated the apology responses of Chinese speakers and found that women tended to accept apologies more than did men. Additionally, Adrefiza and Jones (2013) explored how Australian English and Bahasa Indonesia speakers employ apology response strategies. They found no disparities in gender, and compared to their Australian counterparts, speakers of Bahasa Indonesia exhibited a tendency toward directness.

Studying the apology responses produced by Indonesian English as a foreign language fresh graduates, Waluyo and Sutiyatno (2020) claimed that women tended to be more elaborate. Moreover, they pointed out that women used acceptance more than any other strategy, and acknowledgement was the least used. On the contrary, evasion was male participants' preferred strategy, while they used acknowledgement the least. Finally, owing to their use of acceptance more than any other strategy, Waluyo and Sutiyatno (2020) claimed that women tend to be more direct than men.

Methods

Design

This study was an observational research in which participants were observed responding to volunteers' apologies. In accordance with Spradley's Developmental Research Sequence (DRS), our ethnographic investigation began by identifying a social setting relevant to our research aims. This included locating a context in which interactions relevant to our research naturally occur. The study was conducted at a large university in the United States of America (USA). It is a public university, and has five branch campuses. At the time of the study, there were ~40,000 enrolled

students. Moreover, it offers both graduate and undergraduate degree programs in various disciplines. Additionally, data collection took around two weeks.

Sample

The participants were 100 native and non-native speakers of English (53 male and 47 female students). The native speakers were Americans, while the non-native speakers were from various countries (i.e. China, Venezuela, France, India, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, and Spain). In addition, the participants reported that their ages ranged from 21 - 33 years old. For the non-native speakers, it is worth noting that the sample only included those who had fulfilled the English proficiency requirements to be enrolled in the university's graduate or undergraduate programs.

Table 1

The number of the male and female participants

MALES		FEMALES	
53		47	
NS	NNS	NS	NNS
28	25	24	23

Data Collection

Two volunteers (a native and non-native speaker) took on the main roles in this study. Their role was to stand in the way of participants who wished to use the stairs to go up or down to different floors in the main library of the university. The volunteers blocked the participants in a way that did not seem deliberate. The volunteers were tasked with noticing how the participants would respond to the volunteers' apology for blocking their way. After the participants' respond to the volunteers' apology, they would be told about the aim of the study and then asked to sign the consent form if they do not mind taking part in the study.

Data Analysis

Following data collection, the analysis was carried out in multiple steps as suggested by Spradley (1970). All the apology response strategies produced by the participants were recorded, and then transcribed. After transcribing the data, the researcher read the responses several times for the purpose of identifying the employed response strategies. Then, the participants' responses and the identified strategies were checked by another researcher who has experience in conducting

research on speech acts. Finally, when the researchers disagree about the type of a response and the quantity of the strategies, they would talk about the reasons behind the disagreement until they reached a complete agreement.

Trustworthiness of Data

To guarantee internal validity, the researcher used a random sample strategy for recruiting participants for the current study. According to Preece (1994), random sampling helps to distribute any unknown effects uniformly among individuals. In addition, Bouma and Atkinson (1995) point out that random sampling allows researchers to claim that their participants are typical of a wider community.

Research Ethics

All the participants involved in the study were fully informed about the aim and objectives of the research. In addition, participants were required to provide an explicit consent by signing a formal consent form. Moreover, anonymity and confidentiality were ensured in order to protect the participants' personal information and identities.

Findings

We sought to explore the most and least used apology response strategies employed by NSs and NNSs; the differences, if any, between NSs and NNSs in the formulation of apology responses; and the role played by gender in the formulation of apology responses. We observed that the participants used the following apology response strategies: acceptance, evasion, and rejection. The acknowledgement strategy was not used.

Additionally, when responding to the NS's apology, both native and non-native participants predominantly utilized the acceptance strategy (60 % and 50 %, respectively) (e.g., That's OK). Moreover, the rejection strategy was the least used (e.g., not saying anything). When responding to the NNS's apology, both native and non-native participants most commonly used the acceptance strategy (50 % and 80 %, respectively). Moreover, the evasion strategy was never used. This suggests that individuals are more inclined to accept apologies rather than evade or reject them. Regardless of whether the person being addressed was a NS or a NNS, native participants employed more words in their apology responses than their non-native counterparts. For example, among the NSs, apology responses included "You are OK," "It is alright," "No problem, dude,"

“You are fine!” and “Take it easy!”. Among the NNSs, on the contrary, “sorry” and “thank you” were most common. In addition, “sorry” was used by NSs only when addressing a NNS.

The results also demonstrated that the average number of words used in apology response strategies directed to a NS by women was three, and by men was 2.6. Moreover, the average number of words used in apology response strategies directed to a NNS by women was 1.9, and by men was 2.2. Although not large, the difference in the average number of words used by male and female participants in apology responses directed to a NNS and a NS was significant.

Furthermore, the syntactic structures of NNSs’ apology responses were not as sophisticated as those of NSs. Whether they were addressing a NS or NNS, NNSs relied on basic phrases like “sorry” and “thank you” most often. On the contrary, NSs used more elaborate expressions such as “Sorry! You are ok!” and “Oh no! You are fine!” mostly when they were addressing a NS.

As stated earlier, our participants used three apology response strategies: acceptance (e.g., You are alright), evasion (e.g., Take it easy), and rejection (e.g., Excuse me!). Data analysis revealed that acceptance and evasion strategies were the most and least frequently utilized by both genders, respectively. In terms of gender differences, female participants tended to employ the acceptance strategy in over 55 % of the total instances of apology responses. Male participants demonstrated a higher inclination toward utilizing the acceptance strategy, with an approximate rate of 70 %. In addition, the rejection strategy was used more frequently by female than male participants.

Both Tables 2 & 3 provide summaries for answering the research questions of the current study.

Table 2

A summary for answering research questions no. 1&2

		NSs	NNSs
RQ1	The most used apology response strategies	acceptance strategy	acceptance strategy
	The least used apology response strategies	rejection strategy	rejection strategy
RQ2	The differences, if any, between native and non-native speakers in producing apology responses	Words Used	More words used Less words used
		Syntactic Structures	use more complex expressions Use less sophisticated expressions

Table 3*A summary for answering research question no. 3*

GENDER	ACCEPTANCE STRATEGY (%)	EVASION STRATEGY (%)	REJECTION STRATEGY (%)	AVERAGE WORDS USED
FEMALE	Over 55 %	Less than 30 %	More than 15 %	Native Speaker: 3
				Non-Native Speaker: 1.9
MALE	Approximately 70 %	Less than 30 %	Less than 15 %	Native Speaker: 2.6
				Non-Native Speaker: 2.2

Discussion

Similar to some previously conducted studies (e.g., Holmes, 1989, 2013; Robinson, 2004; Adrefiza & Jones, 2013; Wu & Wang, 2016; Waluyo, 2017; Saleem & Anjum, 2018), the acceptance strategy was predominant in our findings. This could be explained in various ways. For example, because individuals often work together to help save face, the prevalence of acceptance in apology responses seems logical (Brown & Levison, 1987). In addition, acceptance can be seen as a favorably courteous behavior that restores social equilibrium while also helping the offender save face (Holmes, 2013).

Regarding the acknowledgement strategy, it was not used at all. This is in accordance with some previous studies, where this strategy was either not used or used the least (e.g., Saleem & Anjum, 2018; Waluyo, 2017; An et al., 2022; Waluyo & Sutiyatno, 2020). A possible explanation is that acknowledgement is nonverbal (Saleem & Anjum, 2018). Another possible explanation is that this strategy might imply the receiver's disapproval, which could be interpreted as threatening the apologizer's face. When seen from this perspective, the acknowledgement strategy endangers both the recipient and apologizer's face (An et al., 2022).

When exploring the differences between NSs and NNSs, we noted that:

- NSs used more words in their apology responses.

This finding could be attributed to the fact that NSs, as seen in the data, tended to include more elaborate phrases in their responses, such as "You are OK," "It is alright," "No problem, dude," "You are fine!" and "Take it easy!" compared to NNSs who often used simpler phrases

like "sorry" and "thank you." The use of additional words by NSs may suggest a cultural or linguistic preference for more expressive and comprehensive communication in apologies.

- The syntactic structures of NSs' responses were more complicated.

The intricacy of syntactic structures in NSs' responses corresponds to the use of more sophisticated terms and phrases in their apologies. This intricacy may result from a deeper familiarity with the language and cultural norms surrounding apologies, allowing them to produce more intricate and nuanced answers than NNSs, who may depend on simpler linguistic structures.

- "Sorry" was used by native speakers only when addressing a NNSs.

The exclusive usage of "sorry" by NSs when addressing NNSs may be due to cultural and linguistic issues. NSs may reserve the more direct phrase "sorry" for interactions with NNSs in order to simplify communication or demonstrate knowledge of potential language hurdles. When interacting with other NSs, however, they may use more diverse and expressive phrases to properly convey their apologies.

- The average number of words used in apology responses directed at a NS exceeded the average for NNSs.

The variance in apology response word count averages between NSs and NNSs could be due to the fact that NSs tend to use more complex phrases and structures in their apologies than NNSs. The longer responses from NSs may indicate a preference for more elaborate and expressive communication styles in apology, possibly due to cultural or linguistic influences.

In addition, the above points could be attributed to the effect of NSs' level of English proficiency, as NNSs would have been concerned about language deficits, causing them to avoid communicating in a face-to-face context (Freiermuth, 2001).

Our findings differed from those of Holmes (2013), who claimed that women tend to use the acceptance strategy more than do men. However, in line with An et al. (2022), our findings showed that female participants used the rejection strategy more frequently than did their male counterparts. This is rather surprising and undermines the long-held assumption that women are more courteous than men (e.g., Brown 1980; Holmes 1989, 2013; Coates 2013). Additionally, it contradicts the findings of An et al. (2022), who claimed that the linguistic behaviors of women and men are becoming increasingly comparable.

Finally, we observed an interesting phenomenon in the apology responses of male and female participants. The average number of words used in apology responses strategies directed at a NS by females is 3, and by males is 2.6. In addition, the average number of words used in apology responses strategies directed at a NNS by females is 1.9, and by males is 2.2. Although some studies claim that women tend to be more eloquent than men (e.g., Waluyo & Sutiyatno, 2020), this difference in eloquence was specifically noted when the female participants were in interactions with NSs and was not as prominent when addressing NNSs.

Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the most frequently used and least often used strategies of apologetic responses adopted by both NSs and NNSs, as well as to discover any differences between NSs and NNSs in creating apology responses, and the role of gender in producing these apology responses. The study identified three main apology response strategies utilized by the participants: Acceptance, Evasion, and Rejection. Interestingly, the study revealed that NSs used extra words in their apology responses compared to their NNS counterparts. Furthermore, the syntactic structures of the NNSs' apologetic responses were found to be less sophisticated when compared to those of the NSs.

Another significant finding of the research was that the acceptance strategy was the most frequently used by both male and female individuals. On the other hand, the Evasion strategy was shown to be the least used by both genders. In addition, it was observed that males utilized the acceptance strategy more frequently than females, whereas females used the rejection strategy more frequently than males.

Lastly, the study found that the average number of words used by female respondents in apologetic responses aimed at both NNSs and NSs differs significantly. However, it should be noted that the average number of words used by male participants in apologetic response strategies aimed at both NNSs and NSs is not regarded as large.

These findings contribute to the existing knowledge by providing insights into the intersection of gender, nativeness, and apology responses. The study investigates the intricacies of apologetic tactics employed by both native and non-native speakers, shedding light on how gender impacts the formulation of these apologies. By exploring the differences in response strategies between

genders and native versus non-native speakers, the research offers a deeper understanding of how cultural and linguistic factors shape interpersonal interactions. Furthermore, the study's emphasis on syntactic structures and word choices in apologetic answers adds complexity to the research, enhancing our comprehension of cross-cultural communication dynamics. Overall, this study broadens the scope of previous research on apology responses by incorporating gender, nativeness, and language analysis, enhancing our knowledge of intercultural communication practices.

Based on the findings presented, there are several practical implications for language teaching and intercultural communication:

1. **Teaching Apology Strategies:** Language teachers should focus on teaching a variety of apology response strategies such as acceptance, evasion, and rejection. They should also emphasize the differences in the formulation of apology responses between native and non-native speakers to help learners understand cultural nuances.
2. **Gender Differences:** Teachers should be aware of the gender differences in the formulation of apology responses. Female participants tended to use the acceptance strategy more frequently, while male participants leaned towards using more words and the acceptance strategy with greater inclination. This awareness can help in teaching gender-specific communication patterns.
3. **Word Choice and Syntactic Structures:** Language teachers can highlight the importance of word choice and syntactic structures in apology responses. Native speakers used more varied and sophisticated language compared to non-native speakers. Encouraging learners to expand their vocabulary and use more complex sentence structures can enhance their communication skills.
4. **Cultural Sensitivity:** In intercultural communication, understanding cultural differences in apology responses is crucial. For example, the use of "sorry" by native speakers only when addressing non-native speakers highlights a cultural distinction that learners should be aware of to avoid misunderstandings.
5. **Role-Playing Activities:** Incorporating role-playing activities in language teaching can be beneficial for practicing apology responses in various scenarios. This can help learners become more comfortable with different strategies and language patterns used in apologies.

In summary, the findings suggest that language teaching should not only focus on teaching vocabulary and grammar but also on cultural nuances, gender differences, and pragmatic aspects

of communication, especially in the context of apologies. Incorporating these insights into language teaching can enhance learners' intercultural communication skills and promote effective communication in diverse settings.

Larger samples may be used in future studies to create more reliable generalizations. It would also be beneficial to further investigate the relationship between the different types of offenses and apology responses. Another avenue worth exploring is whether apology responses differ across various types of English. Finally, it would be interesting to explore the effect of the participants' personalities on the employed strategies.

One of the present study's shortcomings is that it relied mostly on a single technique of data collecting. Using alternative tools, such as surveys and interviews, would yield additional results and support the conclusions of the current study.

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