

# The Use of Apologizing Strategies by College Students

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**Abstract:** *Apology is one of the negative politeness strategies used to save the other person's face. It is a social act that is aimed at offering a repair for an offence and maintaining good relations between the speaker and the addressee. The purpose of this paper is to examine the choosing of apologizing strategies by college students in regard to two factors: social power and social distance. The result shows that power difference and social distance play an important role in the students' choosing of apologizing strategies. The result also suggests the underlying cultural influence on the choosing of language.*

**Keywords:** *apology; apologizing strategies; social power; social distance*

## 1. Introduction

Apology is a kind of polite speech that is frequently used in people's daily life. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), polite speech is the use of verbal strategies that take the addressee's feelings into account by showing respect for his or her 'face'. They defined face as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (p.61), involving both positive face and negative face. Positive face is the need to be accepted, even liked, by others, to be treated as a member of the same group, and to know that his or her wants are shared by others; while, negative face is the need to be independent, to have freedom of action, and not to be imposed on by others. If a speaker says something that threatens another individual's expectations regarding self-image, it is described as a face threatening act; on the other hand, if the speaker says something that lessens the possible threat, it is called a face saving act.

When we interact with others we must be aware of both kinds of face and thus have a choice of two kinds of politeness. Positive politeness is the face saving act that is concerned with the person's positive face, tending to show solidarity, emphasize that both speakers want the same thing, and that they have a common goal; and negative politeness is the face saving act that is oriented to the person's negative face, tending to show deference, emphasize the importance of the other's time or concerns. Positive politeness strategies include compliments, seeking agreement, joking, offering friendship, informal language use and expressions of sympathy, understanding and cooperation; and negative politeness strategies consist of the use of various 'softening' mechanisms, such as apologizing, indirectness, hedging, questioning and formality in language use. The negative politeness strategy of 'ritual self-deprecation' (Tannen, 1994: 51) involves taking blame in order to avoid implying that the addressee is at fault.

## 2. Apology & Apologizing Strategies

Apology is one of the negative politeness strategies used to save the other person's face. It is an illocutionary act of remedy and a social act of politeness in communicative activities. Apology is a social act that is aimed at maintaining good relations between the speaker and the addressee. To apologize is to act politely, both in the vernacular sense and in the more technical sense of attending to the addressee's face needs (Holmes, 1990: 156–157). One way of attending to the addressee's face needs is for the speaker to indicate that she/he is aware of

them and is taking them into account in communicating the potentially face-threatening act by apologizing for the impingement (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 187). Apologies are symbolic rituals performed by people who have committed offensive acts to show their regret and earn forgiveness from people who have been offended (Benoit, 2015).

Apology can be used to save the other person's face, to harmonize the relationship between the two participants in the communication, to achieve the purpose of communication, and to show sympathy for the addressee. Generally, scholars agree that determining the time and the way to apologize is a strategic communication decision with considerable consequences (Benoit, 2015; Bisel & Messersmith, 2012; Coombs, 2007). Through apologizing and admitting one's own fault, the speaker saves the addressee's face by threatening his/her own face. If the speaker does not apologize, the other person will have a bad impression on him/her, and therefore causing bad effect on their relationship. Nevertheless, by apologizing, their relationship will be harmonized. Furthermore, through apologizing, the speaker can gain cooperation from the addressee, and thus to achieve his /her communicative purpose. In English, the apologizing expression "I 'm sorry" can also be used to show the speaker's sympathy for the addressee.

In different contexts, the speaker may choose different apologizing strategies. That is to say, the utterances used by the speaker to express apology may be different as the addressee or the situation changes. Olshtain and Cohen (1983) classified apologizing strategies into five kinds: Explicit Apology, Account-excuse-explanation, Taking on Responsibility, Offer of Repair, and Promise for Forbearance.

Some linguists such as Fraser (1981), Holmes (1989; 1990), Bergman & Kasper (1993) carried out researches on apologies from different perspectives. They found that the choosing of apologizing strategies may be influenced by such factors as social power, social distance, gender, culture and the degree of offence. Some scholars discussed public apologies in studies of ethical leadership and crisis communication practically and theoretically (Sanderijn, 2017; Yang & Bentley, 2017; Barling, 2014; MacLachan, 2010; Johnson, 2009; Kellerman, 2006). Yet, the apologizing strategies used by contemporary college students, who are young people of the new generation, are relatively rarely studied.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the choosing of apologizing strategies by college students in regard to two factors: social power and social distance. To achieve this purpose, the following hypotheses are proposed for study:

Hypothesis 1. The choosing of apologizing strategies by college students varies as their social power changes.

Hypothesis 2. The choosing of apologizing strategies by college students varies as their social distance with the addressee changes.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Subjects**

The subjects were 200 undergraduate students from Xi'an University of Technology, ranging from 16 to 22 years old. There were 88 females and 112 males in the sample. The students are from different grades and majors.

#### **3.2. Materials**

The subjects answered questions regarding their choosing of apologizing strategies. There are 5 multiple choice questions in the questionnaire. For each question, a specific context was given. The first three contexts are concerning about social power, including their communication with superiors (teachers), equals (classmates) and inferiors (primary school students) respectively. The last two contexts concern about social distance, including their communication with strangers and close friends respectively. The choices provided include the five apologizing strategies classified by Olshtain and Cohen and one free-answer choice. The students can

choose more than one strategies from these five choices and can also provide other strategies they may use according to their own experiences.

The questionnaire was constructed in Chinese.

### 3.3. Data Collection

The questionnaires were randomly distributed to 200 undergraduate students in different classes. The students were given half an hour to finish the questionnaires. Of the 200 retrieved questionnaires, 10 questionnaires were invalid. The rate of validity is 95 percent.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Social Power And The Choosing of Apologizing Strategies

Social power refers to the relative power the speaker possesses compared to the addressee, including social status, age and so on. In the first three contexts of the questionnaire, the relationship between the speaker and the addressee concerning social power are respectively student (inferior) & teacher (superior), student & student (equals), and tutor (superior) and primary school student (inferior). Table 1 shows the frequency of each strategy used by the college students in different contexts concerning social power.

TABLE 1: Frequency of Each Strategy Used in Different Social Power

Strategies	Inferior→Superior	Equals	Superior→Inferior
	Frequency/Percentage(%)	Frequency/Percentage(%)	Frequency/Percentage(%)
A. Explicit Apology	182/96	167/88	156/82
B. Account-excuse-explanation	84/44	8/4	65/34
C. Taking on Responsibility	61/32	110/58	72/38
D. Offer of Repair	19/10	125/66	114/60
E. Promise for Forbearance	76/40	15/8	65/34
F. Others	0/0	4/2	4/2

The statistics in Table 1 shows that changes in social power surely influence the choosing of apologizing strategies by college students. Most students chose Explicit Apology in each kind of social power, but we can still see that the frequency of Explicit Apology decreases as their social power increases. Apart from this, when the speaker's social power is inferior to the addressee, the most frequently used strategies are Account-excuse-explanation and Promise for Forbearance; when the speaker's social power is equal to the addressee, the most frequently used strategies are Taking on Responsibility and Offer of Repair; and when the speaker's social power is superior to the addressee, the most frequently used strategies are Taking on Responsibility and Offer of Repair. When the speaker is equal to the addressee, he/she used far less Account-excuse-explanation and Promise for Forbearance than when he/she is inferior or superior; when the speaker is inferior, he/she seldom used Offer of Repair.

The frequency of Explicit Apology decreases as the speaker's social power increases. This may be due to the social culture. Our culture tells us that we must respect and obey our superiors. When the addressee's social power is stronger, the degree of the offence will be higher. Then, the apologizing strategies used should be more polite. So, the speaker used more Explicit Apology to his/her superior and used the least to his/her inferior. The use of Offer of Repair implies the meaning of "offer". When Offer of Repair is used, the speaker unconsciously makes him/her superior. So, when the speaker is inferior, he/she seldom used Offer of Repair. However, when the speaker is equal or superior to the addressee, the use of Offer of Repair will be taken as a kind of care.

Therefore, social power is a very important factor in college students' using of apologizing strategies.

### 4.2. Social Distance And The Choosing of Apologizing Strategies

Social distance refers to the distance between the speaker and the addressee, that is, the degree of their familiarity, ranging from strangeness to intimacy. In the last two contexts of the questionnaire, the relationship

between the speaker and the addressee concerning social distance are respectively strangers (strangeness) and intimate friends (intimacy). Table 2 shows the frequency of each strategy used by the college students in different contexts concerning social distance.

TABLE 2: Frequency of Each Strategy Used in Different Social Distance

Strategies	<u>Strangeness</u>	<u>Intimacy</u>
	Frequency/Percentage(%)	Frequency/Percentage(%)
A. Explicit Apology	182/96	160/84
B. Account-excuse-explanation	4/2	76/40
C. Taking on Responsibility	91/48	76/40
D. Offer of Repair	76/40	49/26
E. Promise for Forbearance	4/2	87/46
F. Others	4/2	4/2

The statistics in Table 2 shows that changes in social distance surely influence the choosing of apologizing strategies by college students. Most students chose Explicit Apology in each kind of social distance, but we can still see that the use of Explicit Apology is more frequent between strangers than between intimate friends. Apart from this, Taking on Responsibility and Offer of Repair are the most frequently used strategies between strangers, while almost all of the other strategies are frequently used between intimate friends. Only four of the 190 (2%) students used Account-excuse-explanation and Promise for Forbearance respectively between strangers.

The result also shows the influence of culture on the use of language. When talking to strangers, we must be very polite to show our respect to him/her; when talking to intimate friends or families, we may be casual to show solidarity and too much politeness may be taken as strangeness. So, Explicit Apology is more frequently used between strangers than between intimate friends. Moreover, Account-excuse-explanation and Promise for Forbearance are much more frequently used between intimate friends than between strangers. This may be because it is more important to keep good relations between our intimates than between strangers. The use of these strategies may be helpful to strengthen the degree and faithfulness of the apology, to mitigate the result of the offence, to ask for forgiveness from the addressee and to keep the relationship between the speaker and the addressee. However, when apologizing to strangers, to a large extent, it is just because of politeness. So, it is not necessary to explain the reason or to offer repair in order to maintain the relationship.

Therefore, social distance is also a very important factor in college students' using of apologizing strategies.

## 5. Conclusion

Apology, as a kind of polite speech, is used as a remedy in communicative activities. The purpose is to save the face of the person being offended, to mitigate the bad results of the offending, and to maintain the harmony and balance between the speaker and the addressee.

From the results of this study, we can see that the apologizing strategies used by college students will be influenced by social power and social distance. The frequency of the use of Explicit Apology decreases as their social power increases. When the addressee is superior, Account-excuse-explanation and Promise for Forbearance are frequently used but Offer of Repair is seldom used to show the speaker's respect to the addressee; when the addressee is equal to the speaker, two strategies, Account-excuse-explanation and Promise for Forbearance, are seldom used to show solidarity; and when the addressee is superior, Offer of Repair is frequently used to show the speaker's care for the addressee. Furthermore, the use of Explicit Apology is more frequent between strangers than between intimate friends. When the speaker and the addressee are strangers, Account-excuse-explanation and Promise for Forbearance are seldom used; however, when they are intimate friends, almost all the strategies are frequently used by the speaker to maintain their harmonious relationship.

In addition, the influence of social power and social distance on the using of language may be ultimately determined by social culture. We must show great respect to someone who is superior to us and must show care

to the person who is inferior to us. To strangers, we must be very polite to show deference and to intimates, we must try to use all kinds of strategies to maintain the harmonious relations.

There are two potential problems in this research. First, the subjects used are too limited. There are only 200 students participated in this research and they are from the same university. Maybe, they are not quite representative. So, in the future research, more participants should be chosen and they'd better be chosen from different universities. Second, the contexts provided are too limited. There are only five contexts in the questionnaire. So, in the future research, more contexts should be designed to strengthen the scientific nature of the study.

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