

## The Differences of Apology Behavior Between Japanese and Chinese University Students

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### 1 Introduction

Some research has examined apology behavior in a variety of Western cultures and languages. These studies have been important in providing preliminary evidence for a universally valid apology speech act set, and the differential selections from this set according to contextual factors. Also, research on apology behaviors in western and in non-western cultures and languages has revealed a uniqueness between the two cultural areas. However, little has been examined within Asian cultures. It is requisite to extend the scope of study to non-Western languages and cultures, in particular Asian, so as to help determine this fundamental issue in cross-cultural and interlanguage pragmatics.

In this present research, two Asian groups were examined: Japanese learners of English and Chinese learners of English. The study was done from two perspectives: the first one concerns differences of apology behavior in English between non-Western cultures (Japanese and Chinese), and the second one concerns differences of apology behavior between L1 (Japanese/Chinese) and L2 (English).

### 2 Literature Review

#### 2.1 Speech Act Behavior of Apologizing

Canale and Swain (1980) suggest a model of communicative competence which incorporates grammatical competence, discourse competence, strategic competence and sociolinguistic competence. Discourse competence relates to features of text, whether it is spoken or written. Therefore, in order to

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perform a successful speech act of apologizing, we should know what elements a speech act includes.

Olshtain and Cohen(1983) suggest that the apology speech act set consists of five strategies or realization patterns, two of which are general and depend on contextual constraints. They are explicit performative verb such as "I apologize," and the expression of responsibility such as "It's my mistake." The other three strategies are situation specific: they are an explanation of an offense, an offer of repair and a promise of non-recurrence. If you have lost a book you borrowed, you have to explain the offense by saying, "I seem to have lost your book," but if you bump into someone, you do not have to explain the offense because your interlocutor already knows it. In this way, the three components are situation specific.

However, it might depend on the cultural norm whether a component is mandatory in a specific situation or not. Goffman(1971) views apologies as remedial interchange, remedial work serving to reestablish social harmony after a real or virtual offense. Following Goffman's definition, apologies can be classified into (1) those redressing virtual offenses, and (2) those redressing actual damage inflicted on the addressee. Both of them have been to vary cross-culturally.

## 2.2 Interlanguage Pragmatics

Leech(1983) and Levinson(1983) suggest that interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) is a second-generation hybrid. As a branch of Second Language Acquisition Research, ILP is one of several specializations in interlanguage studies, contrasting with interlanguage phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. Within this discipline, 'pragmatic transfer' is one of the issues that attracts much attention.

Pragmatic transfer is divided into two types: positive pragmatic transfer and negative pragmatic transfer. The former is a cross linguistic influence that enhances learner's acquisition, while the latter interferes with it. For instance, the Japanese phrase, 'sumimasen', stands for both 'sorry' and 'thank you' in Japanese. Thus, if a Japanese learner of English should say 'sorry' in place of 'thank you', it wouldn't function as showing gratitude in English, which might cause a communication breakdown. This is called

'negative pragmatic transfer'. On the contrary, if pragmatic rules are consistent between L1 and L2, it may then be considered easier to successfully acquire L2 pragmatic knowledge.

### 2.3 Explicit Performative Expressions of Apology in English, Japanese and Chinese

Explicit performative expressions of apology are universal in a speech act of apologizing. Therefore, the use of an explicit performative expression of apology is used to determine whether a response by a participant of this study can be categorized into a speech act of apologizing.

Borkin and Reinhart(1978) define the function of "excuse me" as "a formula to remedy a past or immediately forthcoming breach of etiquette or other light infraction of a social rule. "I'm sorry," in their analysis, is used in a wider range of contexts, especially "in remedial interchanges when a speaker's main concern is about a violation of another person's right or damage to another person's feelings".

In Japanese, there are several explicit expressions of apology: "mousiwake-arimasen," "sumimasen," "gomen-nasai," and "yurusite-kudasai" are common. For each expression, there is a plain form such as "mousiwake-nai" and "sumanai." According to Yamazaki (1997), the Japanese explicit expressions of apology function as a social index rather than situation-specific.

In Chinese, we have a lot of words to express "apology", there also are different levels to express "apology". For example, the meaning of "对不起" is "sorry", it is used as a common pattern to apology; the meaning of "不好意思" is "excuse me", one can use it to apologize to his friend; the meaning of "向你道歉" is "apologize" and the meaning of "请你原谅" is "forgive me", both of which are used when one wants to apologize deeply.

### 3 Hypotheses

The Japanese are said to be such a remarkably polite people that they are famous for the frequent use of explicit expressions of apology (Naotsuka 1980), while the Chinese are said to not apologize even when they are expected to do so. If there is a different cultural norm, and if second language learners tend

to be influenced by their first language and culture, then the following hypotheses can be posed:

1. Japanese students apologize more frequently than Chinese students in L1.
2. Japanese students apologize more frequently than Chinese students in L2.
3. The criteria in apologizing in L2 are similar to that in L1, but not quite the same.

#### 4 Method

##### 4.1 Participants

Japanese participants included the students in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Iwate University, some of whom major in English and some do not. Chinese participants were students in the Education Department in a university in China, some of whom major in English and some do not. The English proficiency level of the Japanese students and the Chinese students who major in English is intermediate level. Demographic data of the participants in this study is shown in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1. The Demographic Data of Japanese Participants

English-verse on participants	Female (age)	Male (age)	Japanese-verse on participants	Female (age)	Male (age)
College students	11 (20-22)	2 (21)	College students	9 (18-22)	5 (21-24)
Graduate Student	1 (24)		Graduate students		7 (22-25)

Table 2. The Demographic Data of Chinese Participants

English-version on participants	Female (age)	Male (age)	Chinese-version on participants	Female (age)	Male (age)
College Students	22 (21-22)	4 (21-22)	College students	23 (20-22)	7 (20-22)

#### 4.2 Procedure

Dialogue construction (DC) questionnaires were given to the participants. Two versions were given to the Japanese participants to respond to: one was in English, which was completed by 14 English-majoring students, and the other one was in Japanese, which was completed by 21 non-English-majoring students. To the Chinese participants, two versions were also given to respond to: one was in English, which was completed by 26 English-majoring students, and the other one was in Chinese, which was replied by 30 non-English-majoring students. Participants were never informed of the purpose of these questionnaires. They weren't allowed to use dictionaries during replying to the questionnaires, either.

The following ten offense contexts were selected from the DC questionnaires created by Bergman and Kasper (1993).

1. Damaged Car: A and B are friends. A has had an accident with a car borrowed from B.
2. Ruined Magazine: A and B are friends. A borrowed a magazine from B and poured coffee over it.
3. Order Change: A is a customer, and B is a waiter. At a restaurant, A changes her mind after the order has already been taken by B.
4. Food on Customer: A is a waiter, and B is a customer. A spills food on B's clothes.
5. Wrong Order: A is a waiter, and B is a customer. At a restaurant, A brings the wrong order to B.
6. Food on Waiter: A is a customer, and B is a waiter. At a restaurant, A spills food on B's clothes.
7. Upgraded paper: A is a professor, B is a student. A has not yet graded a

term paper that B was supposed to pick up.

8. Borrowed Book: A is a student, and B is A's professor. A forgets a book she was supposed to return to B.
9. Failed Student: A is a professor, a B is A's student. A misplaces B's term paper and fails B.
10. Cheating Student: A is a student, and B is A's professor. A plagiarizes from a published book and is found out by B.

Two of the contexts shown above provide participants with an opportunity to speak to a person of equal status, four of them with an opportunity to speak to a person of higher status, and four of them with an opportunity to speak to a person of lower status.

## 5 Results

This section presents and describes the data collected in an attempt to answer the hypotheses here.

### 5.1 Frequency of apologizing

The primary purpose of this study is to understand the differences in apology behavior between Japanese students and Chinese students who answered DC questionnaire in L2 and L1. According to Cohen and Olshtain (1983), an explicit expression of apology is an essential component of a speech act of apologizing. Thus, it marks an utterance as an apology. In order to investigate our hypotheses 1 and 2, the frequency of the use of a formulaic explicit expression of apologizing by the Japanese and the Chinese participants in their L1 and L2 are examined here.

Figure 1 Mean Frequencies of Apologizing at All Situations

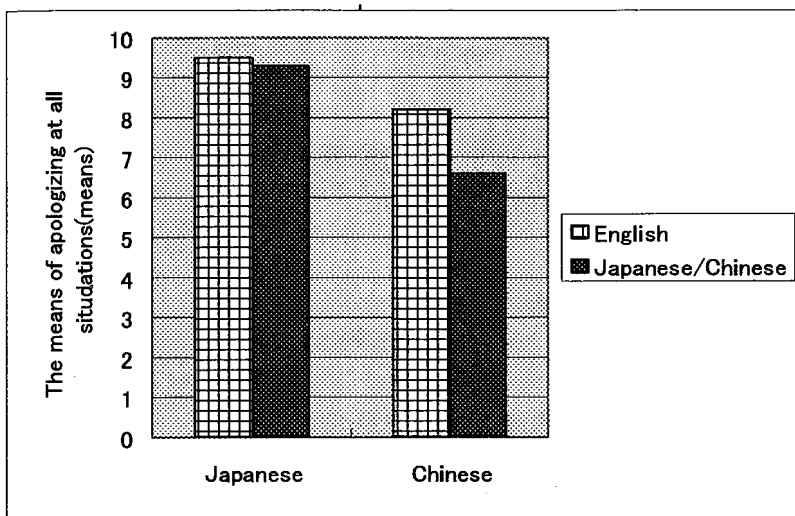


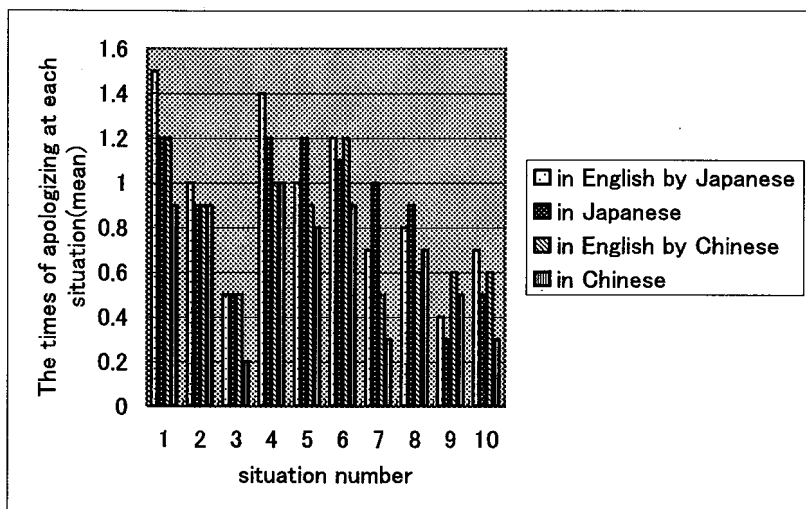
Figure 1 shows the mean of 10 situations presented in the DC questionnaire, which were answered by Japanese students in English and Japanese, and by Chinese students in English and Chinese. T-test was also preformed according to the data, and the results are as follows.

- 1) As for the use of L1 (Japanese and Chinese), Ttest is 1.647( $p < .05$ ), which means there is a significant difference between Japanese students' and Chinese students' responses when they answered DC questionnaire in L1 (Japanese and Chinese). In other words, we can say that the Japanese students tend to apologize more frequently than the Chinese students in their L1.
- 2) As for the use of L2, Ttest is 2.15( $.05 < p < .01$ ), which means there is a significant difference between Japanese students' and Chinese students' responses when they answered the DC questionnaire in L2. In other words, we can say that the Japanese students tend to apologize more frequently than the Chinese students in English (their L2).
- 3) As for the frequency of apologizing by the Japanese students in their L1 and L2, Ttest is 1.076( $p > .01$ ). This means we cannot find a significant difference in the responses by Japanese students in L2 and L1.

- 4) As for the frequency of apologizing by the Chinese students, Ttest is 1.695( $p>.05$ ). This means there is a significant difference when Chinese students answered DC questionnaire in L2 and L1. Therefore, we can say that the Chinese students apologize in English (their L2) more frequently than in their L1.

Figure 2 shows the means of how many times Japanese students and Chinese students apologize in each situation in both L2 and L1 (Japanese and Chinese) respectively.

Figure 2 Frequency of Apologizing in Each Situation



Except for S8 (Borrowed Book), the Chinese students apologized more frequently in English than in Chinese. On the contrary, the mean of the frequency of apologizing by the Japanese students in English is almost the same as that in their L1. However, the Japanese students switched their attitudes in their L1 and L2: they apologized more frequently in English than in Chinese in six situations (S1-Damaged Car, S2-Ruined Magazine, S4-Food on Customer, S6-Food on Waiter, S9-Failed Student, S10-Cheating Student), and did so less frequently in English in three situations (S5-Wrong Order,



S7-Ungraded Paper, S8-Borrowed Book).

For Situation 3(S3)(Order Change), the Chinese students apologized least frequently in both of L2 and L1. This strongly reflects one aspect of Chinese cultural habits: the Chinese don't have to apologize to a waiter or a waitress if s/he wants to change her/his order in a restaurant.

The Japanese students apologized in S9 (Failed Students) least frequently. This situation strongly reflects a power relation.

## 5.2 The Kinds of Formulaic Expressions of Apologies

Four typical English formulaic expressions of apologizing, four typical Japanese ones, and four typical Chinese ones are to be analyzed here.

Figure 3 and 4 show the kinds of formulaic expressions of apologizing that are used by Japanese and Chinese students in L2 and L1 respectively.

Figure 3 English Formulaic Expressions of Apology  
by the Japanese Students

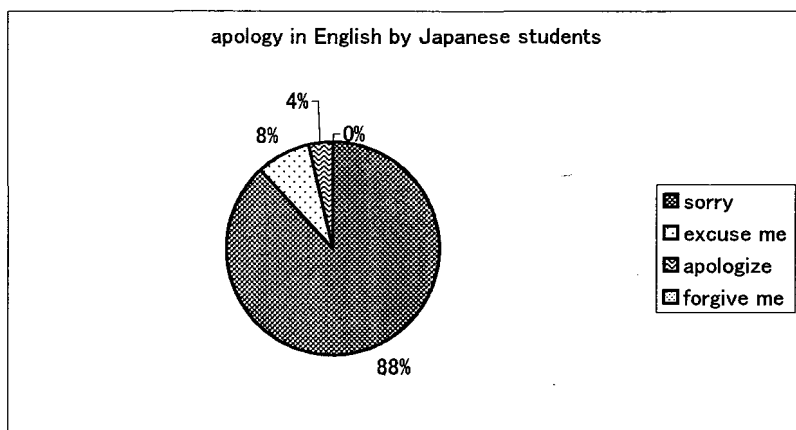
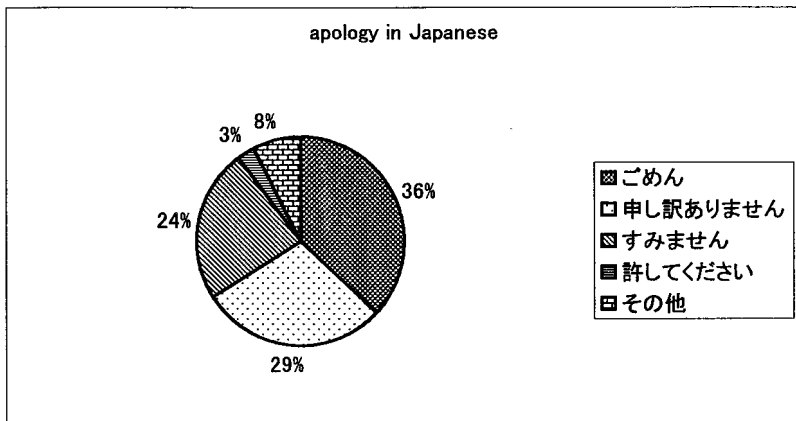


Figure 4 Japanese Formulaic Expressions  
by the Japanese Students



To compare Figure 3 to Figure 4, we can find there is a difference between the English and Japanese data. In English data, 88% of Japanese students use "I'm sorry..." to apologize, while in Japanese data, three kinds of apologies ways are used frequently: *"gomen"*, *"moushiwake-arimasen"* and *"sumimasen"*. Some Japanese students misuse "Excuse me" in L2. This is an L1 transfer; the translation of "Excuse me" is *"sumimasen"* in Japanese.

3% of the Japanese students used *"yurusite-kudasai"* to apologize in L1, but no one used "forgive me" in L2. It seems the phrase of "forgive me" is not familiar to the Japanese as much. In general, Japanese students use "I'm sorry" with which Japanese learners of English are the most familiar.

In Chinese, the meaning of "对不起" is "sorry", the meaning of "不好意思" is "excuse me", the meaning of "向你道歉" is "apologize" and the meaning of "请你原谅" is "forgive me".

Figure 5 English Formulaic Expressions by Chinese Students

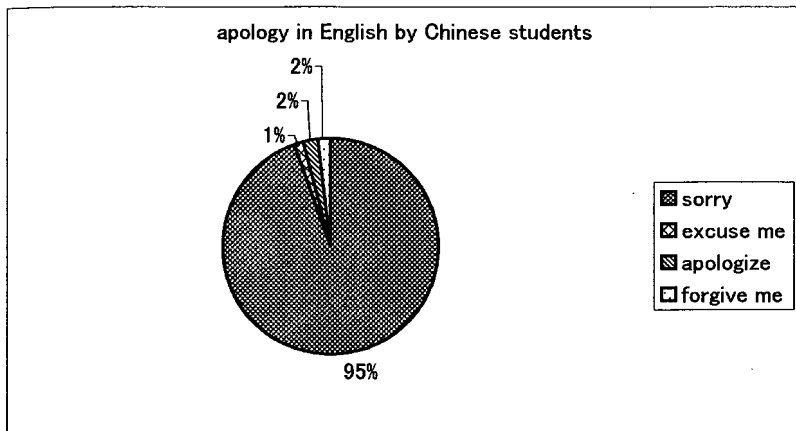
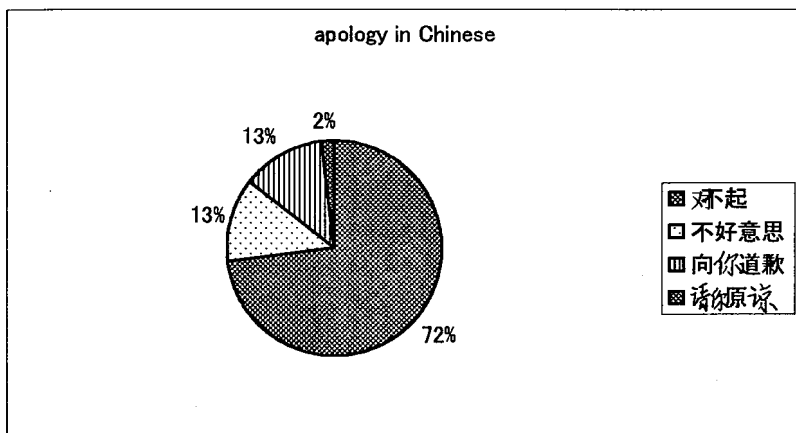


Figure 6 Chinese Formulaic Expressions of Apology by the Chinese Students



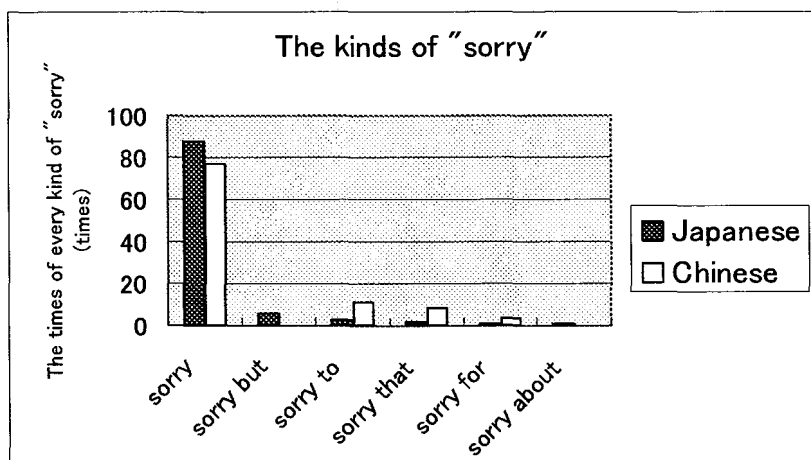
To compare Figure 5 with Figure 6, it clearly shows that both “sorry” and “对不起” are frequently used by Chinese students when they apologize, but “sorry” in L2 is used more than “对不起” in L1. Although Chinese students use “不好意思” to apologize in L1, they don’t choose “excuse me” when they apologize in L2, because Chinese students are told that the meanings of “不

好意思” and “excuse me” are different; “excuse me” is not a kind of apology but it is a kind of greeting in order to gain someone’s attention.

### 5.3 The kinds of “I’m sorry”

Figure 7 shows us how many kinds of “sorry” and how many times(frequency) that each kind of “sorry” was used by Japanese students and Chinese students in English in order to finish their DC questionnaires.

Figure 7 The kinds of “sorry”



Both groups of Japanese and Chinese students frequently used “I’m sorry” to apologize frequently, Japanese students most often used simple sentence to apologize, for example, “I’m sorry”. But, Chinese students added some more words than Japanese students did, such as “sorry to...”, “sorry that...” and “sorry for...” A few Japanese students used “sorry but...” to apologize. There seems to be an L1 transfer among them, because they often use “*sumimasenga*” in their L1, which can be directly translated into “I’m sorry but...”.

## 6 Analysis

Japan is called one of the politest countries in the world. So we have posed

the first hypothesis: Japanese students apologize more often than Chinese students in L1. Japanese people often apologize in any situation even when they haven't offended an other person because they think it is better to apologize in order to lubricate their relationship. The power relation in Japanese culture is so strong that it affects Japanese linguistic behavior strongly.

On the contrary, the principle of an apology behavior among Chinese people is that they apologize only when they really have offended an other person, but that they don't apologize often when they think they can repair their offence. Our data indicate that Japanese students tend to apologize more often than Chinese students. Thus, it can be said that hypothesis 1 is proved.

The Japanese apologize more often than the Chinese in L1 perhaps because of the different cultures between two countries. Then, is it true that Japanese apologize more often than Chinese do in L2? From the results of the questionnaires, we find there is a significant difference in their apology behavior in English (L2) between the data of the Japanese students and the Chinese students. Thus, it can be said that our second hypothesis is proved. However, we have also found that the Chinese students tended to apologize more often in English than in their L1.

We have found a pragmatic failure among Japanese students. Some Japanese students translated "*sumimasen*" into "excuse me" in L2, where it is not appropriate. This is an example of negative L1 transfer. Also, we have found some cases in which "*sumimasen ga*" is directly translated into "sorry but". This is another example of negative L1 transfer.

We have found such L1 transfers in the data by the Japanese participants, but not in those by the Chinese participants. What is more, there is a significant difference between the Chinese L1 data and their L2 data, but we cannot find any significant difference in terms of the Japanese L1 and L2 data. These findings suggest that the Chinese students might have different criteria but the Japanese students might have the same criteria in choosing apology strategies between their L1 and L2. The answer to the hypothesis 3 is "no" for the Japanese students, and "yes" for the Chinese students.

This discrepancy could be explained from two aspects: second language proficiency and attitude toward cultural accommodation. The English

language proficiency of Japanese students might have been still not too high to allow them to express an apology fluently in L2, or that of the Chinese students who might have been not so low but not so high that they choose the typical formulaic expression "I'm sorry" to apologize in L2. Or, there might be a tendency that Chinese students are more ready to accept western culture when studying English, which may not be true with Japanese students. These two aspects should be investigated in a future study.

## 7 Conclusion

In this study, we have found some differences and similarities of apology behavior within non-western cultures: Japanese and Chinese. In terms of second language speech act behaviors, many researchers tended to view Asian cultures as contrasting with Western cultures. However, the findings of this study can suggest that we need to prevent ourselves from indulging in a stereo-typed dichotomy: East and West.

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