

Investigating German and Japanese apologies in email writing

Axel Harting

Hiroshima University

Reference data:

Harting, A. (2006). Investigating German and Japanese apologies in email writing. In K. Bradford-Watts, C. Ikeguchi, & M. Swanson (Eds.) *JALT2005 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

Acquiring stylistic and idiomatic L2 writing competence is a challenging task. However, such writing skills are crucial when it comes to maintaining good personal relations with readers such as when writing an apology, a request, a decline, or a complaint in an email. The focus of this article is the comparison of written apologies in German and Japanese. For this purpose, native speakers were asked to write emails in both languages, which were then analysed according to theoretical findings of speech act performance. The results of this study are presented quantitatively and qualitatively.

Der Erwerb stilistischer und idiomatischer Aspekte beim Schreiben in der Fremdsprache Deutsch ist besonders relevant, wenn die persönliche Beziehung zwischen Schreiber und Leser betroffen ist. Insbesondere zeigt sich dies bei der Realisierung verschiedener Sprachhandlungen, wie Bitten, Entschuldigungen, Absagen und Beschwerden in Textsorten wie E-Mails. Der vorliegende Artikel widmet sich der Beschreibung von Unterschieden schriftlicher deutscher und japanischer Entschuldigungen. Zu diesem Zweck wurde eine Datenbasis mit muttersprachlichen E-Mails in beiden Sprachen erstellt und in Anlehnung an theoretische Erkenntnisse aus der Sprechaktforschung analysiert. Die Ergebnisse dieser Untersuchung werden sowohl quantitativ als auch qualitativ präsentiert.

ドイツ語のライティングにおいて、文法や慣用語法を習得することは、書き手と読み手の人間関係を扱う際非常に重要である。このことは、特に異なる発話行為の実現において現れる。Emailといったテキストにおける「依頼」、「謝罪」、「断り」、「批判」がそれに該当する。本紙は、書きことばによる謝罪に見られる、ドイツ語と日本語間の相違を記述することを目的とする。その際、基盤となるEmailのデータは、両言葉ともに母語で作成し、そのデータを、発話行為の理論的枠組みに従って分析する。その結果、量的および質的な観点から提示される。

Why investigate written speech acts?

The results of an online survey (Harting, 2006)¹, which was carried out in 2005 among 54 German and Japanese German as a Foreign Language (GFL) teachers all over Japan, suggests that there is a need to improve GFL writing instruction at Japanese universities. The survey revealed that writing is neglected in GFL instruction in favour of training communicative—that is, *oral* skills. The communicative

function of writing, however, as may be used in written interaction between teachers and students or among students, for example through emails, is rarely employed in the teaching of GFL. Writing exercises primarily serve as a means of acquiring or testing grammatical or lexical knowledge. The survey further revealed that there were more problems with the students' texts on a stylistic and idiomatic level than with grammar or spelling. The survey suggests that these stylistic and idiomatic difficulties may result from L1 interference, while grammatical errors are more a result of transfer from the students' first acquired foreign language, English.²

A review of 2 years of email correspondence in German with Japanese colleagues, students, and friends allowed insights into their writing difficulties. While stylistic and idiomatic mistakes seem to be less problematic when stating facts, describing events, or telling stories, such mistakes may be quite crucial if the personal relationship between the writer and the reader is concerned. In particular, when asking a favour, declining an offer or appointment, voicing criticism, or asking the reader for forgiveness, the stylistically appropriate use of the target language can be a decisive factor in the success of a speech act. This paper compares speech act performance for apologies, requests, declines, and complaints in German and Japanese. The preliminary results of a pilot study conducted with speech acts involving apology are also presented and described.

Methodological approach

The aim of this study was to develop GFL teaching methods and materials that would enable Japanese students to write

stylistically more appropriate German texts. To this end, the researcher taught a composition course at Matsuyama University in 2004 aimed at improving the students' writing skills by contrasting German and Japanese text types (Harting, 2005). During the delivery of the course, it was revealed that a corpus of sample L1 and L2 texts, as well as theoretical insights into their differences, was required to create an empirically founded concept for GFL composition instruction. In addition, further insights into the particular way GFL students tend to transfer L1 writing styles when writing in German were needed. To account for these theoretical and empirical requirements, a research design was set up consisting of three steps:

Step 1: Comparing German and Japanese writing styles

Step 2: Describing transfer of Japanese writing styles in GFL texts

Step 3: Developing teaching methods and materials for communicative GFL writing

Step 1:

In Step 1, illustrated in Figure 1 below, the theoretical foundation for developing teaching materials for GFL writing was laid by establishing a database with L1 German and Japanese texts. The text type under investigation was emails, because they are a widely used medium for performing the written speech acts to be examined. Furthermore, emails are relatively short, and therefore easy both to produce and to employ in GFL instruction.

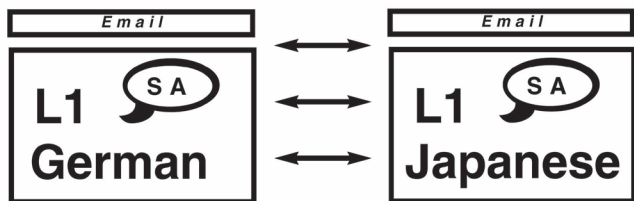


Figure 1. Investigating cross-cultural speech act variation

The database currently consists of 160 emails from students in Japan and Germany. To compare how speech acts are performed across languages, students were given the same writing tasks, aimed at eliciting one of the four speech acts under investigation.

The aim of Step 1 was to investigate the cross-cultural variation of given speech acts across different languages. Four slightly different writing tasks for each of the four speech acts were developed to account for two dimensions of politeness which are relevant in a teaching context: the power relationship of writer and reader, and the rank of imposition inflicted upon the reader (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For each of these 16 writing tasks, 10 emails (i.e., five German and five Japanese emails) were collected and compared.

Since the writing tasks are to be implemented in GFL teaching, they were designed to represent situations which may authentically arise in a teaching context. To illustrate the nature of the writing tasks, Figure 2 shows the four tasks created for apologies.

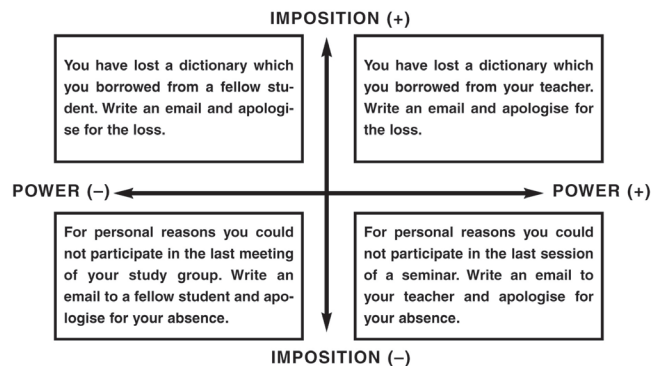


Figure 2. Writing tasks for apologies

The emails collected in Step 1 form the basis for describing differences in German and Japanese writing styles when performing apologies, requests, declines, and complaints. In a pilot study, 20 German and 20 Japanese emails containing apologies were analysed, and the findings described below.

Step 2:

The description of German and Japanese speech act performance will serve as a theoretical basis for verifying the hypothesis that Japanese GFL students, who are not familiar with German writing styles, tend to transfer their L1 writing strategies when writing in L2. In order to show a transfer of L1 writing styles, Step 2 of the study was devoted to L2 text composition and analysis. A closer look at the interlanguage

variation of speech act performance was taken, by investigating how speech acts are realised differently by native and nonnative speakers. In order to keep the social variables constant, Japanese GFL students were asked to write emails with exactly the same writing tasks used in Step 1. Figure 3 illustrates how these texts were analysed accordingly with reference to the characteristics of L1 German and Japanese speech act performance established in Step 1.



Figure 3. Investigating interlanguage speech act variation

The analyses undertaken in Steps 1 and 2 are based on insights taken from a research field called Interlanguage Pragmatics, which examines the particular ways nonnative language users select and realise speech acts (cf. Blum-Kulka, 1983; House & Kasper, 1989). For the speech act *apology* under review in this article, theoretical findings from Borkin & Reinhart (1978), Zimin (1981), Olshtain & Cohen (1983), Cohen & Olshtain (1987), and Trosborg (1986) were consulted. These studies have been carried out with learners of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, among them German and Japanese. However, in most cases the target language has been English only. Consequently, there is a

demand for studies examining speech act realization in a wider spectrum of target languages and cultures in order to find out which aspects of nonnative language development are universal and which are language-specific.

Step 3:

The theoretical and empirical findings of Steps 1 and 2 form the basis for implementing these insights into GFL teaching. As mentioned earlier, there is a demand for GFL teaching methods and textbooks that enable students to write emails which are stylistically more appropriate. Step 3, which has not been carried out yet, will consist of the development, delivery, and evaluation of a teaching concept for GFL text composition for Japanese students.

The concept of the course and its delivery will be evaluated by interviewing the students before and after the course. In addition, a pre- and post-test will be carried out for which the students will have to write emails similar to writing tasks at the beginning and end of the course. The aim is to determine the appropriateness of the methods and materials employed in the course, and how they might be improved.

Data analysis

The analysis of the data gathered was partly data-based and partly theory-based. As far as the performance of the actual speech acts is concerned, the analysis of apologies drew on a theory constructed by Olshtain and Cohen (1983). As mentioned above, there has been some research into the particular ways speech acts are performed across languages. Most studies, however, investigate oral realisations of speech

acts. For this study, an analysis scheme was required which also accounts for the way a speech act is embedded in a written text.

Since the discourse genre to be investigated here is email, categories such as greetings, introductory and concluding sentences, and farewell statements were included in the analysis. The choice of these categories was data driven. Actually, they do not constitute an obligatory part of an email, but they are nevertheless commonly used. According to my observations, many writers tend to obey composition norms of letters when writing an email, particularly if it comes to writing something as delicate as an apology. In total, 12 criteria were selected for the analysis of 40 emails, which are listed in Figure 4.

ANALYSIS CRITERIA	
1. Greeting	7. Promise of forbearance
2. Introductory sentence	8. Intensification
3. IFID (with/without INT)	9. Downgrading
4. Expression of responsibility	10. Concluding sentence
5. Account of the cause	11. Farewell statement
6. Offer of repair	12. Name

Figure 4. Analysis criteria

Analysis criteria 1 and 2 refer to the introductory part of an email, which usually resembles a letter, starting with a

greeting (1) and followed by an *introductory sentence* (2). Categories 3 to 9 focus on the performance of the speech act, based on a list of apology strategies set up by Olshtain and Cohen (1983). According to their findings, apologies are often performed by using an explicit *illocutionary force indicating device* (IFID) (3), which is realised by a formulaic expression of regret such as “I’m sorry” in English. IFIDs may appear with an intensifier (INT) as in “I’m *terribly* sorry”.

Apart from this, an apology can also be performed (with or without an IFID) by referring to one or more elements from a closed set of specified propositions which relate to the apology preconditions, such as the speaker’s responsibility for the act or his willingness to offer repair (cf. Olshtain & Cohen, 1983). For example, the writer may *express* his *responsibility* (4) for the offence caused as in “I completely forgot about the meeting,” which is face-threatening to the speaker and has the function of placating the reader. Also, we often find an *account* (5) of how the offence, which created the need to apologise, came about. In search for self-justification, the writer may relate to external factors over which he had no control, as in for instance “I didn’t feel too well on Monday, so I stayed at home” when apologising for a missed appointment.

In some apologies, an *offer of repair* (6) as for example “I’ll pay for the damage” seems to be appropriate, in particular if damage was caused to the reader’s property. More rarely, we may also find a *promise of forbearance* (7), in which the writer promises that the act or situation he apologises for will never happen again. Finally, the force of an apology may be downgraded or intensified. *Intensification*

(8) can be brought about by expressing explicit concern for the reader, as in “I hope the loss does not cause any inconvenience for you” or by intensifying the IFID as in “I am *terribly* sorry.” *Downgrading* (9) an apology as in “Sorry, but we never start on time anyhow” can be realised by minimizing the actual offence.

The final three analysis categories comprise a *concluding sentence* (10) as “I gotta leave you know,” a *farewell statement* (11) like “Catch up with you soon,” and the *name* (12) of the writer. These categories are not related to the actual speech act performance, but they are commonly found in emails and may play an important role in maintaining the personal relationship between the reader and the writer.

The 40 emails subjected to the analysis were analysed qualitatively and quantitatively. The occurrence of items belonging to one of the twelve categories outlined above was counted, and the actual expressions used were collected in a separate table for further linguistic analysis and comparison. The results presented below mainly draw on results of the quantitative analysis, the aim of which was to determine the extent to which apology performance strategies differ in German and Japanese emails.

Table 1. Quantitative analysis

	Power (–)		Power (+)		Power (–)		Power (+)		Total	
	Imp. (–)		Imp. (–)		Imp. (+)		Imp. (+)		G	J
	G	J	G	J	G	J	G	J	G	J
1. Greeting	4	3	5	5	5	2	5	4	19	14
2. Introductory sentence	3	0	0	0	1	2	0	2	4	4
3. IFID (without/with INT)	4/1	4/1	4/1	5/0	1/2	3/2	1/2	1/10	10/6	13/13
4. Expression of responsibility	5	3	0	5	5	5	5	5	15	18
5. Account of the cause	4	5	4	5	1	1	3	2	12	13
6. Offer of repair	1	3	1	0	3	1	5	5	10	9
7. Promise of forbearance	3	0	2	2	2	0	0	1	7	3
8. Intensification	3	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	5	2
9. Downgrading	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
10. Concluding sentence	3	0	0	0	3	0	0	1	6	1
11. Farewell statement	4	0	5	0	4	0	5	0	18	0
12. Name	5	3	5	0	4	0	5	2	19	5

Preliminary results

Although the database of 40 emails was by no means enough to make substantial claims about differences between German and Japanese speech act performance, some general culture-specific trends were revealed. The results of the quantitative analysis are presented in Table 1, which lists the number of items found in each of the four categories, varying in power and rank of imposition (imp). For each category, five emails per language were analysed, totalling 20 German (G) and 20 Japanese (J) emails. The figures in brackets in the discussion following the table refer to (German/Japanese) figures respectively, as presented in the table.

Before discussing the four different contexts set up for the speech act *apology*, some general observations will be presented. A noticeable feature of the emails under investigation is that they vary considerably in length: the word count for emails written in German ranged from 30 to 102 words, and for emails written in Japanese the word count ranged from 10 to 176 characters. Apart from that, an interesting variation in expression could be observed, which will be exemplified in the quantitative analysis below.

As far as the differences between Japanese and German writing styles are concerned, an outstanding feature marking Japanese emails is the use of emoticons such as (>_<), (>_<;), and (:_<). These resemble sad facial expressions and function to intensify the apology by showing concern for the reader. In German emails, intensification is brought about lexically, as the higher entries for the category intensification show (5/2). A strong deviation between German and Japanese emails was found in the concluding part of the email. Compared to German emails, Japanese emails showed a considerably lower

number of concluding sentences (6/1), farewell statements (18/0), and writer's names at the end of the email (19/5). German emails revealed an interesting variety of expressions of farewell statements, ranging from the rather formal “Mit freundlichen Grüßen [Yours sincerely]” to “Dicker Kuss [a big kiss]” at the informal end of the scale. Concluding sentences in German emails usually contained a reference to the next contact between writer and reader as in “Wir sehen uns morgen wie üblich im Literaturseminar [We'll meet tomorrow as usual in the literature seminar.]” In contrast, Japanese emails with a high rank of imposition sometimes use introductory sentences, which were not found to the same extent in German emails. In total, however, German emails revealed a higher degree of formality inasmuch as they resembled a short letter, containing all its obligatory components, such as a greeting, the speech act, a farewell statement, and the name of the writer. Japanese emails, in contrast, were sometimes interestingly reduced to the essential content of the speech act only as in 悪い、辞書なくした [I am sorry, I lost the dictionary].

As far as the performance of the actual speech act is concerned, Japanese emails showed an overall preference of using IFIDs (26/16). In German emails, these were often replaced by expressions of responsibility as in “Ich habe unser Treffen total verpennt [I completely forgot about our appointment].” Promises of forbearance seldom occurred in the situations under investigation; however, they were sometimes used in German emails. Another interesting finding was the tendency of Japanese writers to use intensified IFIDs such as “本当に申し訳ありませんでした [I am terribly sorry]” (13/6).

If we take a closer look at the four writing tasks, more subtle differences in language-specific preferences of speech act performance are revealed. In situations involving a lower rank of imposition, the following differences could be observed: If the addressee was a fellow student, Germans tended to emphasize their responsibility for the act apologised for as in “Da ist mir doch glatt unser Arbeitstreffen am Montag entfallen [I just forgot about our meeting on Monday]” (5/3), while Japanese preferred accounts of how the act came about as in “急に用事ができてしまった [Suddenly something came up]” (4/5). Another difference is that some German emails in this context contained a promise of forbearance, as in “Auf jeden Fall bin ich nächstes Mal wieder dabei, versprochen! [I promise I will attend the next meeting],” while Japanese emails did not (3/0). In addition to that, in German emails the force of the apology was in some cases intensified by showing concern for the reader as in “Ich hoffe, du bist nicht allzu sauer [I hope you’re not too mad with me]” (3/1).

In the low imposition contexts, where the addressee was a teacher, Germans as well as Japanese tended to use formalized expressions without intensifiers to apologise, for example “すみませんでした [I am sorry!]” in Japanese or “bitte ich mein Fehlen zu entschuldigen [I would like to excuse my absence]” in German. Due to the power relationship between teacher and student, the accounts of how the act apologised for came about tended to be rather formalized and less personal as in “aus persönlichen Gründen” in German and “個人的な理由で” in Japanese, both meaning “for personal reasons”. A major difference between German and Japanese apology strategies in this

context is that Japanese tended to express their responsibility quite explicitly as in “出席することができなくなってしまいました [I could not take part in the lesson],” while Germans did not (0/5).

The two writing tasks which entailed a higher rank of imposition (e.g. the loss of a dictionary) showed the interesting difference that IFIDs seem to be obligatory in Japanese apologies, regardless of whether the addressee is a teacher or a peer, while in German the apology may also be expressed in a more indirect way. When apologizing for the loss of a dictionary to a friend, both Germans and Japanese emphasised their responsibility, which may be realised in German with expressions like “Mensch mir ist da was total Blödes passiert mit deinem Wörterbuch [Well, I have to tell you something about the dictionary I borrowed from you]” or in Japanese “辞書なくしてしまったんよ [I have actually lost your dictionary].” A striking difference is, however, that only German emails contained explicit offers of repair, as in the example “Also werde ich dir ein neues kaufen [So, I will buy you a new one]” when addressing a peer (2/0).

When apologizing for the loss of a dictionary to a teacher, all German and Japanese emails contained expressions of responsibility and offers of repair. An interesting difference, however, is the excessive use of IFIDs in Japanese emails. All of the emails in this group contained at least two IFIDs each, and at least one of them contained an intensifier as in “本当に申し訳ありませんでした” or “心よりお詫びいたします” both of which mean “I am terribly sorry.”

Conclusion

The results of the pilot study seem to imply that there are sometimes subtle, sometimes more obvious, differences between written German and Japanese speech act performance in emails. The study confirmed that apologies tend to be performed quite differently – even within a language – depending on the context and the addressee. The individual speech act realisations varied considerably according to the dimensions of power and rank of imposition, as the data above showed. In order to make more detailed claims about preferences in the choice of different apology strategies, however, a larger corpus of data is required. Furthermore, the data, which was collected in an experimental context, have to be compared to authentically written emails, which may differ to some extent. For one thing, authentic apologies may entail social sanctions, and consequently the writer may endeavour to maintain the personal relationship to the reader by including personal statements in the email, which are not related to the actual speech act, but which may placate the reader. Additionally, the expressions collected for the individual categories have to be subjected to a qualitative linguistic and pragmatic analysis in order to determine which grammatical structures and lexical items are required to enable students to perform L2 speech acts more appropriately.

(Endnotes)

¹ The questionnaire can be seen at <<http://home.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/harting/webform/umfrage.aktuell.html>>.

² The teachers who participated in the survey were asked to rate on a scale from 1 to 5 to what extent they observe transfer mistakes from English and Japanese in students' texts. Transfer mistakes from Japanese displayed means of 3.6 for stylistic and 3.2 for grammatical difficulties, while transfer mistakes from the students' first foreign language, English, showed means of 3.8 for grammatical difficulties and 2.8 for stylistic difficulties.

Axel Harting has a Masters degree in German and English and taught at Bielefeld University (Germany) and at the University of New South Wales (Australia) before coming to Japan. He is now working at Hiroshima University and is doing his PhD on teaching German writing skills to Japanese students.

References

- Blum-Kulka, S., J. House & Kasper, G. (Eds.). (1989). *Cross-cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. Norwood.
- Borkin, A. & Reinhart, M. (1978). Excuse me and I'm sorry. *TESOL Quarterly*, 2 (1), 57-79.
- Brown, P. & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals of Language Usage*. Cambridge University Press.
- Cohen, A. & Olshtain, E. (1987). Developing a Measure of Sociocultural Competence: the Case of Apology. *Language Learning*, 3 (1), 113-134.

- Harting, A. & Yamaki, K. 2005. „Erfüllen äußerer Ansprüche unter Berücksichtigung der inneren Stimme: Zur Integration produkt- und prozessorientierter Verfahren der Schreibdidaktik“. *Neue Beiträge zur Germanistik* 4/1, 72-90.
- Harting, A. 2005. Teaching Standard German Text Types to Japanese Students: Design of a Composition Course. *The Proceedings of JALT 2004*.
- Harting, A. 2006. Stand der Schreibförderung im japanischen DaF-Unterricht: Ergebnisse einer quantitativen Umfrage. *Info DaF* (forthcoming).
- Olshtain, E. & Weinbach, L. (1986). Complaints: A Study of Speech Act Behavior among Native and Non-native Speakers of Hebrew. In M. B. Papi & J. Verschueren (Eds.). *The pragmatic perspective: selected papers from the 1985 International Pragmatics Conference*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Olshtain, E. & Cohen, A. (1983). Apology: A Speech Act Set. In N. Wolfson & E. Judd (Eds.). *Sociolinguistics and Language Acquisition*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 18-36.
- Trosborg, A. (1986). Apology Strategies in Native/Nonnative Speakers of English. In A. Trosborg (Ed.), *Communicative competence in foreign language learning and reading*, The Dolpin, No. 13.
- Zimin, S. (1981). Sex and Politeness: Factors in First- and Second-language Use. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 27, 35-58.