

Research Forum

Apologies in English by Japanese Learners

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What makes the pragmatics of a second language difficult is a difference in the interpretation of certain kinds of behaviour by different cultures. For example, an apology in one culture may be interpreted as an expression of thanks in another culture, or a polite request in one culture may seem rude in another. If a certain type of behavior is interpreted the same way in first language (L1) and second language (L2) speech communities, then learners will have an advantage; but if it is not, then it becomes dangerous for learners to always rely on their L1 intuitions in an L2. Since L2 and L1 expressions may have the same referential meanings but different social meanings learners may misuse language by transferring the use of words in their native language to the target language. Wolfson (1989) calls this behavior *pragmatic transfer* and defines it as "using the rules of speaking from one's own native speech community... when speaking or writing in a second language" (p. 141).

The research reported in this paper concerns the pragmatic transfer of apologies by Japanese from their L1 to English. To investigate this phenomenon, the following four hypotheses were put forward.

H1: Frequency of Apologies. Coulmas (1981) and Kinoshita (1988) compare language habits of the Japanese with those of Europeans and find that the Japanese make frequent and excessive use of polite language. We therefore hypothesized that when Japanese students speak English, they will apologize more frequently than American students do, though less than if they were speaking Japanese.

H2: Status of Apologizee. Olshtain and Cohen (1983) and Beebe et al. (1990) showed that the status or distance between interlocutors is

one of the factors that make native speakers choose certain apologetic speech patterns over others. In this study, status is defined according to age since there is a hierarchy based on age in Japanese society, and this status is more honored than in American society. It was hypothesized that Japanese students would apologize more frequently to higher status apologizees than to lower status ones. Moreover, Japanese responses will influence their responses in English.

H3: Severity of the Offense. Fraser (1981) proposed that one of the factors that influences apologetic speech acts is the severity of the offense committed by the person apologizing. Serious offenses involve cases of significant injury or inconvenience, while non-serious cases involve minor social violations. It was hypothesized that both American and Japanese students will apologize more frequently in serious situations than in non-serious situations. Also, as discussed in hypothesis H1, Japanese students in their L2 will apologize more frequently in both serious and non-serious situations than American ones.

H4: Apologies and Thanks. Borkin and Reinhart (1978) report that the relations between apologies and expressions of gratitude are difficult for Japanese ESL learner to understand. To explain this, Coulmas (1981) describes the double function of phrases expressing either thanks or apologies in Japanese as follows:

In Japan, the smallest favor makes the receiver a debtor. Social relations can be regarded, to a large extent, as forming a reticulum of mutual responsibilities and debts. Not every favor can be repaid, and if circumstances do not allow proper repayment, Japanese tend to apologize. (p. 88)

Based on this research, four questionnaire items were designed to describe situations in which it was assumed that Japanese students would give an apology, while American students would give an expression of gratitude. It was hypothesized that Japanese students would apologize both in their L1 and L2, while American students would express gratitude in all situations. If Americans thank, and Japanese apologize in both Japanese and English, then we can assume that there is pragmatic transfer from Japanese subjects' L1 to their L2.

Method

The subjects in this study were 12 American graduate and undergraduate students and 12 Japanese undergraduate students studying at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, Illinois. The group of Ameri-

can students included 5 males and 7 females, and the group of Japanese students included 7 males and 5 females. The Japanese students had lived in the U.S. for an average of 18 months, ranging from three who had been there only a month and a half to one who had been there four years.

A questionnaire containing descriptions of 18 situations, most of which were designed to elicit an apologetic response, was used to collect the data. The 18 situations were also designed to be categorized by the apologizee's status and the severity of the offense. The subjects read each written situation, then wrote a response. American and Japanese subjects were asked to write their responses in English to all the situations on the questionnaire, the same Japanese subjects were asked to respond in Japanese to the same questionnaire translated into Japanese.

The aim of the data analyses was to determine whether subjects transferred pragmatic knowledge from their L1 to their L2. This data analysis was carried out by comparing the total number of apology speech acts of the three sets of subjects. The total number of apology speech acts in the questionnaire of each set of subjects was counted, as well as the number of apologies in terms of status and severity of offense.

Results and Discussions

The same linguistic forms for apology were used by Japanese and American students in English, although the two groups used different expressions with differing frequencies. American students tend to use "Sorry" rather than "I'm sorry," while Japanese students prefer "I'm sorry" to "Sorry."

There was a difference in the frequency of apologies among each set of subjects. Japanese students apologize very frequently in their L1 (193 times), almost twice as often as Americans did in their L1 (101 times), and they also offer more apologies in English (161) than Americans. In addition, in some situations Japanese students responded with two apologies for a single situation. When we compare the frequency of apologies among the three sets of subjects, the following pattern emerges:

Japanese in Japanese	>	Japanese in English	>	American in English
[Japanese L1]		[English L2]		[English L1]

This result supports hypothesis H1, which stated that Japanese will apologize in their L1 more frequently than in their L2 but still more frequently than Americans. Pragmatic knowledge in L1 indeed seems to be transferred to L2.

When we compare the frequency of apologies in terms of the apologizee's status among the three sets of subjects, there was little difference among high-status, equal-status, and low status apologizees, the result does not support hypotheses H2.

There was also little difference in the frequency of apologies made by Japanese students for serious and non-serious offenses in either their L1 or L2. This result does not seem to substantiate hypothesis H3. However, the number of apologies in Japanese subjects' L1 and L2 is close, both in serious and non-serious situations, and both outnumber apologies from Americans. This, again, seems to indicate pragmatic transfer.

The reason Americans apologize in non-serious situations more frequently than in serious situations may be because in serious situations they give explanations for the offense or offer to repair broken things. In contrast, the reason for the similarity between the frequency of apologies by Japanese students in their L1 and L2 seems to be that they express an apology initially, regardless of the severity of the offense.

Another reason for the results from all sets of subjects might be an ambiguity in the distinction between a serious offense and a non-serious offense. For example, the situation of being late for an appointment was categorized as a non-serious offense. However, the degree of the severity could be changed depending on the apologizee's status, or the social distance between the interlocutors. Thus, being late for an appointment with a professor can be a serious offense, although it was categorized it as non-serious.

Table 1
Number of Apologies and Thanks

Item		Total number of Responses by		
		Japanese in Japanese	Japanese in English	Americans in English
8.	You can't eat cake served by a friends mother	Apologies 7 Thanks 0	3 1	7 3
13.	You borrow a classmate's notes	Apologies 8 Thanks 5	4 5	0 3
16.	You can't extend a visit with your grandmother	Apologies 4 Thanks 0	6 0	3 0
17.	You let your younger sister pay for dinner.	Apologies 8 Thanks 4	2 9	0 8

Table 1 shows that Americans gave no apologies in situations in which they were helped by another person, while Japanese apologized in both English and Japanese. In situations 8, 13, and 17, Americans expressed gratitude rather than giving an apology. The unexpected result was that, in situations 13 and 17, Japanese gave more expressions of gratitude in English than Americans. The reason may be that Japanese students use apologies and expressions of gratitude together in a single situation, while this tendency is not apparent in the responses from American students. For example, a response from a Japanese student in English to item 13 was:

Sorry. I will return your notebook as soon as possible. Thanks.

No expressions of gratitude were given in response to item 16, refusing an invitation to extend a visit, from any set of subjects. The reason may be that this was simply an inappropriate situation to elicit an apology in either Japanese or English.

Overall, the results from items 8, 13, and 17 support hypothesis H4, though further investigation is needed. What Coulmas (1981) claims, based on his comparative study of apologies and expressions of gratitude in Japanese and in several European languages, is confirmed by this study: Japanese tend to equate gratitude with a feeling of guilt because of an ethic of indebtedness. As Coulmas points out, "apologies and thanks as defined against the background of a given sociocultural system are not the same thing as when seen in another cultural context" (p. 89).

As shown in Table 2, responses to the questionnaire were also analyzed according to Olshtain's (1983) five semantic formulas for apologies:

1. Direct apology (e.g., *I'm sorry*, or *I apologize*.)
2. Explanation of why we did what we did
3. Acceptance of responsibility (e.g., *it's my fault*.)
4. Offer of repair (e.g., *Let me pay for it*.)
5. Promise of forbearance (e.g., *It'll never happen again*.)

Table 2
Responses Categorized by Semantic Formula

Item	Total number of Responses by		
	Japanese in Japanese	Japanese in English	Americans in English
Direct apology	194	160	101
Explanation	72	66	49
Acceptance of responsibility	2	10	0
Offer of repair	41	46	50

Note. There were no responses that could be classified as promises of forbearance. This formula is thus omitted from the table.

Two interesting results appear in Table 2. First, American students tend to give explanations or offers of repair to an apologizee slightly more often than Japanese students do in English or in Japanese. Second, Japanese students use a greater variety of apologetic expressions in Japanese. They seem to differentiate expressions according to the status of the apologizee. For example;

- to a professor: *Moshiwake arimasen* (very polite, used by males and females)
- to a friend: *Gomen* (used with a socially close person, by males and females)
- to a close friend: *Warii, Suman* (less polite, used by males)

The reason for this variation probably stems from a Japanese social hierarchy based on social status, age, and sex.

Conclusion

Three conclusions may be drawn from these results:

1. Japanese students tend to apologize more frequently, both in English and in Japanese, than American students;
2. For Japanese, whether responding in English or in Japanese, there is little difference; and
3. In some situations, Japanese students apologize both in English and Japanese, while American students do not.

There are, naturally, some weaknesses in the design of this study. First, as mentioned above, an ambiguity about the severity of the offense may have affected how subjects responded to some of the questionnaire

items; the degree of severity that an individual perceives will differ according to individual or cultural values. Second, the categorization of the questionnaire items only by age of the apologizee and by the severity of the offense may not have identified the relevant dimensions of social variation. Other elements, such as sex differences or social distance between interlocutors may also have affected the apology patterns. Third, for the Japanese students, situations on which they were called upon to apologize to family members in English may have proved less than realistic.

Despite these weaknesses, this study shows that the pragmatics of apologizing in the native language influences how people apologize in a second language. That is, sociocultural elements in the L1 are likely to transfer to speech acts in the L2. As Coulmas (1981) states, even if we know how to say "I'm sorry," if we do not know when, to whom, and in which situation we should say it, the words may not function properly as an apology. Second language learners need to know appropriate pragmatic uses of the forms in appropriate situations, not only the meanings of the forms.

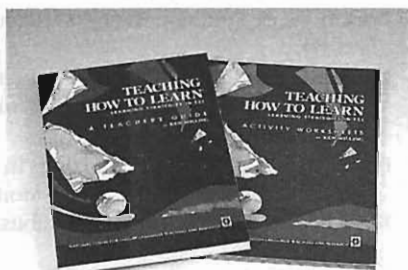
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