

**The pragmatic development of Japanese learners at the beginner's level:
The case of apology**

謝罪場面における日本語初級学習者の語用論的な発達

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1. Introduction

An apology is called for when social norm has been violated (Olshtain and Cohen 1983:20). The culpable person, who perceives him as responsible for causing an offence, must let the offended person know that they are sorry for what they have done. In this respect, the act of an apology is highly recipient supportive and self-demeaning. At the same time, as Trosborg (1987) observed, to save their face an apologizer commands tactful strategies by minimizing the degree of offence or even choosing to deny their responsibility. Thus, we are dealing with two parties: an apologizer and a recipient, and “only if the person who caused the infraction perceives themselves as an apologizer do we get the act of apologizing (Olshtain and Cohen 1983:20)”.

In order to clarify socio-cultural norms among different language cultures, commencing with a study called the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project: CCSARP (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984), numerous studies of apology have focused on similarities and differences of strategies among different native speakers. In CCSARP, Olshtain found that native speakers of Hebrew, Canadian French, Australian English and German did not exhibit significant dissimilarities in strategy selection, concluding that “given the same social factors, the same contextual features, and the same level of offence, different languages will realize apologies in very similar ways (Olshtain 1989:171).” On the contrary, studies comparing native speakers of Japanese and English, whose languages are typologically distant, claimed that there were culturally different preferences of selecting strategies when an apology was performed (Barnlund & Yoshioka 1990; Kumagai 1993a). In this study, I will try to clarify whether there exists a universal manifestation of strategy selection, by analyzing the utterances of early stage Japanese learners. If they were to employ similar strategies to that of native speakers, it could be concluded that different languages realize apologies in similar ways.

As mentioned above, an apologizer needs to interpret the situation, and a number of factors, including “the social status of the two participants”, which is likely to influence their choice of strategies to take (Olshtain and Cohen 1983:21). That is to say, “whether a specific situation calls for an apology and whether a certain utterance qualifies as such an apology will depend on both linguistic and sociocultural norms (Olshtain and Cohen 1983:20)”, and therefore it is of importance for learners to have “the ability to react in a culturally acceptable way in that context and to choose stylistically appropriate forms for the context (Cohen & Olshtain 1981:113)”. The second purpose of the present study is to investigate how learners express their apology and whether there are any developmental patterns in their apologetic expressions according to a recipient's social status.

2. Past research

There are numerous cross-sectional studies in interlanguage pragmatics in which subjects have been mostly intermediate to advanced learners. This trend is also recognizable in the interlanguage studies of apology (Cohen & Olshtain 1981; Narita & Young 1994; Trosborg 1995). For a more in depth understanding of the development of a learner's pragmatics, it would be ideal for researchers to also examine beginning-level learners and conduct longitudinal studies. This is the first interlanguage pragmatic study with beginning-level learners in Japanese.

Within the majority of cross-sectional studies about interlanguage pragmatics and cross-cultural speech act studies in Japanese, data were collected by means of a discourse completion test (DCT) to facilitate large language samples and to compare the dissimilarity among different native speakers (Nakada 1989; Peng 1992; Horie 1993; Ikeda 1993; Kumagai 1993b, Ogoshi 1993). On the other hand, in the field of second language acquisition (SLA), it has been pointed out that spontaneous language samples reflect a learner's performance more accurately (Pienemann 1998). In order to obtain spontaneous language data with controlled variables, a closed role-play was employed in this study.

A thorough literature review revealed little about studies focusing on apology of Japanese learners with the exception of a study by Nishimura (1998), who analyzed letters written by learners. This is the first study of apology, which examines speech production data of Japanese learners.

This paper aims to compare how beginning-level Japanese learners perform their utterances in apology situations with those of Japanese native speakers. The following research questions were constructed for the purposes of this study:

- 1) What strategies do beginning-level Japanese learners employ in the case of apology in Japanese, and are they similar to those of Japanese native speakers?
- 2) What apologetic expressions do beginning-level Japanese learners use, and are there any developmental patterns of the expressions they use?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study consisted of two groups: Japanese learners (L2) and Japanese native speakers (NS-J). The participants in the first group were five beginning-level learners, who were enrolled in undergraduate degree programs at a Japanese university to be taught them respective subjects in English except for the Japanese language courses¹. Prior to arriving in Japan they had been studying Japanese for an average of two months in their home country. In Japan, they started learning Japanese in an elementary course at the university, using a beginners textbook from lesson one. They were two female Chinese students, a male Singaporean, a male Korean, and a male Vietnamese student. They are indicated as 001, 002, 003, 004 and 005 respectively in this paper. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 21 years. Data were collected starting with their arrival in Japan, i.e. Month 1 (M1) and Month 4 (M4).

The participants in the second group consisted of twenty NS-Js (ten male and ten female), who were at the same age as L2 (19 to 21 years old) and studying at the same university.

3.2. Instruments and procedures

For data collection purposes, a closed role-play between participant and investigator was employed to elicit an apology and to compare the participant's oral productions under comparable situation settings. A closed role-play, which is also called oral DCT², was chosen because it can provoke spontaneous utterance while controlling variables in order to ensure compatibility, allowing more varieties of strategies to be observed compared to written DCT (Sasaki 1998).

Six apology situations were selected with variations in on/off-site settings and social/psychological distances: two settings (spilling coffee as on-site and losing a borrowed book as off-site) vis-a-vis three interlocutors (a close old friend, a close senior person *Senpai* and a professor). The following are samples of a role card in the old friend's version, however, on each card a different interlocutor: a close friend, a close *Senpai* of an activity club, or a distinguished professor, was written.

Setting A: You are having a cup of coffee with your old friend. You have mistakenly spilled coffee on his/her clothes. Please apologize to him/her.

Setting B: You borrowed an expensive book called "*Japan's economy*" from your old friend in order to prepare for an examination. You left your bag, which contained the book, on a train yesterday. Please apologize to him/her.

These three interlocutors can be characterized by two factors: social and psychological distance. According to these two factors, three different recipients of an apology were created: an old friend (socially equal and psychologically close), a close senior person *Senpai* (socially distant, yet socially closer to a professor and psychologically close) and a distinguished professor (both socially and psychologically distant)³.

Six role-play cards were randomly shown to a participant, with the cards shown to L2s written in English, while cards for NS-Js were written in Japanese. The participants were given sufficient time to prepare before each role-play. The goal of each role-play was fixed, and in order to maintain interaction the investigator responded to what a participant said, but withheld responses to a minimum, such as giving supportive response and back channeling. The analytical range of a role-play was from "bringing up an apology conversation until its conclusion", and any utterance, which was not directly related to an apology such as a greeting and back channeling, was removed from the analysis.

The period of data collection was from February until July 2013 for NS-Js, with L2s M1 data collected in November 2012 and M4 data collected in February 2013. All data was collected on an IC-recorder.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Strategies

In the study, coding and description of the strategies in the apology speech act set (Table 1) were defined based on Olshtain and Cohen (1983), Trosborg (1987), the coding manual of the CCSARP (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain 1984), as well as on the data obtained in the present study which are shown in italics in Table 1 and Table 2.

All apologizers' utterances obtained in this study were delimited according to the strategies in Table 1. Three rules were applied to delimit utterances: [1] It was considered one strategy, as long as the utterance contained the strategy regardless of whether or not there was a sentence boundary and the utterance of the recipient's apology was inserted in between. [2] As long as the utterance was interpreted as the same strategy, it was considered one strategy, even if the same utterance was repeated, i.e. ごめんごめん (sorry, sorry)⁴. [3] When L2 repeatedly restated or self-repaired their utterance, the final version was employed in the analysis.

To maintain interrater reliability, the initial 20% of the data (both L2s and NS-Js) were coded independently by the investigator as well as another rater, with the kappa coefficient value being 0.88. As this was a highly acceptable level for interrater reliability, the rest of the data was coded only by the investigator.

The distribution of strategies between the two groups: percentage of participants (n=30: 5 participants times M1 and M4 × 3 interlocutors for L2s and n=60 for NS-Js in each setting) and Chi-square (χ^2) test results for comparison between L2 and NS-J are presented in Table 2.

Table 1 Strategies of apology speech act and example

Category	Strategy
Pre-sequence	<i>Pre-1: Mentioning the purpose of conversation</i> example: 謝らなきやいけないことがあって (I have something to apologize for to you.)
	<i>Pre-2: Mentioning a topic</i> example: この前借りた日本経済という本だけど (It is about the book called 'Japan's economy' which I borrowed from you.)
Expression of apology	<i>Apol-1: Apology before explanation or taking on responsibility</i> example: ごめん (Sorry)
	<i>Apol-2: Apology on the spot or after explanation or taking on responsibility</i> example: ごめん (Sorry)
Explanation or account	Expl: Explanation or account example: コーヒーがこぼれちゃった (lit. Coffee was spilt.) / 昨日電車で鞆なくしちゃってその中に借りた本が入ってたの (Yesterday I lost my bag on the train, with the book which I borrowed from you in it.)
Taking on responsibility	Resp-1: Explicit self-blame example: わたしのせい (It was my fault.)
	Resp-2: Admission of facts but not of responsibility example: コーヒーこぼしちゃった (I spilled coffee.) / この前借りた日本経済の本なくしちゃったんだけど (I lost the book which I borrowed from you the other day.)
	Resp-3: Lack of intent example: なくすつもりはなかった (Losing it was not my intention.)
	Resp-4: Expression of embarrassment example: やばい (Darn.) / どうしよう (What should I do?)
	Resp-5: Expression of self-deficiency example: わたしの頭がよくなくて (I'm such an idiot.)

Expressing concern for the recipient	Conc: Expressing concern for the recipient example: 大丈夫? (Are you all right?)/ 高かった? (Was it expensive?)
Minimizing the degree of offence	Mini: Minimizing the degree of offence example: まあ大丈夫だろ (That is nothing.)
Offer of repair	<i>Offe-1: Attempt of repair</i> example: おしぼり取ってくる (I will bring a wet towel.)/ 駅員さんとかにも電話したんだけど (I called the station staff.)
	<i>Offe-2: Asking how to make repairs to the recipient</i> example: どうしたらいい? (What should be done about it?)/ 買って来たほうがいい? (Should I buy you a new one?)
	<i>Offe-3: Asking the necessity of repair to the recipient</i> example: その本まだ使うかな (Do you still need the book?)
	<i>Offe-4: Offer of repair</i> example: クリーニング代払います (I will pay for the laundry charge.)/ 今度新しく買って返す (I will buy a new one.)
	<i>Offe-5: Confirming to the recipient who has said no need to repair</i> example: 本当? (Really?)
	<i>Offe-6: Appeaser</i> example: 今度なんかおごるよ (I will treat you next time.)
Appreciation for recipients' forgiveness	<i>Appr-1: Appreciation or relief for recipients' acceptance of apology</i> example: ありがとう (Thank you.)/ よかった (What a relief.)
	<i>Appr-2: Remark on recipients' forgiveness</i> example: 優しくてよかった (I'm glad that you are so kind.)
Apologetic expression	<i>Apol-3: Apologetic expression for recipients' forgiveness</i> example: でもなんか悪いな (I feel bad.)
Promise of forbearance	Prom: Promise of forbearance example: 今後このようなことが起きないように心掛けます (I will be careful that this will never happen again.)

Within the *coffee* setting, four among 22 strategies were significantly different between the two groups. Expl and Resp-2 strategy were observed less in L2s ($\chi^2(1)=3.84$, $p<0.05$, $\chi^2(1)=9.97$, $p<0.01$ respectively). It can be assumed that L2s simply might not have known the Japanese equivalent of “spill”. The Offe-2 strategy appeared more often in NS-Js data ($\chi^2(1)=5.00$, $p<0.05$). No NS-Js used Resp-3: Lack of intent ($\chi^2(1)=8.37$, $p<0.01$), albeit one L2 used this strategy several times; this result can be excluded as an individual preference.

Within the *book* setting, L2s used Offe-1 ($\chi^2(1)=9.18$, $p<0.05$) more frequently than NS-Js, however, with the remaining seven strategies, NS-Js manifest a preference for the following: Pre-2 ($\chi^2(1)=21.40$, $p<0.001$), Resp-2 ($\chi^2(1)=5.98$, $p<0.05$), Conc ($\chi^2(1)=5.76$, $p<0.05$), Offe-2 ($\chi^2(1)=5.76$, $p<0.05$), Offe-5 ($\chi^2(1)=11.02$, $p<0.01$), Offe-6 ($\chi^2(1)=8.29$, $p<0.01$) and Apol-3 ($\chi^2(1)=4.39$, $p<0.05$). L2s may not have known how to respond in case of Offe-5 and Apol-3, and how to express “loose” in Japanese in case of Res-2 and “(I’ll) treat (you.)” in case of Offe-6.

The findings can be summarized as follows: only 3 strategies in the *coffee* settings and 8 strategies in the *book* settings were significantly different between the two groups and all strategies except one (Offe-1) appear more often in the data of NS-Js. In contrast to the results of former cross-sectional studies, this study resulted in mostly no significant differences in distribution of strategies between L2s and NS-Js in the *coffee* settings, albeit with a few notable exceptions. Increasingly complicated situations (ie - off-site *book* setting), prompted increasingly more elaborate expressions, and therefore

dissimilar strategies became wider in the *coffee* settings. The investigator interpreted this as approximating that there could be a universal realization of apologies, and L2's usage of strategies is not target-like, simply because L2s do not know expressions of the target language.

Table 2 Strategies of apology speech act for L2s and NS-Js

Strategy	Setting A: Coffee		Setting B: Book	
	L2 (M1&M4) n=5(1+1)×3 interlocutors	NS-J n=20×3 interlocutors	L2 (M1&M4) n=5(1+1)×3 interlocutors	NS-J n=20×3 interlocutors
<i>Pre-1: Mentioning the purpose of conversation</i>	0.0	0.0	6.7	11.7
<i>Pre-2: Mentioning a topic</i>	0.0	0.0	10.0	65.0***
<i>Apol-1: Apology before explanation or taking on responsibility</i>	0.0	0.0	43.3	60.0
<i>Apol-2: Apology on the spot or after explanation or taking on responsibility</i>	100.0	100.0	96.7	98.3
Expl: Explanation or account	3.3*	18.3	80.0	81.7
Resp-1: Explicit self-blame	0.0	1.7	3.3	1.7
Resp-2: Admission of facts but not of responsibility	6.6	38.3**	43.3	65.0*
Resp-3: Lack of intent	13.3(**)	0.0	0.0	0.0
Resp-4: Expression of embarrassment	0.0	10.0†	10.0	5.0
Resp-5: Expression of self-deficiency	0.0	3.3	0.0	0.0
Conc: Expressing concern for the recipient	63.3	71.7	3.3	23.3*
Mini: Minimizing the degree of offence	3.3	3.3	0.0	1.7
<i>Offe-1: Attempt of repair</i>	56.7	43.3	53.3*	21.7
<i>Offe-2: Asking how to make repairs to the recipient</i>	6.7	26.7*	3.3	23.3*
<i>Offe-3: Asking the necessity of repair to the recipient</i>	0.0	0.0	6.7	11.7
<i>Offe-4: Offer of repair</i>	26.7	40.0	46.7	50.0
<i>Offe-5: Confirming to the recipient who has said no need to repair</i>	36.7	48.3	10.0	45.0**
<i>Offe-6: Appeaser</i>	0.0	8.3	0.0	23.3**
<i>Appr-1: Appreciation or relief for recipients' acceptance of apology</i>	20.0	16.7	16.7	10.0
<i>Appr-2: Remark on recipients' forgiveness</i>	3.3	1.7	3.3	0.0
<i>Apol-3: Apologetic expression for recipients' forgiveness</i>	0.0	0.0	0.0	13.3*
Prom: Promise of forbearance	0.0	1.7	0.0	1.7

*** P<0.001, ** P<0.01, * P<0.05, † P<0.10

4.2. Apologetic expressions

Three different types of interlocutors with regard to social/psychological distance were selected in the study: a close friend, a senior person *Senpai* of an activity circle, and a distinguished professor. In this section, I will discuss how participants manifested their perception of relationships with their interlocutors in apologetic expression. Tables 3-1

and 3-2 show “Expressions of apology” in the Apol-2 strategy in the *coffee* settings and *book* settings, respectively.

Table 3-1 Expressions of apology for “Apology 2”: the *coffee* settings

Expressions		NS-J			001				002				003				004				005							
		Friend	Senpai	Professor	Friend		Senpai		Professor		Friend		Senpai		Professor		Friend		Senpai		Professor		Friend		Senpai		Professor	
					M1	M4	M1	M4	M1	M4	M1	M4	M1	M4	M1	M4	M1	M4	M1	M4	M1	M4	M1	M4	M1	M4	M1	M4
ごめん (gomen)	ごめん (gomen)	41			3	2											1	1										
	ごめんね (gomen ne)	28																				1						
	ごめんなさい (gomen nasai)	2	15	6		2	2			3	2	2	2	2		2	1	1	1	1	2	4	1	4	3	2	2	
悪い (warui)	悪いね (warui-ne)	1																										
	すまん (suman)	6																										
すまない (sumanai)	すみません (sumimasen)		49	50						2	1			1	1	2	2	1	2	3	3	1			2	2	2	
	すみませんでした (sumimasen deshita)		2	2																								
	失礼しました (shituree shimashita)			2																								
失礼 (shitsuree)	失礼致しました (shitsuree itashimashita)		1																									
	申し訳ない (mooshiwake nai)	2	1					1																				
申し訳 (mooshiwake)	申し訳ないです (mooshiwake nai desu)	1	3	7				2																				
	申し訳ありません (mooshiwake arimasen)		2	7				2																				
	申し訳ありませんでした (mooshiwake arimasen deshita)			2																								
	申し訳ございません (mooshiwake gozaimasen)			3																								
	許して下さい (yurushite kudasai)		1																									
その他 (Others)																												

Table 3-2 Expressions of apology for “Apology 2”: the *book* settings

Expressions		NS-J			001				002				003				004				005							
		Friend	Senpai	Professor	Friend		Senpai		Professor		Friend		Senpai		Professor		Friend		Senpai		Professor		Friend		Senpai		Professor	
					M1	M4	M1	M4	M1	M4	M1	M4	M1	M4	M1	M4	M1	M4	M1	M4	M1	M4	M1	M4	M1	M4	M1	M4
ごめん (gomen)	ごめん (gomen)	32			2									1				1										
	ごめんね (gomen ne)	20								1				1	1													
	ごめんよ (gomen-yo)	1																										
	ごめんなさい (gomen nasai)	2	3			1	2	2	1	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	3	2	2	2	1	1		
悪い (warui)	悪い (warui)	1																										
	すまん (suman)	1																										
すまない (sumanai)	すみません (sumimasen)	4	26	25						1	1			1	2	2	1				1				1			
	すみませんでした (sumimasen deshita)		9	5																								
	申し訳ない (mooshiwake nai)	3																										
申し訳 (mooshiwake)	申し訳なかった (mooshiwake nakatta)	1																										
	申し訳ないです (mooshiwake nai desu)		14	7				1																				
	申し訳ありません (mooshiwake arimasen)		5	9				2																				
	申し訳ありませんでした (mooshiwake arimasen deshita)			2																								
	申し訳ございません (mooshiwake gozaimasen)			1																								
	申し訳ございませんでした (mooshiwake gozaimasen deshita)			1																								
	ご迷惑をおかけして / ました (gomeiwaku wo okake shimashite / shimashita)			2																								
その他 (Others)	何とお詫びを申し上げていいかわからないのですが (nanto owabhi wo mooshigete ii ka wakaranai no desu ga)			1																								

which is the polite form of てしまう, and E: humble honorifics). Expressions with ちゃう, てしまう, and てしまいます are used when a speaker feels that the situation is regrettable.

The use of *form* and *type* did not overlap between the two groups, except “plain *form* and *type* A” and “polite *form* and *type* A” in strategy Expl. Likewise, L2’s selection of verbs was completely dissimilar: no L2s used *type* B, C, D, or E, as well as *form* -te, which indicates, “giving a reason” when it is used at the end of a clause or a sentence. Items marked in gray appeared only in NS-Js data.

NS-Js distinguished the use of *form* depending on whether the social status of the interlocutor was equal or not. 001 and 002 differentiated their speech style in accordance to the same rules of NS-J, but the other three L2s did not. Here as well, there seemed to be no remarkable development of the expressions between M1 and M4.

5. Conclusion

The findings of cross-sectional studies in interlanguage pragmatics, based on intermediate or advanced learners’ data, have consistently demonstrated that there were a great deal of dissimilarities of selections of strategies. In contrast, the present study, based on beginning level learners, demonstrates that more similarities than differences exist in distribution of strategies on apology. At present, it can be concluded that L2s and NS-Js realize apologies in similar ways. Moreover, L2s are unable to utilize the full repertoire of strategies, which NS-Js usually employ, as they simply lack the knowledge and proficiency in the target language. In order to corroborate this hypothesis, further longitudinal data of the same participants requires additional study.

Contrary to strategy distribution, L2’s apologetic expressions differ substantially from that of NS-Js in both selection of *forms* and *types*. L2s who are at an early stage of learning do not differentiate their expressions depending on the social status of an interlocutor in the way NS-Js do. No distinctive development on L2’s apologetic expressions was observed between M1 and M4. By analyzing additional longitudinal data, it will hopefully become apparent at which point of time L2s start differentiating their utterance according to the social status of an interlocutor.

Notes

1. L2s’ English proficiency was high advanced level: native speaker, or TOEFL iBT 100 / IELTS 7.0 above.
2. Bardovi-Harlig (2013) explained the detailed differences among production tasks.
3. The three interlocutors were selected, as the participants can be easily presentative and being inspired by Suh (1999), who built four interlocutors: a close friend, a young, sociable teacher, an older neighbor, and a distinguished professor.
4. Rule [1] and [2] were followed in Beuckmann and Usami (2005).

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