

Apologies in English by Adult Malay Speakers: Patterns and Competence

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Abstract

The speech act of apology has been much researched. Some of the research focused on one culture, others were cross-culturally compared. However, in the Malaysian context, the study of apology has yet to be ventured, be it to focus its manifestation in the people's mother tongues, nor to focus on how it is manifested in English, an alternative popular language used in the country. This paper is an attempt to explicate the production of apologies in English by adult Malay speakers in Malaysia. The choice for English is made out of the ever mounting effort of the government in encouraging Malaysians to become competent speakers of English, the world's lingua franca. The choice for apology is due to its popularity as a study of speech act and being an illocutionary force so common to take place in daily context. The study found that despite years of exposure to English language, the apologies produced displayed influences of the Malay sociocultural rules.

Introduction

Malaysians have been formally exposed to English language since the age of 7, the year they entered primary schools. The formal exposure continued in the adult years through work related needs. Informally, at all levels of development, they have access to the language through various communication channels, such as the television, radios, and written advertisements. With such exposures, the Malaysians would have been expected to acquire certain input of English to make them able at least to communicate competently in the language. That, however, may not be so, because a language is so much associated with its culture and there may be some difficulties in acquiring the nuances in language that are culturally-bounded. Studies in contrastive pragmatics have empirically substantiated these differences and difficulties that brought forth the issue of sociopragmatic competence in second language studies (for example, Harlow, 1990; Eisenstein, Bodman & Carpenter, 1996; Frescura, 1993; Olshtain & Cohen 1983).

The differences in the sociopragmatic aspects lead to difficulties in acquiring the rules of English social norms, especially if it is learnt as a foreign language (EFL), as the situation in Malaysia. Learning the language in an EFL environment may not be an advantage to the learners because of two important reasons: being surrounded with their own native language culture and lack of opportunities for the social use of the English.

This paper discusses precisely these relationships of language and culture manifested through the production of the speech act of apology. Specifically it aims to explicate the patterns of apologies in English produced by adult native speakers of Malay and how these patterns reflect the speakers sociopragmatic competence of English.

The discussion is based on one hundred and sixty two (162) written responses collected based on six (6) elicited apology situations. The data and analyses show that to be competent in a language, a speaker has to know the appropriate way of expressing oneself in that language. This requires understanding of and exposure to the sociocultural rules of the language, in this case, the English language to the Malay speakers in Malaysia

Selected Studies on Apology

Apologies are considered expressive speech acts. Leech (1983: 104-105) defined apologies as convivial speech acts with a social goal of maintaining harmony between speaker and hearer. The act is expected to happen when social norms have been violated, whether the offence is real or potential (Olshtain & Cohen 1983: 20). This act requires an action or utterance which is intended to "set things right" (Trosborg 1994:373).

Studies on apologies so far had focused the discussions on the strategies (Holmes 1989), semantic formulas (Frescura 1993), and perception of apologies (Edmundson 1992). Holmes (1989) for instance found that, in a New Zealand 183 naturally occurring corpus and based on gender, women used apologies more than men, women apologized to other women more than to men, and men apologized to women more than to men.

Frescura (1993) coded her role plays data into two categories of semantic formulas: hearer supportive formulas and self-supportive formulas. The hearer-supportive formulas were used when the speaker who apologizes chose to support the face of the complainer by admitting their own guilt, by recognizing the hearer's rights, or by

offering compensation. The self-supportive formulas were used when the speaker chose to support their own face by denying guilt, by appealing to the hearer's leniency, or by providing an explanation for the offense. With respect to these formulas, she found that the native speakers of Italians preferred the self-supportive formulas, whereas the native speakers of English preferred the hearer-supportive ones. Learners of Italian did not indicate any preference.

As for the perception of apologies, Edmundson (1992) looked specifically at the perception of the semantic formulas in apologies. These perceptions were obtained from 161 native speakers of English who view a video of a popular TV program which contain 6 apologies. The most important findings from this study is that there can be more than one interpretation for each semantic formulas. For example, the semantic formula justification, explanation, or excuse, which she had posited as one category, was interpreted by the subjects as two or three different categories.

With all the above findings on the different aspects of apologies, one would wonder at how apologies were manifested by the native speakers of other unstudied speech community like the Malays in Malaysia. Would they be influenced by their cultural upbringings, or would they be sociopragmatically competent in producing apologies in English, especially after so many years of being exposed to English – from years in schools and higher institution of learning, from work place communication and from media exposure.

The Rules of Speaking in Malay

Rules of speaking in a society are always related to the cultural values of the society (Asmah Hj Omar 1993; Asma Abdullah 1996; Teo Kok Seong 2001, Scollon and Scollon 2001).

Traditionally, the Malays value indirectness in speaking as to save face of others and maintaining good relationship among the interlocuters and the society as whole. When faced with uncomfortable situations, they will try to control their anger, to avoid saying anything or even deal with those situations face to face (Mustafa 2002:103-104; Asma Abdullah 1996:30; Jamaliah Ali 1995:34). This is because, in the Malay culture, sometimes the show of tolerance and understanding via silence and avoidance of responses are valued more than objective and rational excuses. These are all due to the emphases in being cultured and refined. Discontent, if expressed, will be done indirectly so as to avoid overt

confrontation and arouse feelings of discomfort in the other party. This explains why Malays are more inclined to state what should be said rather than say what they really feel.

Being cultured and refined is part of the Malays efforts to preserve 'face' which is important in establishing good relationships and maintaining social harmony. In the Malay context, 'face' means maintaining a person's dignity by not embarrassing him/her as an individual (Asma Abullah 1996:30). Some of the examples of being cultured and refined would be in the selection of the content and form of conversation, nonverbal cues, the order of seating, and forms of greetings (Asmah Hj. Omar 1996, Asmah Abdullah 1996, Teo Kok Seong 1996). Malays are expected to communicate good manners, breeding and sensitivity to those with whom they interact on a more formal basis. Those who do not conform to these cultural rules are usually looked down as unrefined or in the Malay term 'tak tahu bahasa' (Teo Kok Seong 1996:3).

With the above descriptions of the Malay cultural values and common behavior, it would be interesting to see how Malays handle the situations that need apologies in a different language, i.e. English.

Language Transfer and Sociopragmatic Competence

The notion of sociopragmatic competence raised out of the notion of communicative competence in language acquisition. Leech (1983:10) defines sociopragmatics as "the sociological interface of pragmatics" involving speakers' and hearers' beliefs built on relevant social and cultural values. Sociopragmatic competence is the ability to adjust speech strategies appropriately according to different social variables such as the degree of imposition, social dominance and distance between participants of conversation, and participants' rights and obligations in communication (Harlow 1990). Failure to use the language appropriately would be considered as a sociopragmatic failure, and speakers are understood as having difficulty of adapting to the social conditions placed on language use (Thomas 1983:99).

There are mainly three factors that contribute to sociopragmatic failure: linguistic, sociocultural and sociopsychological. The linguistic, sociocultural and sociopsychological factors can be influenced by attributes of the speaker's first language (L1) and target language (TL) and also by his proficiency or knowledge of the target language culture. In the case of linguistic factors, the L1 may lead the

speaker to make inappropriate linguistic choices which could lead to pragmalinguistic failure. These inappropriate choices may be due to the speaker's low proficiency level of the TL. Sociocultural factors such as differences between the L1 culture and the TL culture can lead to negative cultural transfer strategies. Aside from cultural differences, a lack of knowledge of the TL culture norms may contribute to sociolinguistic failure. Finally, sociopsychological factors that include insensitivity to or deviations from social norms of TL culture, or misconceptions and illusions about the TL culture may inhibit a person's sociopragmatic competence.

It is necessary for L2 speakers to be exposed to or at least to be properly taught that pragmatic rules of other languages are not always the same as those of their own. However, the environment where the speakers are in may affect the efficacy of such exposure or teaching. There is a possibility that speakers will continue to prefer their own social and cultural rules to those of TL even after explicit instruction and awareness building, especially in the case of EFL, as in Malaysia.

Hence the purpose of this paper, i.e, to explicate the patterns of apologies in English produced by adult native speakers of Malay and how these patterns reflect the speakers sociopragmatic competence of English.

Hypotheses

The Malays values of preserving 'face', maintaining others' dignity and communicating good manners in a formal way, and preferring silence to producing responses as a way of avoiding disharmony, may affect the way Malays apologize in English language. The apologies may reflect these cultural values, or because English is a foreign language and the subjects may be inhibited with it, they may resolve to the formulaic response that is "I 'm sorry" as a way to generalize the more refined and formal responses of apologizing.

The Data

The data for this paper were obtained from 27 Malay adult learners of English who went through an intensive English language immersion program. Out of the 27, there were 19 men and 8 women. The program was an enrichment course specifically designed to suit the needs of professionals in the field of religious studies who need to go for a three-month short course in England. The subjects are already exposed to

English formally and informally. This program was basically to refresh their communication skills in English for social and academic purposes.

The data was collected via discourse completion task, consisting of a questionnaire containing 6 situations designed to elicit apologetic responses. The situations were also designed to be categorized by the status of the speaker in relation to the hearer, and the severity of the offense. The subjects were briefed to read each written situation, then wrote a response in English as how they would produce it in real situations. The numbers of subjects and situations made up a total of 162 productions of apologies.

The responses to the questionnaire were 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 the speaker (the one who apologizes) did what he/she 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.)

The aim of the data analyses was to determine the patterns of apologies in English produced by adult native speakers of Malay and how these patterns reflect the speakers sociopragmatic competence of English. .

Apologies in English by Adult Malay Speakers

The 6 situations for apology that the subjects had to response to are as the following:

1. You are a college student. You made an appointment with your professor at his office. But you were 15 minutes late because the closest parking place was full. You knock on the door, go in, and say to the professor ...

You:

2. Backing out of a parking place, you run into the side of another car. It was clearly your fault. You dent the side door slightly. The driver gets out and comes over to you angrily. He is an adult, about your age:

Driver: Can't you look where you're going? See what you've done!

You:

3. At a buffet restaurant: You are carrying your meal to your table. When you are walking between tables, you stumble and your soup spills over an elderly lady's blouse.

You:

4. A friend invited you to his parents' house. You visit them. His mother serves a very sweet cake. You cannot eat it, and leave half of it.

Your friend's mother: Don't you like the cake?

You:

5. You were supposed to meet your friend in front of a café but you were 15 minutes late because you had taken a nap.

You:

6. In a crowded elevator, you step on somebody's (adult-your age) foot.

You:

The following are the overall responses of the apologies produced by the learners:

Category	Occurrences
Direct apology (DAp)	23
Explanation (E)	0
Acceptance (A)	0
Offer of repair (O)	0
Promise (P)	0
Justification (J)	0

DAp-A	22
DAp-O	7
DAp-P	3
DAp-J	40
DAp- Dap	5
DAp- DAp-A	4
DAp- DAp-O	1
DAp- DAp-P	0
DAp- DAp-J	3
DAp- DAp-A-P	1
Other sets	53
Total	162

Table 1: Semantic Formulas and Occurrences

The above were the occurrences from the semantic formulas and sets of the formulas calculated from the overall responses. Even though the table gives a summary of how learners would apologize, the clearer picture would be best obtained from looking at individual situations. For this paper, the focus will be on three situations; situation 1, 2 and 6. The situations were chosen mainly for brevity purpose, as the focus is not on the detail discussion on each apology situation, but on the overall impression of the performance and its effect to the sociopragmatic issue.

At the early stage of writing, the guideline for data analyses was the above 5 semantic formulas. However, as categorization process went on, we added Justification (J) as one of the semantic formula, aside from developing all the formulas further as sets of apologies to accommodate the outcomes. They were:

DAp-A or Direct Apology - Acceptance.

DAp-O or Direct Apology – Offer.

DAp-P or Direct Apology – Promise.

DAp-J or Direct Apology – Justification.

DAp- DAp or Direct Apology - Direct Apology

DAp- DAp-A or Direct Apology - Direct Apology – Acceptance/Admittance

DAp- DAp-O or Direct Apology – Direct Apology – Offer.

DAp- DAp-P or Direct Apology - Direct Apology – Promise

DAp- DAp-J or Direct Apology - Direct Apology – Justification

Other sets or any combination of sets that are not the above

SITUATION 1:

You are a college student. You made an appointment with your professor at his office. But you were 15 minutes late because the closest parking place was full. You knock on the door, go in, and say to the professor ...

You:

The responses fell into these sets of formulas:

Category	Examples	Occurrences
DAp-A	Sorry, Prof. I'm late.	4
DAp-P	Sorry, I'm late Prof. Next time I promise I don't do it.	1
DAp-J	I'm sorry because the parking place is full.	6
DAp- DAp		
DAp- DAp-A	Excuse me Sir. I'm very sorry, I'm late	4
DAp- DAp-O	Excuse me Sir. I'm very sorry. Could I join the class	1
DAp- DAp-J	I'm sorry for being late. Sorry Prof. I'm late because the parking place was full.	3
DAp- DAp-A-P	I'm sorry Prof. Please forgive me. I'm late 15 minutes. I	1

	would come early next time.	
Other sets:		7
Total		27

Table 2: Semantic Formulas in situation 1.

Situation 1 is considered quite high in the degree of offensiveness in the Malaysian culture which may also be the case in the native English speaking culture. However, most of the time, entering late to a class could be done quietly, apologizing may be an offense to other students as it may interrupt the class. In the Malaysian culture, it is a norm to have students apologized when they are late, even at college level. It has been embedded in the Malaysian education system that teaches the students to apologize in this situation to show respect to the teachers. This value is carried on to their adult life and evidently is transferred to the situation in English language.

There were however many occurrences of apologies done in wrong form, i.e., instead of saying the appropriate "I'm sorry", learners used "Excuse me" (5 occurrences) and "Please forgive me" (1 occurrence), which may be too formal or too strong semantic formula for this situation.

Other sets for situation 1 include a formula such as, DAp-A-P with this example: "Professor, I'm sorry, I'm late, I'll don't do that next time". This is produced by subject M27, M being male, and 27 is his reference number for this study.

SITUATION 2:

Backing out of a parking place, you run into the side of another car. It was clearly your fault. You dent the side door slightly. The driver gets out and comes over to you angrily. He is an adult, about your age:

Driver: Can't you look where you're going? See what you've done!

You:

Category	Examples	Occurrences
Direct apology (DAp)	I am so sorry, I'm sorry about that	5

DAp-A	I'm sorry. That was my fault.; Sorry, it's my fault.	3
DAp-O	I'm sorry. Can we solve this?	3
DAp-P	I am sorry I didn't do again like that.	1
DAp-J	I'm sorry Sir. I can't see your car just now.	8
Other sets		7
Total		27

Table 3: Semantic Formulas in situation 2.

Situation 2 is high in the degree of offense hence sociopragmatically requires a more intensified apology in terms of word choice or formula. In fact, repair for the damage is the standard expectation for such situation in English culture (Olshtain, 1989: 161).

As shown in the responses for situation 1, the subjects had not failed to apologize, however had produced the wrong form of apology by using "Excuse me" (2 occurrences) instead of "I'm sorry". The formula *Excuse me* is not sociopragmatically appropriate for the degree of offense committed. The subjects did not realize that *Excuse me* is a formula for leave taking, interrupting, or asking for a small favor, and that situation 2 needs an utterance that could 'set something right' – an apology. This response however is similar to an earlier study of apology by Borkin & Reinhart (1978) where Thai and Japanese ESL students used *Excuse me* and *I'm sorry* inappropriately, as in the case of Malays speakers. They attribute the errors to imperfect matches between the forms and analogous forms in the students' NL. As in Thai and Japanese, there is only one form for *Excuse me* and *I'm sorry* in Malay, and that is *Maafkan saya* (I'm sorry) or *Minta maaf* (sorry). The Malay data seem to suggest a cultural similarity with the Thai and Japanese data in the 1978's study.

The results also showed that the formulas were lacking in the use of intensifiers which are more appropriate to show guilt and concern of the speaker over the matter. Intensifiers can be in the form of "so" or "terribly" accompanying "I'm sorry" as in "I'm so/terribly sorry".

Other sets include: Admit – Offer: “I know that’s my fault. I will try to help you in repairing your car”. (M14).

A lot of responses were in the category of Apology-Justification that there was also one that were done twice, i.e., Apology-J-Apology-J (“I’m sorry I think I take a look. I’m sorry I am sleepy”) (F17) and there were also sets with this 2 initial semantic formula, followed by formulas as below:

Apology- J-Offer as in “Oh! I’m sorry sorry about this. Actually I’m in a hurry for the class. Anyway, I’ll be willing to cover all the repair”. (F04)

Apology – Admit – J –Offer as in “I’m so sorry. This is my fault. I have to meet somebody to discuss a serious matter because of this hurry I made a fault. And bang your car. Can we settle it outside?” (F02)

Apology- J- Apology – J – Apology -Admit as in “I’m sorry Sir, I’m in hurry now. Please forgive me. I really didn’t mean it. I’m sorry, this is my fault”. (F20).

There were also other combinations of the above semantic formulas. These show that subjects sensed that the offense is serious and feel that they have to offer more than just an apology and justification, but also willingness to rectify the matter. This concern is a reflection of the influence of culture where they were brought up, even without the use of intensifiers.

SITUATION 6:

In a crowded elevator, you step on somebody’s (adult-your age) foot.

You:

Category	Examples	Occurrences
Direct apology (DAp)	Sorry; I’m so sorry.	10
DAp-A	Sorry. I step on your foot.	2
DAp-J	Sorry sir. I don’t mean it.	9
DAp- DAp	I’m sorry ,I’m sorry.	1
Other sets	I’m sorry, are you okay?	5

Total		27
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Table 4: Semantic Formulas in situation 6.

Other sets in this situation include the one without any response ((F03), Apology followed by a sarcastic note (F20), 2 occurrences of Apology followed by statements of concerns ("I'm sorry, are you okay?") (F25, F26), and Justification followed by an Apology (M27).

Sociopragmatic Competency in Apology

Several linguistic features point to the issue of sociopragmatic competence of the subjects when producing the speech act of apology in English:

i. Wrong Form

Learners often mistook the formula "I'm sorry" with "Excuse me". These are shown by the examples below:

"Excuse me please. I not see you." (Situation 3/M12)

"Will you please excuse me, I'm so sorry for being late." (Situation 5/F01)

"Excuse me. I don't like the cake." (Situation4/M07)

The examples above correlate with studies of apologies in English by Thai and Japanese learners where they confused the usage of "Excuse me" for an apology and at the same time used the form "I'm sorry" for certain situations that called for that speech act (Borkin and Reinhart 1978). They concluded that the errors occurred due to imperfect matches between the forms and analogous forms in the students' NL. The same is the case here among Malay subjects. The obligation to be polite and cultured led them to the use of the inappropriate forms.

ii. Intensifiers and Downgraders

Intensifiers are words in English to intensify the apology, such as "so", "very", "very very", "terrible" and "apologize" in "I apologize" to signal the level of severity of the situations. As with the English language, the usage of intensifiers also correlate with the severity of the offence that warrant an apology in the Malay language and culture. However, the speakers failed to produce these intensifiers where needed, and

produced them where not needed. These are some examples where the intensifiers are needed but not produced:

"Sorry I'm rushing to my car" (Situation 2/F25)

Situation 2 is high in its level of severity of offense and the interlocutors were strangers. It would be more appropriate to use the intensifier as to show honest concern and guilt. Most of the subjects used appropriate response in this situation, however the lack of an intensifier in a few responses may be due to the attitude of the driver who '... comes over to you angrily', coupled with the fact that he is of the same age as the subjects.

"Excuse me please. I not see you." (Situation 3/M12)

Subject M12 had used the wrong form of apology "excuse me" in all 6 situations. In the above example, not only the form was wrong, the high level of severity of offense coupled with the social distance and age of the interlocutors were not reflected without the intensifier.

Below are examples where intensifiers are not needed but produced nevertheless:

"I am very sorry." (Situation 6/M08)

The above response sounds very formal for the context of the situation. As Malays are accustomed to formal responses as way of showing politeness, this may just be another manifestation of cultural transfer.

"I'm so sorry. I've no intention to step on you." (Situation 6/F04)

"Oh my dear! I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to step on your foot (Situation 6/F19)

Situation 6 took place in a crowded elevator between strangers. The whole context of the situation which include the public and uncomfortable setting, the low level severity of the offense, and the high level of social distance and power between the interlocutors, did not require the use of intensifier for the apology, what more a justification and exclamation ("Oh my dear!").

"Please forgive me." (Situation 6/M14)

For the example above, the whole underlined apology is way too strong for such an offense. One may look at it as a literal translation from Malay's way of apologizing "*Harap maafkan saya*", yet, even in Malay it is still inappropriate because the more

common response would be "*MAAF*" ("sorry"). However, in this case, the use of the extra polite formula may simply be due to the learner's inadequate sociopragmatic knowledge in English.

The above examples could be related to the transfer of the subjects' cultural experience in their L1 to English hence reflecting their inadequate sociopragmatic competence needed in producing apologies in English. This also can be seen by the use of downgraders and making promises not to cause the offense again when as adults, they could simply apologize and justify or rectify the situation. Such responses, as shown below, may owe to the social distance between the speakers where profuse apologies were normal in Malay:

"I'm sorry Prof. Please forgive me. I'm late 15 minutes. I would come early next time."

(Situation 1/M23)

The downgraders may come in a form of double politeness markers which are a modal and the formulaic "please" such as below:

"I'm sorry Professor, because I'm late. Could you please give me an opportunity to see you now." (Situation 1/M06)

The discussions so far have highlighted features that can be interpreted as signs of inadequate sociopragmatic competence on part of the subjects/speakers of Malay. These features served as initial findings of Malay apologies in English. However, despite the inadequacy, there was one exception who displayed very competent, appropriate responses to all the situations.

The highlights somehow confirmed the hypotheses posited earlier that Malay speakers' apologies in English may be laden with Malay cultural rules. The speakers also did resolve to the formulaic response that is "I 'm sorry", but sometimes used the wrong form "Excuse me" which may be due to direct translation from Malay or simply because they have not fully acquired the appropriate apologetic formulas in English.

Pedagogical Implications

The results of the study show that learners who are studying ESL/EFL while being surrounded by their native (L1) language and culture, need to be given a lot of

opportunities to observe and experience real social interactions that involve real manifestations of the rules of speaking in English or their L2. Language in social interactions, carries with it the nuances of culture, so imagine having social interactions with people from different cultures? The fear of not being socially fitting, may cause non-native speakers to shy away from having conversations or even small talks with English native speakers or non-natives who are competent in English. This fear and reluctance may further hinder them to be competent in the language, linguistically and sociopragmatically.

Conclusion

The findings showed that years of exposure to English language does not guarantee sufficient understanding of the TL cultural rules. Non-native speakers of English, using English in their homeland to interact with the native speakers may incorporate substantial L1 linguistic and cultural rules, as shown in the discussion above. The apologies' pattern by Malay speakers in an imagined TL environment has displayed their L1 linguistic and sociocultural rules, negatively affecting their sociopragmatic competence in the production of apologies in English. The findings also show that the area of sociopragmatic competence is critical to the understanding, solving, and improving the overall competence levels. This may help raise language users' awareness of how to become competent in the global market. It may also help in language teaching, especially English language teaching in the Malaysian context. The teaching of ESL/EFL in Malaysia from the moment English is introduced at the age of 7 to graduation from the colleges, is still highly grammar based. Even though the communicative or functional aspects of the language were introduced, learners need more than just classroom learning to be sociopragmatically competent in the language.

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Appendices: The 6 situations and a sample of responses

THE 6 SITUATIONS:

You are a college student. You made an appointment with your professor at his office. But you were 15 minutes late because the closest parking place was full. You knock on the door, go in, and say to the professor ...

You:

Backing out of a parking place, you run into the side of another car. It was clearly your fault. You dent the side door slightly. The driver gets out and comes over to you angrily. He is an adult, about your age:

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Mother: Don't you like the cake?

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You:

In a crowded elevator, you step on somebody's (adult-your age) foot.

You: