
Sorry, I Should Have Checked the Culture First: An Exploration into the Use of Cultural Context Related to Social Orientations in Interpersonal Apologies

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Abstract

Humans make mistakes, and as a result, apologies are an inescapable aspect of intercultural communication. This paper suggests that cultural pragmatics are the foundation of an effective apology. Through a content analysis of sources, the key contextual factors that impact an apology are individualism-collectivism orientations rooted in the social values of different cultures. Some of the key findings propose that these different orientations are exemplified in Japanese and American cultures, as they tend to focus on either the group or the individual in an apologetic situation. Apologies are not cross-culturally universal, but based on the pragmatics of cultural orientations, especially individualism-collectivism, they can be predicted. In this paper, apologies are defined through their potential across cultures, and Japan/the U.S. are identified as cultures that present strong social contexts, requiring a fundamental cultural knowledge to create an effective apology. Next, the literature review establishes the importance of these socially based expectations through linguistics, social purpose, and saving face. The discussion section then argues that these concerns are more important than situational cues, and that an individualistic orientation is less complicated to predict in regard to apologies, and that these pragmatic preparations prevent the escalation of the act being apologized for. In the conclusion, it is pointed out that even with these contextual clues, apologies are not entirely predictable, but these tools can help mitigate cultural misgivings.

Introduction & Background

As more people travel and work in foreign countries, the need for cross-cultural competency grows. This is especially true with speech acts that are essential to daily life; an apology is one such act. However, this form of communication is deceptively simple; it has many intricacies that can greatly differ across cultures. A universal apology structure would be helpful, but based on the literature reviewed in this paper, that generalization would not work. Since apologies are not cross-culturally universal, they then must use cultural orientations as predictors, specifically individualism-collectivism. This exemplifies the prudence of a cultural approach, specifically, an examination of the heightened expectations collectivistic cultures place on an apology in contrast to individualistic cultures. This provides a foundational basis for people navigating an apology in a foreign country; socially based expectations are a fundamental concern in interpersonal apologies. Some practices that differentiate the two orientations are concerns that coincide with culture: linguistics, social purpose, and saving face. While

everything in an apology matters and should be taken into account, the major cultural features that define a person's orientation to the world should be applied first.

There is a large amount of research on apologies, and there is a significant number of sources dedicated to the relationship between culture and apologies. This paper aims to go beyond the sources examined, in the current field of study, to propose a way of breaking down cross-cultural apologies. Through the identification of various cultures as individualistic or collectivistic, this paper will establish simple guidelines to help people who are unsure of how to approach an apology in a foreign country. This issue benefits from a simplistic approach, as there are many potential apologetic situations, and it would be difficult to fully account for them all. Therefore, the focus on these two larger cultural distinctions ensures each country is on the spectrum, and people will not mistakenly exacerbate the issue that prompted the apology in the first place.

Literature Review & Discussion

To begin, what is an apology? Widely considered a speech act, an apology "include[s] a breach or transgression, the recognition of the transgression, the acceptance of responsibility for its occurrence by the transgressor, and linguistic expression of remorse" (Kartika & Aditiawarman, 2019, p. 246). The purposes of an apology, according to Maddux, Kim, Okumura, & Brett (2011), is for "negotiations, conflict resolution, and trust repair" (p. 407). They found that the "type of trust violation" impacted the effectiveness of an apology (Maddux, et al., 2011, p. 407), meaning that the act requiring an apology has an impact on the type of apology used. In 1992, Mir looked at an apology as a speech act to show it as a "[r]emedial interchange consist[ing] of a dialogue in which the offender provides excuses and accounts for his offense and the offended shows some sign of acceptance and sometimes appreciation for the offender's corrective behavior" (p. 1). Understanding this, "the act of apologizing is cross-culturally universal" (Mir, 1992, p. 14), but each apology is embedded in the culture it is created in. Then, the specific cultural understanding is that an apology "could...be associated with the degree of one's interdependence or independence" (Berry, Segall, & Kagitçibasi, 1997, p. 124). This is what brings us to the ideas of collectivism and individualism.

In most of the research uncovered in the field, Japanese and English-speaking cultures were identified as case studies. This paper will use Japan and the U.S. to exemplify the differences between collectivistic and individualistic cultures. Since Japan has such a specific set of pragmatic concerns, it makes it an exemplary study in comparison to the U.S., which typically requires fewer social cues. This paper will use individualism as synonymous with low-context and collectivism as synonymous with high-context, to establish broad cultural norms. These orientations seemed to be inherent in the field of study, as factors impacting the research results. This understanding, however, applies to more than just apologies, "according to Hofstede (1980), individualism-collectivism is one of the main dimensions that differentiate cultures," (as cited in Yum, 2013, p. 110), and this distinction can help separate an

apology into two approaches. This will be extrapolated into generalizations, to help examine how socio-cultural concerns can simplify apologies.

This leads to the pragmatic considerations that make up a potential apology, first looking at linguistics. Language is the lifeblood of culture, so it makes sense that it has an impact on an apology being made. Language is a factor that is inherently linked to social orientation, as language often develops out of these worldviews—the words used reflect the culture itself. Collectivism is the more pertinent ideology to examine because English speakers tend to use “*I’m sorry* in over 90% of all cases” of apologies (Ogiermann, 2015, p. 4). That fact makes an apology simple to predict in comparison to apologies in a collectivist culture. This is theorized as a reflection on the relatively low-context nature of English countries, with Ogiermann (2015) presenting an apology as being “highly conventionalized and produced without much reflection in English” (p. 4). The difference is presented linguistically, through word choice such as the apologetic word for a “formal situation of Japanese working environment using ‘shitsureishimashita’” and “‘Gomennasai’ [as] a very informal apology that should only be used with close friends, family and girlfriends” (Kartika & Aditiawarman, 2019, p. 254). English does not tend to differentiate as heavily in apology terms as Japanese, which reveals that an apology requires knowledge of language use. This means more than just knowing how to say sorry in the proper language and instead, knowing how different terms reflect different cultural values. ‘Sorry’ can work in both formal and informal occasions, but ‘gomennasai’ should only be used informally. This may not be something people entering an unfamiliar country are aware of, but it does matter. Only if it is recognized first that the country may be high-context and have a language system differentiating between occasions can these contexts be accounted for. This is something that could be intuitive, but the recognition of the language preferences that orient acceptance towards certain word choices makes for an intentionally well-crafted message.

Next, looking at the social purpose of an apology in cultures (that have different social orientations) requires an examination of apology usage. An apology has already been defined, but there are underlying cultural values attached to those definitions that specify the goal of an apology depending on ideology. Haugh & Chang (2019) found that impoliteness and insincerity were potential side effects of not adhering to contextual meanings. They confirm that the ideas of “particular (linguistic) forms or strategies” do not adhere to the ideas of being polite (para. 1), and the consideration of politeness is a “contextually-bound judgement” that can be made in the production or perception of the message (para. Introduction). Importantly, they found that an apology can “vary significantly across speakers of the same language variety” despite an apology being made in a “normative” way (para. Studying variability in perceptions of (im)politeness). A study by Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984) furthered this through “Widdowson’s terms (Widdowson 1978) that learners are just as liable to transfer ‘rules of use’ (having to do with contextual appropriacy) as those of ‘usage’ (related to grammatical accuracy)” (p. 196). In other words, it is essentially human nature to contextualize each speech act.

People in these cultural orientations have expectations placed on communication behaviours, so as a foreigner, it can be difficult to understand the ideas behind something like an apology. For example, in Japanese culture, the idea of blame is

purposely ambiguous, using the idea of “‘nurturant acceptance’ (amayakashi) that does not hold [the apologizer] fully responsible for their impulsive behavior” (Wagatsuma & Rosett, 1986, p. 476). This is something that someone in a country like the U.S. may not fully understand, because, in Japan, their collectivistic nature is said to take the “onus off individual actors,” in opposition to America, where often the individual is held responsible, not the group (Maddux, et al., 2011, p. 409). This develops into the concept of blame, where the function of an apology holds different functions in these cultures. The role of an apology “in Japan is to act in a socially normative way; to apologize in the U.S. is to establish who is at fault” (Maddux, et al., 2011, p. 411). These fundamental differences in the purpose of an apology make universalization difficult because if speech acts look to accomplish something, having these irreconcilable foundations makes the act unable to accomplish the same thing in different settings.

Furthermore, Maddux, et al. (2011) uncovered that in Japan, apologies were more frequent, concerning a broader range of subjects, and less about blame/self-worth (pp. 412-413). This conclusion meant that Japanese apologies do “not necessarily mean blame is being conveyed or accepted” and U.S. apologies find that an “integrity violation implies blame and acknowledgement of low integrity” (Maddux, et al., p. 420). The apologies needed in each culture cannot be the same because they are dealing with different requirements. In terms of repairing trust, this shows that blame, at least in this context, could be one example of an essential factor that either needs to be avoided or addressed to effectively apologize. Without proper identification or mitigation of blame, an apology is less effective.

This idea of purpose is developed by the Asia-centric concept of saving face; it exemplifies why an apology is fundamentally different between high and low context cultures. At their core, “apologies involve loss of face for the speaker and support for the hearer” (Blum-Kulka, S., & Olshtain, E., 1984, p. 206). In Japan, a very high-context and collectivistic society, the act of saving face is highly valued. The concept of saving face came up many times in the research as one of the things differentiating the two orientations. Saving face is when someone tries to “avoid humiliation or embarrassment, to maintain dignity or preserve reputation” (Brill, 2010, para. 1). An apology then, in Japan, may be described as a “pragmatic behavior designed to preserve face, especially when encountering face-threatening acts” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, as cited in Kartika & Aditiawarman, 2019, p. 246). Face, in terms of an apology, can mean that a person is “acknowledg[ing] responsibility for the untoward act,” and thus, is a vital contextual cue (Edelmann, as cited in Gibney et al., 2008, p. 69).

In a collectivistic culture, there is the general idea that people look out for each other and the best interest of the group as a whole, so when someone needs to apologize, there is a desire to preserve their dignity. To extrapolate this idea of face, an apology is not an excuse to shame someone or gain retribution. This is in opposition to other cultures, which may desire a form of “guilt” or “shame” from the offender as an “explicit promise” to not repeat the issue...” (Gibney et al., 2008, p. 69). This goes into Japanese being an “honorific language” that considers “linguistic politeness” (Dunn, 2011, p. 3644). Even the concept of saving face might not be applicable outside of the context of Asian societies, which have been influenced by this idea (Gibney, et al., 2008,

p. 68). In the U.S., saving face is not a common concern in an apology. This is something inherently different that must be considered if an apology is being made in a collectivistic culture that values this embarrassment mitigation. Ignorance on this matter could create an apology that results in a worsened situation.

To acknowledge the other side of the argument, what if cultural orientation is not the most important aspect of developing an apology? It is undeniable that a high-context culture will have an impact on how one apologizes, but it could be argued that the unique situation is the most important part. This means that regardless of where you are, the use of apology is an always shifting act that requires a theoretical approach going beyond cultural orientation. This would come from the perspective of seeing the unique scenario as the main issue that needs to be overcome, regardless of culture. For example, in a disagreement with a colleague, the time elapsed since the argument, their mood, and the sincerity of the apology might seem like more important factors than considering if they come from a collectivistic culture. These, however, are smaller factors that follow an individualistic tendency to “overestimate the role of the individual” (Maddux, et al., 2011, p. 409). While these factors are important to consider and can help design the apology, they are secondary to cultural concerns. Taking larger factors into account first is the primary goal, as proposed by this paper.

If your significant other is angry about something you did and you interrupt them to apologize, it likely will not go well. However, everything comes back to culture. This means that in a low-context culture, it is more likely their angry emotions will be clearly expressed and then, can be directly acted upon. In a high-context culture, those emotions may be harder to discern, so there is the need to respect their space and choose a time to apologize that suits the norms of the culture. You may try to preserve their face and allow them to let out their emotions privately before working it out with them. Following instincts and apologizing based on what is visible is not a good approach. Rather, knowing what is generally considered acceptable in the culture (in the broader scenario) is most important because it acts as a starting point. Since an apology often involves a volatile situation, the context it is made in can either calm the situation or make it worse. So, if someone was unfamiliar with a culture, they could easily wind up being disrespectful, rude, or inappropriate, which only worsens the mistakes already made. The best idea is to understand the basic cultural orientations and apply them to the situation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a universal apology would be a helpful tool in cross-cultural interactions, but the closest we can get is cultural competence in social relations to develop a foundational apology. Once a culture is identified as being either collectivistic or individualistic, it is then possible to pragmatically craft an intentional apology that accounts for these fundamental features. Naturally, other concerns go into an apology that should also be taken into consideration, yet those factors are secondary to understanding the major conceptual challenges faced in interacting with that culture. Larger concerns through linguistics and the importance placed on the social purpose of

an apology, like the assignment of blame and saving of face, are several aspects of culture that can be recognized before apologizing. Understanding these cultural preferences is a first step that shows cultural respect. It is imperative that before smaller concerns can be taken into consideration, that the initial approach will not make the issue worse; coming at an apology from the wrong perspective could create an entirely new problem. Now, a prediction could be false, but it eliminates some major indiscretions from being made before the apology even begins. The literature reviewed found culture, in its social orientation, to be at the basis of apologetic messages. This paper had a small scope, but these findings could be applied to cultures worldwide and provide some insight into other considerations that are essential for an apology.

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