Apologizing in English Among Nigerian Teenagers: Examining Innate Strategies, Gender Differences, and Pedagogical Implications for Conflict Resolution

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Abstract

The sustained interest in apology discourse across languages stems from its critical social functions. However, research on apologies in African languages and English as a second language remains limited. This study examines the influence of gender on apology strategies, their potential innateness, and the similarities between Nigerian teenagers and both native and non-native English speakers. It also explores pedagogical and conflict-resolution implications. Employing Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) framework, data from 1,000 participants with no formal apology instruction were analysed using frequency analysis, percentages, and chi-square tests. The results reveal notable similarities in the use of apology strategies, supporting the notion of innateness. No significant gender differences were found. Key implications include reinforcing the general-purpose English pedagogical approach, integrating studies on apologies into language education, fostering self-discipline to reduce conflicts, and promoting women's involvement in mediation efforts.

Keywords: _Apology Discourse, Apology Strategies, Nigerian Teenagers, English as a Second Language, Gender Differences, Language Pedagogy, Conflict Resolution._

INTRODUCTION

Apology is a social phenomenon that occurs in interpersonal and inter-group interactions as a speech act, or a speech-act event. Being a composite concept, it evokes connotations of humility, politeness, love, peace, kindness, gentleness, empathy, discipline, emotional/psychological/socio-cultural beauty and power(lessness).

From functional perspective, it can be defined as a speech-act used for the restoration of interpersonal and inter-group harmony when infractions occur. Reiter (2000), cited in Debby and Hamzah (2022, p. 407), defines it as a "compensatory action for an offence committed by S (the speaker) which has affected H (the hearer)."

Smith (2008) cited in Boroujeni and Mansouri 2023, views apology as a moral phenomenon. Very importantly, it should be regarded as a spiritual phenomenon which can, in the world view of the Igbos of Nigeria, appease the spirits and pacify the dead. The Igbos believe in the involvement of the spirits in every apology event, hence the saying that the offended cannot step over a genuine apology and strike a retaliatory blow unless he or she wants to face the wraths of the gods.

In Nigeria, the performance of apology discourse by children, teenagers and adults of both genders can be done in heritage languages, pidgin or English. As English is a second

language (ESL, L2) in Nigeria, children, teenagers and other sociolinguistic groups constitute its learners and users at different proficiency levels.

The L2 status of English, necessitates questioning the varieties of apology rhetoric employed by its speakers, especially when the pedagogical approach in English language education in Nigeria remain General Purpose English, which pays no serious formal attention to pragmatics. As an acclaimed universal phenomenon and sociocultural practice, based on numerous studies conducted in many Euro-American countries and Asian countries, apology takes different pragmalinguistic forms; the commonest one is the conventional formulaic "I am sorry."

Apparently, this formula has been divested of vitality and effectiveness as a result of the connotation of perfunctoriness associated with it. Therefore, the knowledge of other apology strategies becomes imperative and critical in order to make apologies adequate, effective and successful in each context and event. Due to the overwhelming deployment of "sorry" in observed apology contexts, subjects of this study were assumed to be novices in apology discourse.

The functions of apology, variously perceived and described in recent studies, can be summarized as the maintenance of peace and harmony at interpersonal and inter-group levels (George, 2020; Smaglii, Tykhonina & Galiant, 2018; Rieger, 2017; Elasfar, Pathan and Imani, 2023). Apology also reflects the offender's genuine sorrow and regret and also repairs trust (Boroujeni and Mansouri. 2023); it saves the face of interlocutors (Chen, Lu and Wei, 2022; Majeed and Janua, 2014).

Above all, it serves as an instrument for conflict resolution (Clemmons 2022; Korpela, Kurhila and Stevanovic, 2022; Curran, and Coakley, 2021; Hollingsworth, 2023). Effective execution of any of the functions depends on efficient manipulation of the known strategies to generate genuinely and sufficiently-convincing remorse for the offence committed.

This study is anchored in Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) theoretical framework. Both researchers were members of the Cross Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP). The CCSARP, initiated in 1982 and led by Blum-Kulka, involved a team of international researchers and many languages like English, Danish, French, German, Hebrew, etc. The success of CCARP in apology researches involving native and non-native speakers of numerous languages attest to its adequacy and practicability, especially in strategy-driven apology researches like the current study.

Developed from rhetorical theories, the framework constitutes an explanation of the dynamics of apologising. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's model comprises five key strategies: expression of apology, acknowledgement of responsibility, explanation, offer of repair, and promise of forbearance.

Newer variants are not significantly different. Trosborg's (1995) model contains seven strategies: the IFID, expression of regret, explanation, reparation, repetition, expression of empathy, and acknowledgement of responsibility. For Curran and Coakley (2021), these eight strategies sufice: acknowledgement and naming of offence, acceptance of responsibility, acknowledgement of the effect on the offended party, expression of regret or remorse, offer of explanation, putting of self at the mercy of the offended party, giving commitment that the offence will not be repeated, and making practical attempt to repair the damage caused.

However, the CCSARP model has remained effective in identifying the similarities existing in realisation patterns among languages and between native and non-native speakers' realisations, relative to the same social contexts (Kaya 2012).

Over four decades after CCSARP, apology researches on uninvestigated languages, social groups and institutions have continued to attract attention in ESL and EFL countries. Debby and Hamzah (2022) have investigated Indonesian EFL learners' apology and identified five strategies in the students' elicited data. Both genders in the study mostly prefer expression of apology strategy. Attayari (2017) and Aboud and Javanshir (2021) indicate that Saudi EFL learners apply all strategies but mostly prefer the IFID. Attayari shows that both genders apply all the strategies alone or in combination.

Similarly, Chinese EFL learners use all strategies but mostly prefer the combination of the IFID and the acceptance of responsibility strategies (Chen, Lu and Wei 2022; Zhou, Guangzhou and Zhanghong, 2022). Some other recent apology studies which address issues of strategy application and gender include those of Farenkia (2022), which focuses on speakers of Cameroon French; Boroujeni and Mansouri (2022), which is on the intercultural dynamics in apology communication between spouses; Dozie and Otagburuagu (2019), which examines politeness in apology among Igbo speakers of English; Majeed and Janua (2014), which investigates apology realisation among speakers of Urdu language.

Other strategy-based studies include: (Prima, Hartono and Windawaty, 2023; Lu, 2022; Aboud and Shivbliyev, 2022; Albadiri, 2020; Amalia and Mujazin, 2023; Al-Habi, Hamzeh, M. & Mahfoodh, Omer A., 2021). Psychological perspective is evident in literature (George, Guilfoyle, Steele and Struthers, 2022; Tony and Hayes, 2017; Slocum, Allan and Allan, 2011; Kalinina and Gabdreeva, 2020).

Studies focusing on the influence of sociocultural factors on strategy choices include (Kulsawang and Ambele, 2024; Ismagilova, Shakirova & Zabavnova, 2021; Saleem and Azam, 2015). Also, some dwell on mediation (Clemmons, 2022; Korpela, Kurhila and Stevanovic, 2022; Curran and Coakley, 2021; Carroll, Allan and Halsmith, 2017), while others explore pragmatic transfer of strategies (Eliza, 2019).

The continued productive research interests in apology in diverse languages and diverse sociolinguistic groups affirms its sociocultural and political relevance in today's world ridden with conflicts. Despite the various perspectives from which apology researches are conducted in different environments, speech-act research in Africa appears stifled.

ESL and EFL, including heritage languages, are yet to receive adequate attention in apology research. For instance, the population of this study is assumed to lack formal knowledge of apology discourse in any language. Therefore, the environment of this study remains unexplored, implying that the study's outcome is expected to extend the frontiers of interlanguage pragmatics.

As strategies remain the fulcrum of almost all apology studies in unexplored languages or variants of English in non-native environments, the current study necessarily investigates strategies but most importantly raises and essentializes the issues of gender and innateness of strategies and their inherent implications for language pedagogy and conflict management. This perspective requires thorough exploration and emphasis. The universality status of apology as a speech act logically suggests innateness of strategies. Similarity of the outcomes of researches on apology strategies in diverse cultures may substantially reify this thinking.

Objectives of the Study

In view of the assumption of lack of formal tuition in apology discourse in any language among the population, proving the assumption becomes the first objective. The second objective centres on determining the extent the population's application of strategies approximates, or differs from, the findings in previous studies; either way, the outcome will lead to conclusions regarding innateness of strategies.

A dimension of the second objective is the search for an emergent peculiar sociocultural pattern resulting from the population's deployment of strategies. Thirdly, the study investigates gender disparity in apology discourse. Finally, the study focuses on the exploration of the inherent language-pedagogical and conflict-management implications of the findings.

METHODOLOGY

The design of the study is quantitative, descriptive, and cross-sectional due to the large amount of data needed to provide a snapshot of the linguistic status quo in the area of study. The first-year students of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, representing arts and science programmes, constituted the population.

The students comprised those who just commenced university education with the same level of English language proficiency. The students, with 16-19 age brackets, passed through the Nigerian Secondary school system. Out of about eight thousand students, one thousand made up of equal number of male and female constituted the sample selected through a random sampling technique.

Despite other methods of data collection (role plays, ethnographic observations, intuition, etc), the Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT), otherwise known as production questionnaire, seems appropriate for this study.

A second instrument was a background-check questionnaire that elicited information regarding various aspects of the participants' background: gender, age, mother tongue, ethnicity and the course of study. The WDCT consists of descriptions of speech act scenarios in which the subjects are primed to perform an apology act in the written mode.

Despite criticisms, the effectiveness of WDCT in interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) research has been noted in Labben (2016); Birjandi and Soleimani (2013); Aufa (2012). For Birjandi and Soleimani, the instrument is "sufficiently reliable and valid for measuring pragmatic knowledge of L2 learners" (p.1).

The argument that research respondents "can provide only insights on how they think they apologize, not how they do apologize" (Rieger 2017, p. 555) cannot apply to low-proficiency ESL/EFL learners, who lack sophistication in English grammar, and who, at this stage, employ limited pragmalinguistic resources to express themselves. When primed to act in a specific context, they tend to verbalise only the transferred, learned or acquired strategies.

Despite Rieger's preference for data generation through interactional exchanges, she still believes that WDCT data "can offer valuable insights," depending on the "focus" of a study (p. 555). The WDCT remains an apt instrument to generate the amount of data needed in a cross-sectional study of this nature. The WDCT of the present research comprises six apology scenarios. The questionnaire was administered to the students in their departments with the permission of the respective heads of department. The purpose of the exercise was explained and emphasis laid on voluntary participation. Duration was not specified because of the need

to provide enough time for reflection before responding to each scenario. Each respondent worked independently and the responses were collected on the spot. To facilitate analysis of data, the female participants' production questionnaires were numbered 1 to 500, while the male respondents were numbered 501 to 1000. The data were examined to identify and tabulate the strategies in accordance with Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's taxonomy of apology strategies. Percentages, frequencies and chi-square formed the analytical tools. The chi-square analysis was specifically applied to test the significance of gender differences in apology realisations.

FINDINGS

The data and their analysis below follow the order of the presentation of the objectives. Samples of elicited data are not edited and are presented first before tabular analysis.

Research Objective 1: To investigate the first objective, the first question in the questionnaire sought to know whether the subjects underwent explicit instruction on apology discourse in secondary school. The result is presented below.

Table 1: Reception of Formal Instructions on apology while in Secondary School

Gender	Received No instruction	%	Received Instruction	%
Female	488	48.8	12	1.2
Male	491	49.1	9	.9
Total	979	97.9	21	2.1

Table 1 shows that 97.9 % of the population received no explicit instruction on apology, while 2.1% claimed that they received such instructions. The conclusion, therefore, is that no formal instruction on apology strategies took place in almost all secondary schools the subjects attended.

Research Objective 2:

The analysis of direct and indirect apology strategies employed by the subjects is presented here. Direct apology strategies include performative verbs like (*be*) *sorry, apologise, regret, excuse, pardon* and *forgive.* The indirect strategies include *acknowledgement of responsibility, explanation, offer of repair, and promise of forbearance.* Six different apology scenarios are created to investigate the deployment of these strategies. The scenarios are different in some respects, especially in the nature and severity of infraction and in the status of the interlocutors.

Every occurrence of each strategy is counted. Samples of strategies employed in the situations are presented first, followed by the analysis in a summary table. In apology situation 1, a course mate is expected to apologise to a fellow course mate for the loss of a major, foreign course book. The interlocutors here are equal in status but the offence is considered severe. Samples of strategies employed are presented below.

Expression of apology

a) I'm sorry, I lost your book (female subject, no. 25).

b) Please forgive me (female subject, no. 141).

c) Please find a place in your heart to forgive me (male subject, no. 606).

d) Please accept my apologies (male subject, no. 697).

Acknowledgement of responsibility

    a)   I lost the book yesterday (female subject, no. 5).

    b)   Please, the thing is that I lost the book (female subject, no. 379).

    c)   I think I lost the book (male subject, no. 506).

    d)   I lost the book you gave me (male subject, no. 780).

Explanation

    a)   Please something happened the day I went to night class, the book was stolen (female subject, no. 78).

    b)   Emma, I left it in my locker and went to school yesterday. But … (male subject, no. 537).

    c)   I left the book in my bag. I don't know who took it (male subject, no. 545).

Offer of repair

    a)   I will look for it, but if I don't find it I will find a way to replace it for you (female subject, no. 1).

    b)   I will replace it back as soon as possible (female subject, no. 110).

    c)   I'll get you another one (female subject, no. 251).

    d)   I promise to buy you a new one (male subject, no. 556).

      Situation 2 involves unequal-status interlocutors in that a student is expected to apologise to his lecturer for stepping on his or her foot in a lecture hall. From the perspective of the student, the offence is serious. Some examples of strategies used are presented below.

Expression of apology

    a)   Sorry sir (female subject, no. 37).

    b)   Forgive me ma (female subject, no. 166).

    c)   Please pardon me (female subject, no. 481).

    d)   Oh my God! Sir I'm very sorry (male subject, no. 704).

Acknowledgement of responsibility

    a)   I mistakenly stepped on your foot (female subject, no. 209).

    b)   I was not conscious of my movement (female subject, no. 396).

    c)   I didn't see you coming (male subject, no. 520).

    d)   Am very sorry Sir, *it was not intentional* (male subject, no. 754).

Explanation

    a)   *That was an accident*. I'm terribly sorry (male subject, no. 640).

    b)   It was accidental (male subject, no. 815).

Offer of Repair

  a) May I wipe the dust off? (female subject, no. 13).

  b) Permit me to dust it off (male subject, no. 700).

Promise of forbearance

  a) I will be more careful so it will not repeat it self again (female subject, no. 74).

  b) I will not do it again (female subject, no. 488).

  c) I will not try it any other time sir (male subject, no. 727).

  d) It happens unknowingly *but I promised it wouldn't happen again* (male subject, no. 956).

Situation 3 presents a more serious offence than the one in situation 2. The interlocutors are also unequal in status. In this situation, a student is expected to apologise to his/her lecturer for keeping the lecturer waiting for a long time in an appointment. Below are samples of the strategies used.

Expression of apology

  a) Sir I'm sorry for not coming on time (female subject, no. 2).

  b) Sir please forgive me (female subject, no. 170).

  c) Please sir pardon me for coming late (female subject, no. 239).

  d) I am very sorry for not keeping to time (male subject, no. 634).

Acknowledgement of responsibility

  a) I have no excuse for my behaviour (female subject, no. 180).

  b) It was not intentional (female subject, no. 352).

  c) I failed to keep the time (male subject, no. 633).

Explanation

  a) I encountered some delays on my way coming here (female subject, no. 249).

  b) We had an impromptu test in my math class (female subject, no. 290).

  c) I had to take care of my dad who is sick before coming (male subject, no. 501).

  d) Our car had a flat tire on the way (male subject, no. 617)..

Promise of forbearance

  a) It would not happen again (female subject, no. 108).

  b) I promise that this will never repeat it self (female subject, no. 330).

  c) It will never happen again (male subject, no. 519).

  d) I promise to do better next time (male subject, no. 990).

Situation 4 presents interlocutors of equal status and an infraction adjudged less severe. In this scenario, a student treads on a fellow student's foot in a lecture hall and is expected to apologise for the offence. The data below show the manner of the subjects' response.

Expression of apology

a) I am so sorry dear (female subject, no. 5).

b) *Please excuse me*, I mistakenly stepped on your foot, *sorry* (female subject, no. 42).

c) Please I am sorry (male subject, no. 648).

d) Please forgive me (male subject, no. 740).

Acknowledgement of responsibility

a) I didn't see your foot (female subject, no. 60).

b) It was not deliberate (female subject, no. 71).

c) I didn't do it intentionally (male subject, no. 503).

d) It was a mistake (male subject, no. 631).

Explanation

a) That was an accident (male subject, no. 639).

b) It was accidental (male subject, no. 715).

c) I don't know that your foot was there (male subject, no. 868)

Promise of forbearance

a) Next time I will be careful not to step on you (female subject, no. 74).

b) I will not do it again (female subject, no. 91).

Situation 5 involves socially unequal interlocutors in a serious infraction. Here, the speaker, who is higher in status, has pushed down a younger person carrying a tray full of oranges. Some of the strategies adopted by the subjects are presented below.

Expression of apology

a) Sorry dear (female subject, no.414)

b) I'm so sorry (female subject, no.500).

c) Chai!!, sorry oo (male subject, no. 751).

d) I'm very sorry my dear (male subject, no. 895).

Acknowledgement of responsibility

a) It wasn't intentional (female subject, no. 67).

b) It was indeed my mistake (female subject, no. 97).

c) It is a mistake (male subject, no. 670).

d) I wasn't careful (male subject, no. 901).

Offer of repair

a) I'm very sorry. *Let me help you gather them* (female subject, no. 4).

b) Please let me help you pick them up (male subject, no. 604).

c) Don't worry I will help you gather the oranges (male subject, no. 831).

d) I promise to pay for the oranges (male subject, no. 996).

Situation 6 also involves unequal-status interlocutors (like situation 5) in a mild offence. Here, the speaker (the older interactant) has bumped into a younger person in a street corner. Samples of strategies employed by the subjects are presented below.

Expression of apology

a) Sorry (female subject, no. 9).

b) Sorry. Excuse me (female subject, no. 38).

c) Please pardon me (male subject, no. 599).

d) Please forgive me (male subject, no. 602).

Acknowledgement of responsibility

a) I was in a hurry and I wasn't looking (female subject, no. 258).

b) I wasn't watching my way clearly (female subject, no. 279).

c) Sorry, *it is a mistake. I didn't do it intentionally* (female subject, no.2 91).

d) I didn't see you coming (male subject, no. 733).

Table 2: Summary of Analysis of Apology Strategies Used in all Situations

S/N		Situations						Total
	Direct Strategies	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	
1	Expression of apology							
a.	Be sorry	613	977	942	977	969	936	5414
b.	Apologize	4	16	29	13	5	3	70
c.	Regret	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
d.	Pardon	0	25	53	17	0	13	108
e.	Forgive	56	100	123	40	40	26	385
f.	Excuse	0	0	0	5	0	6	11
	Indirect Strategies							
2	Acknowledgement of responsibility	586	223	47	166	196	141	1359
3	Explanation	18	9	526	12	4	0	569
4	Offer or repair	372	10	0	0	542	0	924
5	Promise of forbearance	0	26	160	14	0	0	200

Based on the background of lack of formal instruction in apology discourse, it is a spectacular finding that all the apology strategies, apart from one direct strategy subset (regret), exist in the cognitive linguistic corpus of the population. Regarding strategy application, the summary table indicates that (*be*) *sorry* is the most preferred direct strategy, while the most preferred indirect strategy is acknowledgement of responsibility. Worthy of note is that the population may not offer a victim of an offence a promise of forbearance.

Research Objective 3: The Influence of Gender on Apology Realisation

The following tables present the analysis of both genders' choice and employment of direct and indirect strategies in the six apology situations. In order to avoid data duplication, the differences in both genders' strategies are presented only in the analysis table below. The working hypothesis is that the difference between both genders' use of strategies is insignificant.

Table 3: Percentage Analysis of the Usage of Apology Strategies by Male and Female Subjects in all Situations

Direct Strategies	Situation 1				Situation 2				Situation 3				Situation 4				Situation 5				Situation 6			
	M	F	%M	%F	M	F	%M	%F	M	F	%M	%F	M	F	%M	%F	M	F	%M	%F	M	F	%M	%F
1) Expression of apology																								
a. Be sorry	291	322	47.5	52.5	493	484	50.5	49.5	477	465	50.6	49.4	486	491	49.7	50.3	484	485	49.9	50.1	449	487	48.0	52
b. Apolologize	4	0	100	0	5	11	31.3	68.8	10	19	34.5	65.7	7	6	53.8	46.2	0	5	0	100	0	3	0	100
c. Regret	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
d. Pardon	0	0	0	0	21	4	84.0	16.0	37	16	69.8	30.2	0	17	0	100	0	0	0	0	6	7	46.2	53.8
e. Forgive	30	26	53.6	46.4	50	50	50.0	50.0	89	34	72.4	27.6	20	20	50.0	50.0	14	26	35.	65.0	15	11	57.7	42.3
f. Excuse	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	100	0	0	0	0	0	6	0	100
Indirect Strategies																								
2) Acknowledgement of responsibility	302	284	51.5	48.5	111	112	49.8	50.2	8	39	17.0	83.0	94	74	56.0	44.0	99	97	50.5	49.5	81	60	57.4	42.6
3) Explanation	11	7	61.1	38.9	9	0	100	0	224	302	42.6	57.4	12	0	100	0	4	0	100	0	0	0	0	0
4) Offer of Repair	160	212	43.0	57.0	4	6	40.0	60.0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	233	309	43.0	57.0	0	0	0	0
5) Promise of forbearance	0	0	0	0	15	11	57.7	42.3	78	82	48.8	51.2	0	14	0	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

The frequency and percentage analyses indicate differences between both genders in the utilization of strategies. The percentage analysis result is further subjected to chi-Square test to determine the significance of the observable differences. The test yielded the result in table 4 below.

Table 4: Chi-Square Analysis of the Use of Apology Strategies by Male and Female   Subjects

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	3.273[a]	27	.124
Likelihood Ratio	5.328	27	.063
Linear-by-Linear Association	2.6 29	1	.417
N of Valid Cases	613		

a. 36 cells (64.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .47

The result of the chi-square analysis shows that no significant difference exists between both genders in the application of apology strategies. The already established level of significance or baseline for accepting or rejecting hypothesis is 0.05. In this test, the probability value generated, as shown in the table above, is 0.124, Since the probability value is greater than the level of significance, the hypothesis is, therefore, accepted.

DISCUSSION

The first objective of the study is to ascertain whether the subjects of the study acquired knowledge of apology discourse in English through explicit or implicit means. The elicited data shows that no substantial formal instruction took place in the classroom. The knowledge of apology among the study population can, therefore, be traced to acquisition or transfer. The examination of the national secondary school English language curriculum corroborated it. The curriculum contained no apology topic or any topic on pragmatics. The situation accords with the English language pedagogical approach in operation in the country, which is General Purpose English (GPE), not English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The GPE, which has persisted, despite the new communicative approaches, lays emphasis on lexical, grammatical, phonological and writing skills, with the assumption that these skills would translate to a general capacity to cope with the demands of different communicative situations. Some educated Nigerians support the GPE by citing the enviable proficiency level and communicative skills of notable educated elderly Nigerians, who passed through the GPE. If the subjects' apology knowledge came through implicit process, it meant that they acquired the ability through interactions in the environment. The phenomenon of universality strongly supports the possibility of transfer from heritage language to English. Some previous studies show that such a transfer happens. A recent study by Aboud and Shibliyeyev (2021), involving Arabic and English, provides an example. Also, Dozie and Otagburuagu (2019), whose study has focused on the politeness of apologies realised by Igbo bilinguals, have discovered an "obvious transfer of … mother tongue to their target language production" (p. 1). To support their finding on transfer of first language features to a target language, they cite similar findings in Cohen and Olshtain (1981), House (1988), Olshtain (1989), Bergman and Kasper (1993) and Al Zumor (2011) (p. 3). Olshtain's findings, according to Dozie and Otagburuagu, show that "faced with similar circumstances, chances are that diverse languages will accomplish apologies characteristically alike" (p. 3).

The second objective seeks to identify the strategies the population adopts in apology discourse. A startling upshot of the study happens to be the representation of all the five apology strategies, apart from the *regret* subset of the direct strategies, in the elicited data. The subjects comprise intermediate learners of English who (considering the elicited data) lack sophistication in its use, but have (beyond expectation) demonstrated a reasonable ability to engage in apology discourse in English. Based on the frequencies of occurrence in all the six apology situations, "be sorry," with a cumulative frequency of 5414, remains the most employed direct apology strategy among the population. It is followed by "forgive" (385), "pardon" (108); "regret" has no score, but it occasionally occurs in the apology discourse involving adults in the environment. Similarly, the four indirect strategies are represented in the data, and acknowledgement of responsibility emerges as the most preferred. Acknowledgement of responsibility has a cumulative frequency of 1359, followed by offer of repair (924), explanation (569) and promise of forbearance (200).

Obviously, the population investigated deploys direct apology strategies as the basic or foundational strategies, irrespective of the severity of infractions and the social status of participants in the discourse. Direct apology features in almost all the participants' responses in all the situations. Its massive use is expected because parents and older siblings socialise children into apology behaviour early in life with its Igbo equivalent, *ndo*. This facilitates the acquisition and use of *sorry,* unlike the learning of some English structures. The difference between *sorry* and *ndo* manifests itself in the functional restriction associated with *sorry. Ndo* is more liberal in application, as it can be used by an offender or anyone else to address a victim of any infraction or misfortune, without the implication of responsibility on the part of the speaker. The world view of the Igbo seems to be that victims of infractions or any form of misfortune deserve apologies by all.

The sequence of strategy preference noticed in this study is similar to the findings in Kaya (2012), which identifies Turkish-German bilinguals with the dominant use of the IFID, acknowledgement of responsibility and offer of repair. In another study, Farashaiyan and Amirkhiz (2011) compare the apology strategies used by Iranian EFL and Malaysian ESL university students and the result also indicates that "*I'm sorry*" has recorded the highest occurrence of 34% in Iranian data and 39% in Malaysian data. Other studies with similar results involving L2 speakers of English in different environments are those of Aydin (2013) with Turkish and American English speakers, Debby and Hamzah (2022) with Indonesian speakers of English, and Chen, Lu and Wei (2022) with Chinese English speakers. IFIDs are also the most preferred by the speakers of Urdu language (Majeed and Fauzia, 2014).

Another notable feature of this study involves the use of multiple strategies in a situation. The IFIDs, employed by almost all the study participants in almost all the situations, do not occur in isolation but in combination with other indirect strategies. First, co-occurrence of two IFIDs in a situation is evident. In such cases, it is usually a combination of "be sorry" with any other IFID. Three examples are presented below:

(a) *Am sorry* I lost your book, please *forgive* me (female subject, no. 40).

(b) *I am sorry sir,* my *apology* (female subject, no. 9).

(c) Oh! *I'm sorry.* It wasn't intentional sir. *Pardon* me (male subject, no. 695).

Secondly, there are combinations involving other strategies, most of which are combinations of an IFID and indirect strategies. Three examples are presented below:

a) I am really sorry sir, it happened unknowingly but I promised it wouldn't happened again. (A combination of IFID, acknowledgement of responsibility and promise of forbearance. From male subject, no. 551).

b) I am sorry for being late. I was stuck in traffic. I apologize for keeping you waiting (IFID and explanation. From female subject, no. 39).

c) My good Lord, I never knew you were behind me. I will help you pick them (Acknowledgment of responsibility and offer of repair. From male subject, no. 800).

Multiplicity of strategies in an apology event has been reported in other studies. Saleem and Azam (2017) report a combination of IFID, acknowledgement of responsibility and promise of forbearance among Urdu-speaking Pakistani students. Bataineh and Bataineh as cited in Aydin (2013) show that Jordanian Arabic speakers "used a combination of many

strategies at the same time" (p. 12). Persian native speakers also prefer the use of "more combinations of strategies rather than choosing only one strategy" (Chamani and Zarepur 2010 as cited in Aydin 2013, p. 13). Combining strategies is also the realisation style of Saudi Arabic speakers (Altayari, 2017), Chinese English speakers (Chen, Lu and Wei, 2022), and Cameroonian French speakers (Farenkia, 2022). Across languages and speakers, the norm appears to be the use of multiple strategies in an apology event.

No sociocultural restrictions were observed regarding strategy combinations, unlike the situation reported in Ishihara and Cohen (2010), where, in Israel, expressions of apology can combine with explanation but not with offer of repair because offer of repair would amount to committing a second infraction, if the interlocutor is a higher-status person. In that culture, according to these scholars, it is the boss that determines the next action to be taken by the offender. In this study, apology situation 3 demands that a student apologise to his/her lecturer for not keeping to time in an appointment. More than 50% of the respondents indicate preference for explanation in addition to the expression of apology. A holistic picture of apology discourse among this population shows that indirect strategies are strictly situation-dependent; that any offended person unfailingly receives expressions of apology in addition to any of acknowledgement of responsibility, explanation or offer of repair. But the person may not receive a promise of forbearance, which is considered an effective strategy in mediation (Curran and Coakley, 2021). This lack of emphasis on promise of non-repetition of the offence appears salient because of its intercultural and mediational implications.

Regarding the influence of gender, Dozie and Otagburuagu (2019), and Jamuna (2015) consider females more polite than males in their studies on the politeness level of apologies. In Dozie and Otagburuagu, the subjects have identified the most polite apology form from a list of expressions presented. As linguistic politeness depends on the application of strategies, their studies can be interpreted as implying that females apply different strategies that make them more polite. However, in Krisagbedo (2021), no significant difference in politeness exists between both genders in apology and request discourses by Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba speakers of English. On apology strategies proper, Debby and Hamzah (2022) and Majeed and Janjua (2014) indicate no gender disparity in the application of strategies.

The effectiveness of an apology depends on the socio-cultural context of the event and on the apology strategies deployed. As an apology can be made effective through intensification; one obvious intensification strategy is the employment of multiple strategies. For example, an expression of apology, together with an account, could be appropriate in a situation in which the offender needs to clear himself/herself of accusation of malice or deliberate offence. According to Lewicki, cited in Clemmons (2022), acknowledgement of responsibility, explanation and an offer of repair are the most important elements in an apology. Similarly, Gooder and Jacobs, cited in Thijittang (2010), maintain that "The proper apology acknowledges the fact of wrong doing, accepts ultimate responsibility, expresses sincere sorrow and regret, and promises not to repeat the offense" (p. 34). In other words, the restoration of solidarity, harmony and peace is dependent on an acceptable apology.

Implications of the study

Two categories of implications are derivable from this study: implications for language education pedagogy and conflict management. Regarding language education, the study affirms the reality and effectiveness of unconscious leaning, confirming the feasibility of learning pragmatic, grammatical and communicative skills implicitly (Drigas and Mitsea,

2022; Guci and Drajati, 2019; Ward, 2022). This serves as vindication of GPE, and a call for the rethinking of the imposition of modern language pedagogical methods on ESL and EFL countries. Teachers can devote attention to lexis, structures, reading and comprehension, writing and phonology, since the development of communicative skills can happen subliminally. In summary, the GPE approach should not be discarded.

Conflict-management Implications

The outcome of the investigation demands awareness of the intrinsic value and purpose of the innateness of apology strategies. The innateness of the strategies draws attention to man's natural capacity for maintenance of social harmony, conflict avoidance and conflict management. This natural endowment (linguistic and non-linguistic) balances human fallibility and imperfection, which predisposes man to unintentional infractions. The innateness confers on humans an inalienable social responsibility and obligation to seek and maintain social harmony, just as the gift of language imposes the imperativeness of communication on humans. Humans, therefore, stand in the middle of the binary opposition involving the propensity to generate conflict on the one hand and the natural capacity to resolve it on the other. Engaging in apology discourses is, therefore, a moral imperative.

Secondly, apology requires methodical and sustained cultivation at home and school in the same manner language education receives attention. The innate capacity needs to develop in, and along with, the child as a part of character formation in the entire socialisation process. At both home and school, its functions require emphasis, including explicit and incremental teaching of the strategies and the socio-cultural contexts that impinge upon the discourse.

Reliance on only subliminal acquisition of the discourse may diminish its significance as a normative, innate principle of life. Apology should, therefore, feature in both primary and secondary school curricula; it should also form a part of general studies' curriculum in tertiary institutions to complement peace and conflict studies programmes already instituted in some tertiary institutions. These practical measures are likely to engender social harmony and peace among children.

At the advanced level, apology discourse needs to be developed into an interdisciplinary course of study. The course should aggregate all the positive and pejorative connotations of the concept and also weave the rhetorical, sociological, ethical, cultural, psychological, political, metaphysical and legal components of the discourse together. Prospective mediators, peace advocates, teachers in primary and secondary schools, administrators, etc should study this course to acquire skills in conflict resolution and peace building.

Mediators and peace advocates necessarily require thorough knowledge of the apology discourse: knowledge of the realisation strategies, sociopragmatic factors and peculiar socio-cultural restrictions that determine the choice of strategies. A good number of inter-personal disputes and inter-group conflicts require apology as a sole solution or as a necessary part of the mediation process. Achieving a good result, especially in intercultural contexts, depends on the effectiveness and quality of mediation, which also (in some cases) depends largely on thorough mastery of the apology discourse.

Success in managing parties that are in dispute partly depends on the mediator's pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge of apology. Apart from understanding the intricacies of the application of strategies, mediators need to pay attention to the adequacy and appropriateness of apology in each apology event, including the identification of the key strategy (depending on the infraction) to which other supportive linguistic and non-linguistic

strategies can be added. As the possibility of misconstruing a genuine apology is real, appropriateness and adequacy of apology may achieve two things: demonstration of sufficient remorse and extraction of sincere forgiveness.

This study and previous ones clearly demonstrate the female gender's proficiency in apology and politeness discourse. Therefore, women participation in conflict-resolution efforts has become inevitable. Experience shows that men dominate and head mediation commissions on sociocultural and political matters, with limited success sometimes.

In traditional Igbo society, the resolution of sociocultural disputes is the prerogative of the male folk; however, it is the *umuada (*an association of the female members of a kindred, excluding those married into the kindred) that usually intervenes to solve intractable family disputes. Therefore, priority should be given to the training of women mediators, who should be given the opportunity to lead conflict-resolution missions.

The offer of repair strategy deserves a deeper consideration, for it stands as an indirect moral injunction; it demands self and group discipline, circumspection in one's daily activities, respect for human rights and strict obedience to socio-cultural and legal injunctions.

Restitution entails that infractions (injuries, abuses and violations of rights) in any form should never have happened. It points to the imperativeness of circumspection, which will minimize infractions and, therefore, render restitution unnecessary. Strict insistence on restitution as a moral principle can have restraining effects on youth and adult conduct.

Lastly, an insight gained from the expression of apology in Igbo culture affirms the desirability, practicability and acceptability of offering apologies on behalf of offenders. Victims of infractions or misfortunes of any kind deserve and do receive apologies from everybody in the spirit of human solidarity. The apology may include restitution offered on behalf of the offender(s), human or non-human. The activities of aid organizations should be viewed from this perspective. In the event of a natural disaster, for example, aids signify apologies tendered to achieve reconciliation between the victims and the environment.

CONCLUSION

Despite the population's lack of explicit tuition on apology discourse in any language, it exhibits reasonable knowledge of all the five main apology strategies used by speakers of other languages and speakers of ESL, EFL and English as mother tongue. This finding confirms the universality and innateness of the strategies.

The population's ability to perform apologies in English would not be feasible without pragmatic transfer from its mother tongue. Also, the population's apology realisation pattern remains the employment of direct strategies in combination with other appropriate indirect strategies, irrespective of the status of the offended.

This pattern, which both genders have employed without any significant disparity, approximates the realisation patterns in many parts of the world. These findings are significant on their own, but fundamentally they draw attention to language pedagogy and conflict management.

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