

# Apologizing in English and Japanese

:Socio-cultural Dimensions

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## 要旨

「謝罪」という言語活動に焦点を当てて、社会的な相互行為の枠組みにおける謝罪行動の役割を明らかにする。Meier (1995) の理論に基づいて、謝罪を『話者が守りたい「自分は良い人である」というイメージが、そのグループ内の社会的規範に照らし合わせて違反した為に損なわれたときに、その傷ついたイメージを修復する (Repair Work) 行為』として捉える。謝罪する側だけでなく謝罪される側の行為も研究対象に含め、英語と日本語の謝罪表現の比較分析を通して日本とアメリカの社会的規範の違いについて考察する。結果として、日本語の方が「自己」の拡張の範囲がより広い、つまり他者の行為に対してまで責任を感じる事が明らかにされた。

## I. Introduction

This paper reexamines Meier's (1995) approach to the analysis of Repair Work, placed within a more comprehensive framework of social interaction, and explores how an apologetic action influences interaction by examining the process of the apologetic action in America and Japan. It also attempts to compare the difference in the social norms between English speakers and Japanese.

Although numerous attempts have been made by linguists to demonstrate Brown and Levinson's politeness theory, there is little agreement as to what politeness is. Consequently, Meier proposes that it is time to critically reexamine Brown and Levinson's framework and its manifestations in the treatment of so-called politeness phenomena, because their concepts are "both too undifferentiated and too limited" (Meier 1995:381). Meier suggests that, "for example, apologies, although classified by Brown and Levinson as negative politeness strategies, could be viewed as requests for exoneration (e.g., *please forgive me*, *please excuse me*) and as requests would be threats to Hearer's face, which would bring their status as a politeness strategy into question" (Meier 1995:385). In order to attempt to analyze

speech acts within a more comprehensive system of social interaction, and to explore the goals underlying their use, Meier (1995) actually outlines how a study of Repair Work can be differently and more accurately construed using an approach, which does not rest upon Brown and Levinson (1987), but rather incorporates the notion of interactional speech within a framework of social interaction.

Moreover, as Kumagai (2001:10) points out, an apologetic action is regarded not only as a fundamental personal action but as the action projected by the Speaker's (apologizer's) view of the ethics, a norm, and the rule on the interaction in specific society. Accordingly, it is necessary to reconsider the apologetic action and its process in the interaction, taking the Hearer's response into consideration as well as the Speaker's utterance.

Thus, I first will outline preliminary discussions such as Speech Act Theory and Meier's Repair Work. Secondary, I will consider the definition of what counts as an apology. Thirdly, I will examine the apologetic strategies in America and Japan, discussing that the differences in apology between English and Japanese, which native speakers cause by the differences of the norms in the two, and argue that apologizing is performed not only by the explicit expressions such as "I'm sorry" and "Excuse me", but also by the norms. At the same time, I will prove that some negotiations in the Speaker and Hearer's mind is carried out before apology is performed. Consequently, I will suggest that any speech acts are performed according to the norms.

## II Preliminary Discussion

### 1. Speech Act Theory

In the speech act theory advocated by Austin (1962), apology has the effect of paying off a debt, thus compensating the victim for the harm done by the offence (Searle 1969). John Searle, a prominent among speech act theorists, classifies and defines apologizing as *Expressives*, which means to express the psychological state of speaker toward a particular state of affairs. Other *Expressives* includes 'thank', 'congratulate', 'deplore', and so on (Searle 1976: 10-13).

Underlying the notion of illocutionary acts are certain conditions, the most important being that interlocutors share beliefs about speakers' sincerity in expressing their intents. Participants also accept basic notions that they cooperate with each other and that they expect cooperation from one another. Since it is impossible to "know" fully what is in someone else's mind, interlocutors have to share assumptions about how linguistic form relates to inner thoughts. Interlocutors have to base their interpretations of speech on the same or at least on the very similar presuppositions about the range of Speaker's intentions and the

way these goals are realized linguistically.

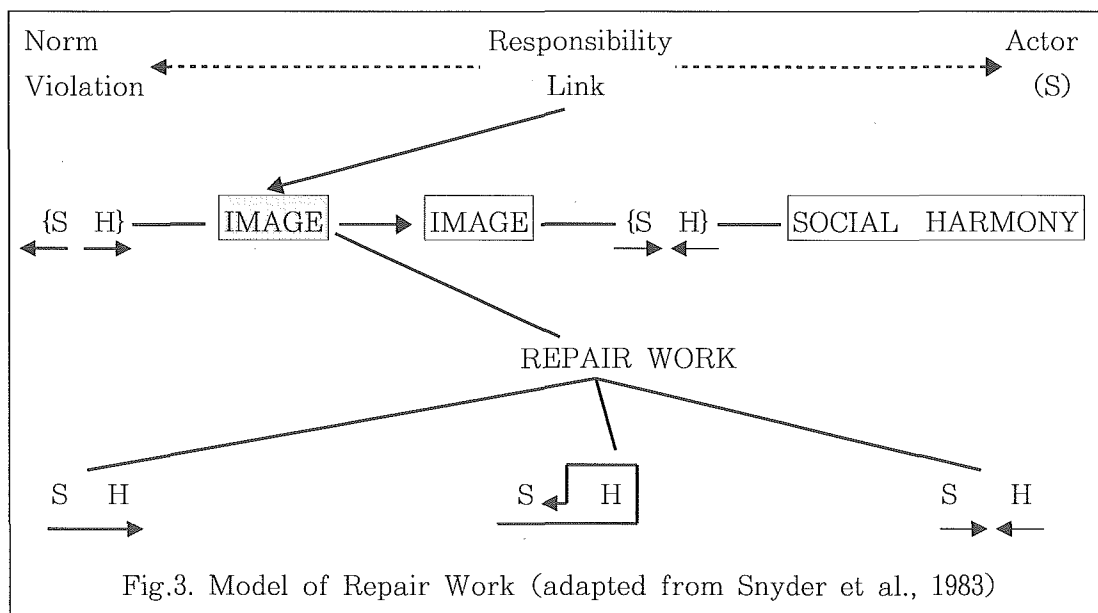
Although Speech act theorists stress the importance of sincerity conditions, it does not necessarily apply to everyone, especially, those who do not belong to Western culture. Cultural knowledge and assumptions play a critical role in co-participants' response to each other's messages. Although it is necessary to have the ability to speak and comprehend a particular language, it is not a sufficient condition for mutual understanding. It is also crucial to share the same norms that are learned through socialization in the culture.

## 2. Meier (1995)'s Theory: Repair Work

Meier attempts to analyze speech acts within a more comprehensive system of social interaction, looking specifically at the speech act of retrospective Repair Work, characterizing it in a very different way from Brown and Levinson.

Meier actually outlines how a study of Repair Work can be differently and more accurately construed using an approach which does not rest upon Brown and Levinson but rather incorporates the notion of interactional speech within a framework of social interaction.

According to Meier's view, "Repair Work functions to remedy any damage incurred to an 'actor's' image upon the establishment of a responsibility link between an actor and behavior which fell below the standard expected relative to a particular reference group. The responsibility link also allows for cases in which the actor takes responsibility for another's action" (ibid. 388). Fig.1. provides a sketch of Meier's model of Repair Work.



Repair Work is “an attempt to show that the Speaker is a ‘good guy’ (despite having violated a social norm) and can be relied upon in the future to act predictably in accordance with the social norms of a particular references group, in other words, to act appropriately.... By acting appropriately and contributing to a group’s underlying social harmony, the actor is accorded social value and consequently a certain amount of power” (ibid. 389).

The following is Meier’s explanation of Repair Work (ibid. 389-390):

“The potential myriad of ways to effect Repair Work are thus categorized according to their focus of function in bringing about convergence between S and H. These have been grouped into three major categories (as depicted in Fig. 3), branching off of Repair Work. The S→H type involves S seeing things H’s way, expressing appreciation for H’s feelings. Examples of this include the following: expressing empathy with H; expressing negative feelings; explicit statement of a bad performance; redress. The second major strategy, on the other hand, involves getting H to see things S’s way. Subsumed under this category are excuses, justifications, appeal to H’s understanding, etc. The third category is depicted as S and H meeting halfway; in this case the focus is on absolution, an attempt to wipe the state clean. Routine formulae as well as expressing a hope for a continuation of a return to status quo are examples of third category.”

### III. What makes us apology?

As mentioned above, although apology tends to be regard as only Speaker’s (S’s) action, the effectiveness of apology is determined by the Hearer’s (H’s) response. The act of apologizing involves a certain negotiation in the social relationship threatened by the infraction either consciously or unconsciously. The negotiation is based on the individual norms so that S’s concept of ‘good guy’ does not always consistent with H’s. The misinterpretation in interaction should be caused by the difference of the conception, which is diversified according to the personal background, for example, age, gender, the place of residence, including the place of growing up, the parent’s thought, and so on. Compared with the interaction between speakers who have common native language, it is obvious that the different native speakers like English and Japanese have quite different social norms. Even people who have a similar background do not always have completely the same concept of ‘good guy’. Even if the parents intend to raise their children in the same way, all brothers and sisters do not have the same characters. In brief, ten people have ten each different thoughts.

Thus it is a premise that any kinds of speech acts follow upon the

negotiations in S's and H's mind. To take a simple example, if S meets H whom S has met only once before, S would say hello to H because, according to S's norm, H is S's friend. On the other hand, H may feign that H cannot recognize S because S is not intimate enough to say hello in H's norm. Then misunderstanding happens. S wonders the reason of H's ignorance, while H may feel sorry to S and regrets that H also should have said hello to S, that is to say, both of them feel uncomfortable.

The same observation applies to apology act. If the concept of 'good guy' between interlocutors are agreed, that is, S's norm is similar to H's, the interaction goes smoothly. S generally expects H's permission while apologizing. H's responses which come up to S's expectation are "it's OK" and "don't mention it." In the case that H says, "there's no need to apologize", it means that H does not consider that it is necessary for S's previous act to apologize, that is, S's norm is not consistent with H's.

Moreover, although most of the previous studies of apology focus on the way of apologizing from S's view, this paper focuses on H's response to S's apology. Apology is middle segments of three-part sequences. The first part, which may be verbal or behavioral, constitutes the "object of regret" (Coulmas 1981:75). Following apology, the last section consists of the Hearer's response. Accordingly, it should be argued that apology takes into account not only S's apology but also H's reaction for discussion.

Under Kumagai's argument (2001), apology is act for attaining the purpose of solving the problem or the friction between speakers and hearers and restoring human relations. Therefore, it is necessary to regard apology as what is realized through the process of the interaction of both S's side and H's side. Although the apology is considered as an act which respect only H's 'face' in Goffman's term (1971), it should be taken into account that S also takes measures for protecting S's own 'face' simultaneously. Examining the process of apology execution leads also to the knowledge about the method of maintenance of 'face'.

In the following chapter the new approach of apology will be verified by examining various apologetic expressions in both Japanese and English.

#### IV. Case Study

This paper compares Japanese and English remedial interactions and explores the remedial process underlying them in the light of Japanese and English norms. Although previous studies of the speech act of apology argued explicit expression such as "I'm sorry" and "excuse me" of how to apologize from Speaker's (S's) view, there is little study on Hearer's (H's) reaction. The paper thus looks at the

discourse of apologizing, focusing H's responses as well as S's reaction. Then it interprets the findings of the analysis in the light of Japanese and English values and concepts concerning the norms. Through this approach, this paper describes Japanese and English remedial interactions in terms of culture-dependent social norms.

## 1. Method

This paper discusses the remedial interactions of Japanese and English speakers based on an analysis of data collected from scripts of movies and TV dramas, including not only typical apologetic expressions such as *sorry*, *excuse*, *apologize*, *forgive*, and *pardon* in English and *gomennasai*, *sumimasen*, *shitsureishimashita*, and *waruine* in Japanese, but also the other speech acts which are considered as apologizing based on some reasons. Examples of remedial interactions were collected from scripts of 8 Japanese TV dramas and 25 American/English films. These scripts included comedies, love stories, and adventures, and the data contained a variety of situations and relationships of interlocutors.

## 2. Data Analysis

Although most of the previous studies of apology have focused on how to apology from Ss' view, apology should be regarded as not only S's action, but also the action determined by the H's response.

This paper, in contrast, focuses on how H receives S's apology. As assumed in previous section, it is a premise that the act of apologizing is performed after a certain negotiation between S and H, which is based on the individual norms and so that S's norm does not always agree with H's. If their norm differ, the misinterpretation in interaction may occur. If the negotiation between interlocutors goes smoothly, the communication would succeed, which means that their social norms agree each other.

First, the following are the examples of typical response in English and Japanese. Both of Exs. (1) and (2) make it clear that the negotiation between S and H was succeeded, that is, their norms agree. Responsibility link (cf. Meier 1995) differs according to the individual norm. In this case, both S and H think that S should apologize for S's action. H understands why S apologized. It means that the apology was smoothly performed in the interaction.

(1) (JOE withdraws his hand, before it touches ANDREW's.)

JOE: Whoa-oh! (beat) *Sorry*, I...

ANDREW: **It's okay**. Can I sit down?

J: Uh, yeah.

(Philadelphia 1993)

(2) KOGOMI: *Gomennasai.*

*"I'm sorry."*

GORO: (waratte) *Iiyo.*

(smiling) *"It's okay."*

K: *Hidoi koto watashi icchatta.*

*"I have said terrible thing (to you)."*

(*Kita no Kuni kara* 1988)

Compared with Exs. (3) and (4), McALLISTER's response in Ex. (3) "there's no need apologize" means that the norms between S and H are different. In other words, H considers that it is not necessary for S's previous act to apologize. In the same way, in Ex. (4) Jintaro does not think Shino should have apologized. Thus misinterpretation is caused by the divergence of the norms for apology between interlocutors.

(3) KEATING: *Sorry if I shocked you, Mr. McAllister.*

McALLISTER: Oh, **there's no need to apologize.** It was very fascinated,

Misguided though it was.

(*Dead Poet Society* 1989)

(4) JINTARO: (Akirete) *Soncho hitori kimerare nai noka yo, konomura wa.*

*"(Amazed) I can't believe this village cannot decide even a village mayor!"*

SHINO: *Gomennasai.*

*"I'm sorry."*

J: *Shinochan ga ayamaru koto ja nai kedo sa.*

*"It is not that you should apologize, though."*

(*Aikotoba wa Yuuki* 2000)

## 2-1. Japanese-English difference in H's reaction to S's apology

There are differences of apologetic expression between English and Japanese because they have different norms in mind. The norm differs by the background of the community spoken in the same language, for example, gender, age, social status, and culture. Here is an interesting story showing differences in apologetic expression between the U.S. and Japan (Makoshi 2001: 78):

"When I go to the states after a long interval, a friend of mine would tell me several days after my arrival as follows: You have finally gotten used to the States. Now you no longer repeat thank you, excuse me or I am sorry."

"On the other hand, when you go back to Japan after staying in the States for a while, you could unwillingly offend someone by not apologizing unless it

is clear that you are wrong or when you are late for an appointment by a few minutes. Furthermore, if you attempt to talk equally to others regardless of their age and title, you could be labeled as conceited.”

In English some H does not acknowledge the apology intentionally in order to lighten S's burden as feeling guilty. In Western culture, it is an important concept that all human beings are created equal. The act of apologizing has broken down the balance in interaction, in other words, apologizing makes S's place lower than H. Then, as can be seen in the Anne's words in Ex. (5), H in higher position feels uncomfortable. It is like an imposed burden so that H wants to return to the original position by refusing to accept S's apology.

(5) MARILLA: *I'm sorry* I lost my temper, Anne.

ANNE: **Marilla, please.** I never meant anything to come of all this.

*(Anne of Green Gables 1985)*

The following Ex. (6) shows S's refusal to H's sympathy by fending off S's apology. Andrew with AIDS requests Joe to become his lawyer because he was dismissed for the unjust reason. However, Joe refuses for fear of infection of AIDS. When Joe shows sympathy, Andrew tried to relieve his shock with a joke, “Don't send flowers”, hiding his deep sorrow because in this case Joe's sympathy sounds like only a formal greeting.

(6) (ANDREW rises, thoroughly business-like.)

ANDREW: Thanks for your time.

JOE: Beckett? *I'm sorry* about... what's happened to you. It's a fucking kick in the head.

A: (a smile) **Don't send flowers, Joe. I'm not dead yet.** (ANDREW exits.)

*(Philadelphia 1993)*

On the other hand, Japanese native speakers tend to acknowledge apology because they want to clarify a social vertical relation. Japanese people always want to grasp clearly where they should be in interaction, even if it is not the position they desire. Moreover, Japanese people generally tend to consider that it is a virtue to stand on a position lower than the others. Thus accepting S's apology means that the S's modesty, which puts S down to the lower position by apology, is admired, respecting S's feeling.

Ex. (7) shows vertical relation obviously. Kyoko is Yoko's student, which



means Yoko is naturally on the higher position than Kyoko in social relations. Yoko acknowledges Kyoko's apology so that Yoko rises much higher than Kyoko. This situation is not unusual in Japanese society. Unless H acknowledges S's apology, H feels embarrassed and would apologize again until H accepts it. For this reason, compared with Western society, apology tends to be acknowledged more easily in Japanese society.

(7) Kyoko: *Sumimasen*, sensei, okamai mo dekinakute.

"*Pardon me*, Ms. Yazaki (teacher), for our poor service."

Yoko: **Iinoyo sonna koto.** Anata ga otouto-san to imouto-san no mendou wo miterun datte?

"**Don't mention it.** You take care of your younger brothers and sisters, don't you?"

(*Shokuinshitsu* 1997)

Besides, although in English H usually says lightly "It's OK." in order to mitigate the feeling of S's guilt, in Japanese H may ask the reason why S apologizes even if H knows the reason, pretending H can not understand why S apologizes. This is because H tends to mitigate S's burden to keep S's face, sympathizing with S's feeling sorry. In this case H's norm is that S does not have to apologize, or there is no cause to apologize in S's previous act. The important thing is where the norm to apologize is. In Ex. (8) Kyoko apologizes Shuji for his hair design in his sketchbook being stolen because she handed it to his rival. Although Kyoko takes responsibility for that, Shuji does not consider it important like Kyoko does.

(8) SHUJI: Doushita no?

"What's the matter?"

KYOKO: *Gomen.*

"*Sorry.*"

S: **Nani ga?** ( kitsui kanji dewa naku)

"What -- ?" ( not tight speaking way)

K: -- sketchbook -

"-- sketchbook -"

S: **Aa--**, kini shinai, kini shinai.

"**Ah--**, don't mind, don't mind."

(*Beautiful Life* 2000)

## 2-2. Japanese-English similarities in H's reaction to S's apology

It may be considered there are two ways of H's reaction without comment on S's apology, which is seen in both Japanese and English. One is that H purposely

ignores the apology and changes the subject because H has already allowed S, so that S is no longer hurt. The other is that H does not forgive S and explained the reason of H's anger. The former is Exs. (9) and (10), the latter is Exs. (11) and (12).

(9) KEATING: Neil, what's up?

NEIL: Can I speak to you a minute?

K: Certainly. Sit down.

N: *I'm sorry*. Here.

K: Excuse me. **Get you some tea?**

N: Tea. Sure.

(*Dead Poet Society* 1989)

(10) (SHUJI and KYOKO are slurping ramen noodles.)

SHUJI: *Gomen ne*, konna toko de...

"*Pardon*. In such a place..."

KYOKO: (tabete) **oishii**.

(eating) "**It's delicious.**"

(*Beautiful Life* 2000)

(11) ANNE: *I'm sorry*, Mrs. Cadbury, but I wasn't paying attention.

MRS. CADBURY: **You haven't been paying attention for the past six months.**

(*Anne of Green Gables* 1985)

(12) JINTARO: Ashita ?

"Tomorrow?"

TADASHI: Kyuna hanashi de *suimasen*.

"*Pardon me* for sudden talk."

J: (kirete) **Ikeru wake nee janai ka, bakayaro!**

(going berserk) "**How the hell do you think I can go? Get away with you!**"

(*Aikotoba wa Yuuki* 2000)

## V. Conclusion

Although apology has been studied from various different point of view, most of them have focused on only the Speaker's (S's) apology. The speech act, however have to be studied not only S's action but also Hearer's (H's) action. In short, it is important to take up the whole discourse within a framework of social interaction.

This paper looked at apology by reexamining Meier's (1995) approach to the analysis of Repair Work, placed within a more comprehensive framework of social

interaction. Moreover, it compares Japanese and English remedial interactions and explores the remedial process underlying them in the light of Japanese and English norms. Although previous studies of the speech act of apology argued explicit expression such as “I’m sorry” and “excuse me” of how to apologize from S’s view, there is little study on H’s reaction. The paper thus looks at the discourse of apologizing, focusing H’s responses as well as S’s reaction.

Apologetic interactions in different cultures, as well as other types of interactions, should not be considered as the same actions in the one category. As a result, it is proved that social norms are different between Japanese and English speakers. Through this approach, this paper described Japanese and English remedial interactions in terms of culture-dependent social norms.

### 《Texts》

**English Scripts:** “Simply Movie Scripts” <http://simplyscripts.com/movie.html>  
\* ‘D’ is an abbreviation of ‘Directed by’ and ‘W’ is an abbreviation of ‘Writing credits’.

Anne of Green Gables. 1985. D: Kevin Sullivan (D). W: Lucy Maud Montgomery (novel).

Dead Poet Society. 1989. D: Peter Weir. W: (WGA) Tom Schulman (written by).

Philadelphia. 1993. D: Jonathan Demme. W: (WGA) Ron Nyswaner (written by).

### Japanese Scripts

Kamata Toshio and Hata Mineaki. 1997. “Shokuinshitsu” (The Staff Room).

Nihon bungei sha.

Kitagawa Eriko. 2000 “Beautiful Life” Kadokawa shoten.

Kuramoto Sou. 1988. “Kita no Kuni kara” (From the North Country) First & Latter Part. Riron sha.

Mitani Kouki. 2000. “Aikotoba wa Yuuki” (A Watchword Is Courage). Kadokawa shoten.

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