



## Apologizing in Daily Life: A Speech Act Analysis in English

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### Abstract

This study aims to analyze the forms and functions of apologizing as a speech act in everyday communication from a pragmatic and sociolinguistic perspective. Using a qualitative library research method, data were collected from recent scholarly sources and analyzed through the frameworks of speech act theory and politeness theory. The findings show that apologies are influenced by social factors such as power relations, social distance, and the severity of the offense. Apologies are often delivered indirectly, using hedges and softeners to mitigate face threats. This indicates that apologizing is not merely a personal expression of regret, but a strategic act to maintain social harmony.

**Keywords:** *Apology; Speech A; Pragmatics*

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bentuk dan fungsi meminta maaf sebagai tindak tutur dalam komunikasi sehari-hari dari perspektif pragmatik dan sosiolinguistik. Dengan menggunakan metode penelitian pustaka kualitatif, data dikumpulkan dari sumber-sumber ilmiah terbaru dan dianalisis melalui kerangka teori tindak tutur dan teori kesantunan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa permintaan maaf dipengaruhi oleh faktor-faktor sosial seperti hubungan kekuasaan, jarak sosial, dan tingkat keparahan pelanggaran. Permintaan maaf sering kali disampaikan secara tidak langsung, dengan menggunakan lindung nilai dan pelembut untuk mengurangi ancaman terhadap muka. Hal ini mengindikasikan bahwa permintaan maaf bukan hanya sekedar ungkapan penyesalan pribadi, tetapi juga merupakan tindakan strategis untuk menjaga keharmonisan sosial.

**Kata Kunci:** *Permintaan Maaf; Tindak Tutur; Pragmatik*

## INTRODUCTION

Language is not merely a tool for conveying information; it serves as a central medium for constructing and maintaining social relationships among individuals. Through language, people do not only express their thoughts and emotions but also negotiate identity, power, and social positioning within their communities. One prominent social function of language in daily use is the act of apologizing. Although often perceived as a simple gesture, an apology plays a crucial role in restoring harmony within interactions and repairing relationships that may be disrupted by mistakes or social norm violations.

From a linguistic standpoint, apologizing falls under the category of expressive speech acts, as it conveys the speaker's feelings of regret, guilt, or empathy towards the hearer. However, from a pragmatic perspective, an apology can be considered a face-threatening act, since it involves the speaker openly admitting fault. Nevertheless, an apology simultaneously functions to save the hearer's face by acknowledging the transgression and signaling a willingness to amend the situation. Consequently, social factors such as power relations, interpersonal closeness, and the severity of the offense greatly influence the form and strategy of apologies used in communication.

Although apologies are a universal communicative practice, their forms and expressions are deeply shaped by cultural norms, politeness expectations, and social dynamics. In societies that place high value on hierarchy and politeness, apologizing tends to be conducted with greater caution and often involves language that reflects these cultural values. The central issue, therefore, lies in understanding how apologies are formulated and function across various social contexts, and how elements such as power, social distance, and severity of the offense impact the linguistic choices in apologizing. This is a particularly relevant area of inquiry in efforts to understand how language reflects and reinforces social behavior and cultural values.

Recent studies in the last five years have highlighted the diverse use of apology strategies in Indonesian contexts. Abudin and Sundari (2021) found that public figures on social media tend to use indirect forms like explanations to maintain social harmony. Irawan and Hardjanto (2023) revealed gender differences, with women showing more intensified apologies. Siregar (2023) observed that students commonly use indirect responsibility and repair offers in face-threatening situations. Waliyadin and Fauzi (2021) emphasized the role of explicit instruction in teaching pragmatic apology strategies in ELT settings. These findings confirm that apology expressions are deeply shaped by cultural norms, gender, and context.

This paper aims to critically examine the forms and functions of apologies in everyday interactions by highlighting their pragmatic and sociolinguistic dimensions. The main focus will be on how factors such as power dynamics, social proximity, and cultural contexts shape the strategies employed in apologizing. Ultimately, this study seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of how language functions to maintain politeness and harmony in social communication, and to contribute to the academic discourse on the intersection between language use and social practices.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a literature review (library research) method, which involves collecting and analyzing existing scholarly works relevant to the topic of apology speech acts from linguistic and pragmatic perspectives. The primary data sources include academic journal articles, books, and conference proceedings that directly examine the forms, functions, and sociolinguistic dimensions of apologies in various cultural contexts, particularly within Indonesian and broader Asian societies. These are supplemented by secondary data such as theoretical frameworks and conceptual discussions on speech act theory, politeness strategies, and face theory developed by scholars like Austin, Searle, and Brown & Levinson.

The data collection technique consists of systematically searching academic databases such as Google Scholar, SINTA, and Scopus for peer-reviewed works published within the last five years. Keywords used include “apology strategies,” “pragmatic politeness,” “speech acts,” and “Indonesian linguistics.”

Data analysis follows a qualitative descriptive approach, where selected texts are examined and categorized based on the types of apology expressions, the contextual factors influencing them (e.g., power dynamics, social distance, severity of offense), and their pragmatic functions. This approach allows for the interpretation of how language reflects social behavior and maintains interpersonal harmony

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Speech Act Theory**

In the study of semantics, communication is understood as the process of conveying meaning from one individual to another through the use of language. Communication is not merely the exchange of words or sounds, but rather the delivery of ideas and intentions encoded in linguistic symbols. According to Charles Morris (1938), communication is the process in which signs are used to convey meaning. This implies that linguistic signs or symbols play a crucial role as tools that connect the speaker and the listener in the delivery of ideas. Geoffrey Leech (1981) added that communication in semantics involves the interpretation of meaning based on context, the speaker's intention, and the shared knowledge between the speaker and the hearer.

This highlights that meaning cannot be separated from the communicative situation in which it occurs. Meanwhile, Stephen C. Levinson (1983) described communication as a dynamic interaction in which meaning is often not conveyed explicitly, but inferred through various contextual clues. communication is a complex process that involves transmitting and interpreting meaning through language. This process is not solely reliant on sentence structures or vocabulary, but also influenced by the context,

intentions, and shared understanding between the speaker and the listener. Therefore, semantic communication focuses not only on what is said but also on what is meant and understood.

In semantics, communication is not only concerned with the literal meaning of words but also involves the speaker's intention and the impact it has on the listener. This understanding is at the core of speech act theory, which was first introduced by J.L. Austin and further developed by John Searle. According to Austin, when people communicate, they are not merely stating facts but also performing actions through their words. He categorized speech acts into three levels: the locutionary act, the illocutionary act, and the perlocutionary act. A locutionary act refers to the actual act of saying something with its literal meaning. For example, the statement "It's cold in here" simply describes the temperature. An illocutionary act, on the other hand, is concerned with the speaker's intention behind the statement. The same sentence could imply a request for someone to close a window. The perlocutionary act refers to the effect the utterance has on the listener—such as prompting someone to actually close the window after hearing the comment.

John Searle expanded Austin's ideas by classifying illocutionary acts into five distinct types. Assertives are statements that express the speaker's belief about something, such as "The meeting starts at 10 AM." Directives are intended to get the listener to do something, like "Please close the window." Commissives commit the speaker to a certain course of action, such as "I will help you with that." Expressives reveal the speaker's emotions, as in "I'm sorry for being late." Lastly, declarations are utterances that can change the reality of a situation just by being said, like "You are hereby promoted." These types show that communication through language is more than just conveying information; it is also about influencing others, expressing feelings, making commitments, and even bringing about change.

Speech act theory, originally formulated by J.L. Austin and later refined by John Searle, analyzes how language functions not only as a medium for conveying information but also as a tool for performing actions. In his seminal work *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), Austin introduced three dimensions of speech acts: locutionary acts, referring to the act of producing a meaningful utterance (e.g., saying "It's cold in here" to describe the temperature); illocutionary acts, which denote the speaker's intention behind the utterance (e.g., indirectly requesting someone to close the window); and perlocutionary acts, referring to the effect the utterance has on the listener (e.g., the listener responds by actually closing the window). Building upon this foundation, John Searle, in his work *Speech Acts* (1969), developed a classification of illocutionary acts into five main categories: assertives, which express the speaker's belief about the truth of a proposition (e.g., "The meeting starts at 10 AM"); directives, which aim to get the listener

to perform an action (e.g., "Please close the window"); commissives, which commit the speaker to a future course of action (e.g., "I will help you with that"); expressives, which reflect the speaker's psychological state or feelings (e.g., "I'm sorry for being late"); and declarations, which effect a change in the external status or situation by their very utterance (e.g., "I now pronounce you husband and wife"). This framework offers a comprehensive basis for analyzing the pragmatic functions of apologies as a subtype of expressive illocutionary acts.

### **Components of an Apology**

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) developed a framework for understanding apologies in the context of speech acts, identifying several key components that work together to restore social harmony after an offense. According to their research, an apology is not simply a matter of saying "I'm sorry"; it involves a combination of elements that address the emotional and social aspects of the transgression, helping to mend the relationship between the speaker and the hearer. The first component of an apology is an expression of regret, which is typically marked by phrases like "I'm sorry" or "I apologize." This element demonstrates that the speaker is aware of the violation of a social norm or expectation and is emotionally affected by it. This is often the most immediate and direct response to an offense, signaling the speaker's acknowledgment of the wrong and their remorse. The emotional tone of the apology is important because it conveys empathy and concern for the other person's feelings, which can help to alleviate tension and promote reconciliation.

Next is an acknowledgment of responsibility. This part of the apology involves the speaker accepting responsibility for their actions or behavior. Statements such as "It was my fault" or "I shouldn't have done that" indicate that the speaker understands their role in the incident and is not deflecting blame. This component is crucial because it shows sincerity and accountability, which are vital for the apology to be perceived as genuine. Acknowledging responsibility helps to repair the relationship because it demonstrates that the speaker values the other person's feelings and is willing to take ownership of their mistakes. The third key component is an offer of repair, which signifies the speaker's willingness to take corrective action to address the harm caused. This might be expressed through verbal offers like "Let me fix this" or, in some cases, through concrete actions that demonstrate an effort to make up for the wrongdoing. Offering repair is important because it goes beyond merely expressing regret and responsibility—it suggests that the speaker is committed to preventing a recurrence of the issue and is actively working to restore the relationship. This component helps to restore trust and shows that the speaker is not only apologizing but also taking steps to correct the situation.

When these components regret, responsibility, and repair are combined, they create a full apology that can be effective in rebuilding interpersonal trust and reducing the negative effects of the offense. By acknowledging the emotional and social consequences of their actions and offering to make amends, the speaker can help to restore harmony and repair the relationship. This framework, proposed by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, has been widely influential in understanding how apologies function in communication, particularly in the context of interpersonal relationships. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) work offers a comprehensive view of the apology process, emphasizing that a successful apology is not just about saying sorry, but about demonstrating empathy, taking responsibility, and offering to make things right. These components work together to repair the social fabric that may have been damaged by the offense and are essential in maintaining positive relationships.

### **Politeness Theory**

Politeness theory, proposed by Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1987), is a framework that explains how language is used to maintain social harmony and protect the "face" of individuals involved in communication. The theory distinguishes between two types of face: positive face (the desire to be liked and admired) and negative face (the desire to remain unimpeded and free from intrusion). In their work, Brown and Levinson highlight how individuals use different strategies to manage these social needs during interactions. An important concept in this theory is negative politeness, which is employed when the speaker acknowledges that their actions may impose on the hearer. Apologies, as a form of negative politeness, are aimed at recognizing and mitigating any potential threat to the hearer's face. This occurs by explicitly acknowledging the imposition or harm caused by the speaker's actions. For example, when someone says "I'm sorry for the trouble," they are recognizing the discomfort their behavior has caused and expressing regret for it. This strategy shows the speaker's awareness of the social norms that were violated and demonstrates a willingness to reduce the damage caused by their actions.

An apology typically involves three main components: an expression of regret, an acknowledgment of responsibility, and an offer of repair. The first component, an expression of regret, is a direct way to show that the speaker understands the impact of their behavior. Common phrases like "I'm sorry" or "I apologize" reflect the speaker's emotional response to the situation. The second component, acknowledgment of responsibility, indicates that the speaker accepts their role in the offense. This is often communicated through phrases such as "It was my fault" or "I shouldn't have done that." This step is crucial for conveying sincerity and for demonstrating that the speaker is aware of the consequences of their actions on the hearer.

The third component, an offer of repair, signals the speaker's intent to make amends or fix the situation. Statements like "Let me fix this" or "How can I make it right?" illustrate the speaker's willingness to take action and restore social balance. Apologies serve to address face-threatening acts (FTAs), which are situations where the speaker's actions or words threaten the hearer's social identity. According to Brown and Levinson, these acts can be reduced or eliminated through the use of politeness strategies like apologies. In a situation where a person arrives late to an appointment, an apology such as "Sorry I kept you waiting" not only acknowledges the delay but also addresses the impact on the listener's negative face by recognizing their time and freedom from inconvenience.

The use of apologies as negative politeness strategies can vary based on the social context and cultural norms. For example, in a formal setting, a more elaborate apology might be necessary to ensure the speaker conveys sufficient respect and acknowledgment of the offense. In contrast, in casual interactions, a simple apology may suffice. The phrasing, tone, and body language accompanying the apology all contribute to how the apology is perceived, with sincerity and social awareness playing significant roles in its effectiveness. Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory provides valuable insights into the way language, particularly apologies, functions to preserve social harmony and protect the "face" of individuals involved in communication. Apologies, as negative politeness strategies, are crucial tools for mitigating the impact of face-threatening acts and fostering positive interpersonal relationships. By understanding and utilizing these strategies, speakers can navigate social interactions more effectively, demonstrating respect for others' autonomy and emotional needs.

| <b>Apology Phrase</b> | <b>Literal Meaning</b>     | <b>Usage Context</b>                  | <b>Speech Act Function</b> |
|-----------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| I'm sorry             | I ask for forgiveness      | General, personal & formal situations | Expressing regret          |
| I apologize           | I beg your pardon          | Formal and professional situations    | Formal apology             |
| Excuse me             | Forgive me                 | To interrupt a conversation           | Getting attention/apology  |
| My apologies          | My request for forgiveness | Official letters/emails               | Formal written apology     |
| Forgive me            | Forgive me                 | Personal, emotional situations        | Asking for forgiveness     |
| I didn't mean to      | I didn't intend to         | After minor mistakes                  | Clarifying intention       |

|                              |                                |                               |                          |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Sorry for the trouble        | Sorry for the inconvenience    | When troubling someone        | Expressing inconvenience |
| I beg your pardon            | I ask for forgiveness          | Formal/polite context         | Polite/formal apology    |
| Sorry, my bad                | Sorry, that's my fault         | Informal, with friends        | Casual self-blame        |
| Please accept my apology     | Please receive my apology      | Formal letters, academic      | Requesting acceptance    |
| I didn't mean to hurt you    | I didn't intend to hurt you    | Personal, emotional           | Expressing empathy       |
| I hope you can forgive me    | I hope you'll forgive me       | Close relationships           | Seeking reconciliation   |
| Sorry, it won't happen again | Sorry, it won't occur again    | Promise of improvement        | Assurance of correction  |
| I regret my actions          | I feel sorry for what I did    | Formal/professional           | Expressing regret        |
| Sorry for interrupting       | Sorry for cutting in           | Academic/meetings             | Polite interruption      |
| I'm deeply sorry             | I am very sorry                | Emotional or formal           | Deep apology             |
| That was inconsiderate of me | That was rude of me            | Recognizing personal mistakes | Acknowledgement          |
| My mistake                   | My fault                       | Informal                      | Casual apology           |
| Sorry for the confusion      | Sorry for the misunderstanding | Professional settings         | Clarification            |
| Sorry to keep you waiting    | Sorry I made you wait          | Formal and casual             | Acknowledging delay      |
| I owe you an apology         | I need to apologize to you     | Personal, serious             | Expressing obligation    |
| I sincerely apologize        | I truly apologize              | Formal, polite                | Formal apology           |
| I'm sorry if I offended you  | Sorry if I hurt your feelings  | Neutral/conditional           | Conditional apology      |
| Sorry about that             | Sorry regarding that           | General/casual                | Light apology            |
| My fault entirely            | It's completely my fault       | Taking responsibility         | Self-blame               |
| Sorry I snapped at you       | Sorry I yelled at you          | Emotional, personal           | Emotional apology        |



|                                 |                                 |                            |                            |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Sorry for being late            | Sorry I arrived late            | Academic, school, work     | Acknowledging lateness     |
| Please forgive my rudeness      | Forgive my bad behavior         | Polite, formal             | Politeness repair          |
| I'm ashamed of what I did       | I feel ashamed of my actions    | Personal awareness         | Expressing shame           |
| Sorry, that came out wrong      | Sorry, that wasn't my intention | Clarifying intent          | Repairing miscommunication |
| I hope you're not mad           | I hope you're not angry         | Personal relationship      | Mitigating tension         |
| I never meant to hurt you       | I never intended to hurt you    | Emotional relationships    | Justifying                 |
| I admit I was wrong             | I acknowledge my mistake        | Formal and personal        | Confession                 |
| Please don't take it personally | Don't take it to heart          | To ease tension            | Soothing phrase            |
| Sorry, I was out of line        | Sorry, I crossed the line       | Professional/personal      | Responsibility             |
| Sorry for not replying sooner   | Sorry I didn't respond earlier  | Email, messages            | Professional apology       |
| Sorry for the inconvenience     | Apologies for the trouble       | Formal, public service     | Institutional apology      |
| I shouldn't have done that      | I wasn't supposed to do that    | Reflective                 | Regretful expression       |
| I feel terrible about it        | I feel very bad about it        | Emotional                  | Expressing remorse         |
| I'm sorry for the delay         | Apologies for being late        | Letters or services        | Formal apology             |
| Please forgive my ignorance     | Forgive my lack of knowledge    | Academic/general knowledge | Admitting lack             |
| Sorry I didn't realize that     | Sorry I wasn't aware            | Unintentional mistake      | Clarifying intention       |
| Sorry I couldn't help           | Apologies for not helping       | Personal, empathetic       | Expressing limitation      |
| I truly regret my words         | I deeply regret what I said     | Formal/emotional           | Deep regret                |
| Sorry, I misunderstood          | Apologies, I got it wrong       | Failed communication       | Repairing misunderstanding |

|                           |                            |                                |                           |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| d                         |                            |                                | g                         |
| Sorry, didn't catch that  | I didn't get that          | General conversation           | Request for clarification |
| Sorry for your loss       | Condolences                | Condolence expressions         | Expressing sympathy       |
| Sorry for acting that way | Sorry for my behavior      | Personal reflection            | Acknowledging behavior    |
| Sorry, I overreacted      | Apologies for overreacting | Emotions, conflicts            | Admitting overreaction    |
| Please forgive my delay   | Sorry for being late       | Official letters, professional | Formal apology            |

### **Apology as a Face-Saving Act**

In daily communication, especially when there's a difference in status or authority between people, saying sorry plays a big role in keeping things respectful and harmonious. Based on Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987), apologies are considered face-threatening acts because they involve admitting to a mistake. However, they also serve to protect or restore the other person's face, making them an important tool for maintaining social balance.

In contexts where one person has more power—like a student speaking to a professor or an employee talking to their boss—apologies often come with additional language strategies. These include hedges, such as "maybe," "I think," or "it seems," which help soften the message and reduce the risk of sounding too direct. There are also softeners like "sorry," or "I apologize," which are used to show politeness and reduce potential conflict. Using these expressions shows the speaker's awareness of the situation and their effort to show respect. This becomes especially important in formal or hierarchical settings where words carry more weight. So, apologies, when combined with the right language strategies, aren't just about admitting wrong—they're a smart way to manage relationships and protect both parties' dignity.

### **Contextual Analysis**

When analyzing how people apologize, it's important to consider the social context, because different situations affect how apologies are delivered. One key factor is social distance. When the relationship between two people is more distant—such as between strangers or individuals from different social groups—apologies typically need to sound more formal and respectful. A casual apology might be acceptable among close friends, but it's not always appropriate when there's emotional or social distance. Another key element is the severity of the offense. If the offense was minor, such as

accidentally interrupting someone, a simple “sorry” may be sufficient. However, if the offense was serious—such as breaking a promise or causing harm—apologies need to be more detailed, sincere, and may include an explanation or commitment to make things right. And power dynamics play a big role. In most cases, people with lower authority—such as employees, students, or junior members—tend to apologize more often than those in higher positions. This reflects not only politeness but also an attempt to maintain respect and avoid conflict in hierarchical relationships. Together, these three factors—social distance, severity, and power relations—shape how apologies are formulated and delivered in different interactions.

## CONCLUSIONS

Apologizing constitutes a nuanced speech act that serves a critical function in preserving social cohesion. More than a mere expression of regret, an apology signifies the speaker’s acknowledgment of responsibility, sensitivity to social norms, and commitment to relational repair. Its delivery is shaped by various contextual factors, including the interpersonal relationship between the speaker and listener, the severity of the transgression, and the underlying power dynamics. Research indicates that apologies frequently involve indirect strategies—such as hedging, softeners, or deference markers—particularly in contexts marked by social hierarchy. These findings highlight the importance of sociocultural awareness in both interpreting and performing apologies, affirming that saying “sorry” is not a perfunctory act but a deliberate and meaningful form of communicative behavior embedded within broader pragmatic and relational frameworks.

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