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A LINGUO-CULTURAL APPROACH TO APOLOGIES: THE CASES OF ENGLISH AND SPANISH

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Apologies are both speech acts and face-threatening acts. While apologies have received scholarly attention, they have rarely been examined through a linguo-cultural lens, i.e., studying culture through language. This paper explores apologies in English and Spanish, focusing on how cultural and contextual variables shape politeness strategies. Data was collected using Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs), in which participants responded to scenarios involving varying social factors. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) taxonomy was used to analyse the responses. The findings revealed significant differences in the frequency and types of strategies employed, particularly a shift in the use of negative politeness strategies among English participants. The results also suggest that language shapes apology strategies and that globalisation may contribute to linguistic homogenisation.

Keywords: apologies; linguo-cultural; Spanish; English.

1. Introduction

Apologies are a common speech act, but they can often lead to awkward or embarrassing interactions. As Brown and Levinson (1987) explain, apologies are face-threatening acts (FTAs henceforth), making them inherently sensitive interactions. Brown and Levinson define face-threatening acts as:

> acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker. By 'act' we have in mind what is intended to be done by a verbal or non-verbal communication, just as one or more 'speech acts' can be assigned to an utterance. (1978, 65)

Previous research has extensively explored speech acts such as offers, requests, and apologies from a cross-cultural pragmatics perspective (House and Kádár 2021). These studies highlight how cultural contexts shape pragmatic expectations and influence communication success (see Kecskés and Horn 2007).

However, less focus has been placed on apologies from a linguo-cultural viewpoint. Unlike cross-cultural studies, the linguo-cultural approach acknowledges the risk of mapping a language directly to a specific culture. As Hasanova (2014, 160) explains, this term "has been often used in association with the term culture-through-language studies". In other words, whereas cross-cultural studies typically associate a culture with a specific country and thus include participants from only one country, linguo-cultural studies recognise that this association is not always appropriate or accurate. Instead, they associate culture with language, allowing participants from different countries to be grouped together based on their L1. For example, British and American participants could belong to the same group in a linguo-cultural study.

With this in mind, the objective of this paper is to conduct a linguo-cultural analysis of apologies in English and Spanish. Rather than comparing countries, this study explores cultural preferences as expressed through language. Participants include native English speakers from the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada, as well as native Spanish speakers from Spain, forming two distinct

groups: native English speakers, and native Spanish speakers.[1] To address the paper's objectives, the following research questions were posed:

> RQ1: To what extent do different patterns emerge when apologising in different contexts?
>
> RQ2: How do these apology patterns vary depending on the participant's language?

2. The speech act of apologising

Apologies are speech acts that inherently threaten the face of the speaker and/or the hearer (Goffman 1955). Cross-cultural studies (see Chamani and Zareipur 2010; Kasanga and Lwanga-Lumu 2007; Márquez-Reiter 2000; Mugford 2020; Usmani and Almashham 2024) have demonstrated that cultural norms influence interactions, leading to variation in communication strategies across cultures. More precisely, these studies have identified differences in the strategies employed by speakers from different cultural backgrounds, as well as variations in the degree of directness and broader socio-cultural differences, among other factors. In short, these studies highlight the close relationship between language and culture. In fact, Triandis (2000, 145) claims that cultural differences often result in miscommunication, which can lead to conflict and have negative consequences.

Politeness is another area where cultural preferences can be observed (Huang 2017; Leech 2014). Spencer-Oatey and Kádár (2021, 48) explain that people may interpret the same practices as different and potentially contradictory, which can cause problems of interpretation and communication when interlocutors do not share the same knowledge and experience, such as culture. Understanding these cultural differences –reflected in linguistic preferences– is essential for fostering effective communication, particularly in intercultural contexts.

[1] For simplicity, participants are referred to as English and Spanish.

This section has been divided into three subsections: subsection 2.1. introduces Blum Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) taxonomy of apologies; subsection 2.2. examines face, FTAs and strategies for doing FTAs. Finally, subsection 2.3. focuses on positive and negative politeness.

2.1. Blum Kulka and Olshtain's taxonomy

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) taxonomy, which has been widely used for studying apologies, is central to this paper's analysis of apology patterns across cultures, as it serves as the foundational framework for examining apologies. According to their framework, apologies can be categorised into two types. An apology may consist solely of a head act, such as *I'm sorry*, or the apology can include additional elements that refer to the offence or express regret (see Table 1). Table 1 summarises this taxonomy, illustrating head acts on the left and head acts combined with strategies on the right. The head acts –such as *sorry*, *excuse*, *forgive*– are shown on the left, and apology strategies, such as the speaker accepting responsibility (e.g. Excuse me *for being late*), are displayed on the right. The analysis in this paper follows this division between head acts and strategies.

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984, 207) further outline four strategies that are commonly employed in apologies: (1) an explanation or account of the offence, such as *I lost your notes*;[2] (2) an acceptance of responsibility, e.g. *it has been my mistake*; (3) an offer of repair, e.g. *Is there some way that I can make it up to you*; (4) a promise of forbearance, e.g. *It won't happen again*. Thus, apologies may consist of a head act or may combine a head act with one or more strategies.

[2] All the examples are retrieved from my data.

Type (performative verb)	*Examples*	
1 (be) sorry	(55)	I'm sorry (that) I'm so late (S10, AUE)
2 excuse	(56)	Excuse me for being late again (F)
3 apologize	(57)	I apologize for coming late to the meeting (F)
4 forgive	(58)	Forgive me for coming late (F)
5 regret	(59	I regret that I can't help you (F)
6 pardon	(60)	Pardon me for interrupting (F)

Table 1. Head acts and strategies (1984, 207)

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) also distinguish between different devices for the intensification of apologies. Within this category, they differentiate between intensifying expression within the head act, expressing explicit concern for hearer, and intensification through adverbials and/or repetition (1984, 208). In addition to these strategies, new labels were created to account for certain recurring patterns observed in the data, such as expressing feelings, the use of double intensifying expressions (double IE), and mitigating interjections. These labels have been incorporated into Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) taxonomy, as I consider them to function as additional strategies that enhance the effectiveness and elaboration of apologies. For instance, mitigators are treated in this study as an umbrella term encompassing expressions that soften the impact of an offence. These labels will be discussed in the following sections.

2.2. Face, FTAs and strategies

To understand FTAs, it is first necessary to grasp the concept of *face* as introduced by the sociologist Goffman:

> The positive social value a person effectively claims for himself *[sic]* by the line others assume he *[sic]* has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes—albeit an image that others may share, as when a person makes a good showing for his *[sic]* profession or religion by making a good showing for himself *[sic]*. (1955, 213)

In short, face is defined as the favourable social worth that an individual asserts for themselves (1955, 213), and FTAs, as the term suggests, are speech acts that threaten this face. Brown (2015, 327) also explains the difference between positive and negative face:

"positive face, or the want for approval from others, and negative face, or the want not to offend others". According to Brown and Levinson (1987, 69), speakers tend to avoid FTAs or minimise their impact by using a number of strategies (see Figure 2).

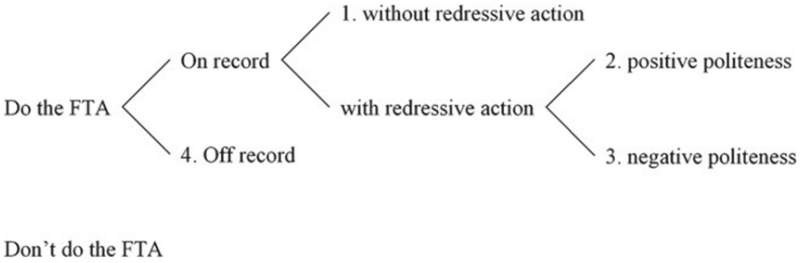

Figure 2. Possible strategies for doing FTAs (1987, 69)

When going on record, the speaker explicitly states their intentions (e.g. *Bring me water*). To avoid this, the speaker can go off record and be indirect (e.g. *I am so thirsty*). Alternatively, going on record can be combined with redressive action, which can be employed to minimise the impact of the FTA. Brown and Levinson (1978) provide the following explanation for redressive action:

> By redressive action we mean action that 'gives face' to the addressee, that is, that attempts to counteract the potential face damage of the FTA by doing it in such a way, or with such modifications or additions, that indicate clearly that no such face threat is intended or desired, and that S in general recognizes H's face wants and himself wants them to be achieved. Such redressive action takes one of two forms, depending on which aspect of face (negative or positive) is being stressed. (1978, 69-70)

Redressive action takes the form of positive politeness, such as (1), which uses an in-group marker, or the form of negative politeness, as in (2), which minimises the imposition on the hearer. Redressive action can also refer to a combination of both, positive and negative politeness, as in example (3).

(1) Hey *buddy*!
(2) *Would it be possible* to get that?
(3) *Darling*, *could* you *please* give me the book?

2.3. Positive and negative politeness

Brown and Levinson (1987, 101) define positive politeness as "redress directed to the addressee's positive face, his *[sic]* perennial desire that his *[sic]* wants (or the actions/acquisitions/values resulting from them) should be thought of as desirable". In other words, positive politeness involves acknowledging the hearer's needs and fostering acceptance or approval.

In addition, Brown and Levinson (1987, 102) classify the strategies of positive politeness as "three broad mechanisms", which are (i) claiming common ground between speaker (S) and hearer (H), (ii) conveying that speaker and hearer are cooperators, and (iii) fulfilling the hearer's wants (see Figure 3). These mechanisms encompass different strategies for redressive action, such as claiming in-group membership with the hearer, e.g., using in-group identity markers, as illustrated in example (1).

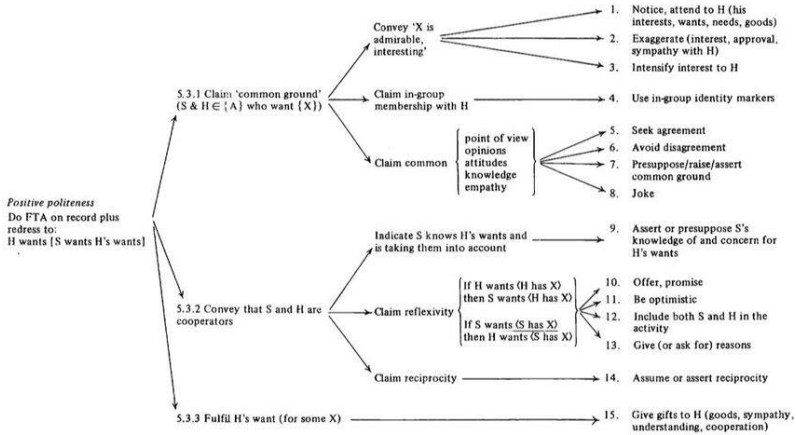

Figure 3. Chart of strategies: Positive politeness (1987, 102)

In contrast to positive politeness, negative politeness focuses on non-imposition. Brown and Levinson (1987, 129) describe it as "his *[sic]* want to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded". In contrast to positive politeness, negative politeness is more specific and purpose-driven, which is, as mentioned, minimising the imposition on the hearer (Brown and Levinson 1987, 129).

Focusing now on negative politeness strategies, Figure 4 illustrates some of the "motivations a speaker may have for using the linguistic realizations characteristic of negative politeness" (Brown and Levinson 1987, 130).

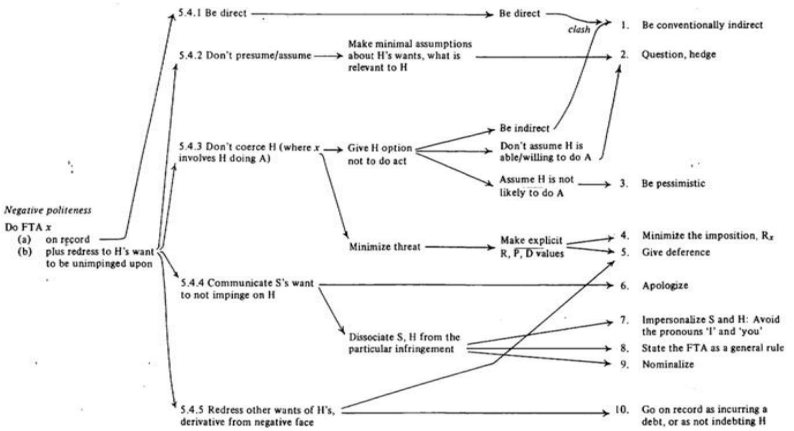

Figure 4. Chart of strategies: Negative politeness (1987, 131)

As Figure 4 shows, the strategies of negative politeness primarily involve (i) not coercing the hearer and (ii) not imposing an action on the hearer. As mentioned, negative politeness strategies are less varied than positive politeness strategies and mainly focus on avoiding imposition on the hearer.

3. Methodology

This section outlines the research methodology used to examine the patterns of apologies across different contexts and linguo-cultural backgrounds. To address the research questions (see §1), participants completed Discourse Completion Tasks (DCT henceforth), and the study adopted a mixed methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative perspectives for the following reasons: the study aimed to examine linguistic patterns and cultural implications, an in-depth analysis of participants' responses was conducted, and the data was quantifiable.

To examine these patterns, five situations were designed, differing in social factors such as the rank of imposition, social distance, and power distance (see section 3.3.). These factors should trigger variations in apology strategies. Furthermore, these variables are "based on universal principles" but "have culture-internal application" (Brown and Levinson 1987, 242).

For clarity, this section is divided into four subsections. Subsection 3.1. describes the participants; subsection 3.2 provides information about the materials used and the procedure.

3.1. Participants

Participants were divided into two groups based on their L1, with one group comprising native Spanish speakers and the other, native English speakers. The sample included 76 participants, with 38 individuals from each language group. As mentioned in §1, the Spanish participants were from Spain, mostly from Madrid, while the English participants were from the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada. These participants were asked to fill a DCT online, which was the same for both groups – except for the language, which was in Spanish and in English, according to the participants' L1.

Sociodemographic variables such as age and gender were not considered as primary factors in this study, as it does not include sociolinguistic analysis, though future research could incorporate them. In this study, participants in the Spanish group ranged from 18 to 60 years of age, with 25 female and 13 male participants. The English participants ranged from 18 to 45 years of age, consisting of 29 female and 9 male participants. Whether participants were monolingual was not considered, as issues related to second-language proficiency were beyond the scope of this study.

3.2. Procedure

The present study examined linguistic patterns in two widely spoken languages: English, as the global lingua franca, and Spanish, a globally significant language. Data was collected online via

questionnaires based on DCTs. While the limitations of this data collection method are acknowledged –particularly its inability to fully capture the authenticity of naturally occurring data (Cyluk 2013; Golato 2003; Lorenzo-Dus 2001; Ogiermann 2018)– it remains a widely used tool in pragmatics research (see Schauer and Adolphs 2006). This reliance on DCTs stems from the inherent challenges in capturing authentic interactions. In pragmatics, authentic data are essential for understanding how language functions in context. However, recording individuals with prior knowledge of being observed may lead them to biases, even unconsciously. Conversely, recording without informed consent, raises ethical concerns. Therefore, DCTs represent a practical solution; in these tasks, participants are presented with hypothetical scenarios and asked to simulate how they would respond in such contexts.

In the context of this study, which focuses on the pragmatic strategies employed in apologies across English and Spanish, DCTs are particularly effective because they allow for controlled cross-linguistic comparison. By standardising the scenarios, the method ensures that all participants respond to the same situations, enabling a more systematic analysis. Furthermore, since apologies are often highly context-dependent and influenced by social factors, DCTs make it possible to examine these variables more precisely than would be feasible with naturally occurring data.

The DCTs for this study included five scenarios designed to elicit apologies. Each scenario incorporated varying degrees of offence, familiarity, and power relations between interlocutors. As Brown and Levinson (1987, 74) explain, these "sociological factors" encompass social distance (D), power distance (P) and rank of imposition (R) –rank of offence in the case of this study. (D) refers to the relationship between interlocutors, i.e., whether it is close or distant (P) refers to whether the relationship between interlocutors is asymmetrical or symmetrical; and (R) has to do with how big the offence is.

The DCTs allowed for the observation of how interpersonal factors –i.e. the aforementioned sociological factors– influenced the linguistic realisation of apologies. Both questionnaires included six

sociodemographic questions and five open-ended questions asking participants how they would apologise in different contexts. Participants also provided consent to have their responses used for academic purposes. The scenarios were as follows:

In context 1 ("Spilt coffee") participants were asked how they would apologise if they spilt coffee on their professor or boss, staining their trousers, a situation characterised by an asymmetrical relationship with considerable social distance and a high rank of offence. Context 2 ("Lost T-shirt") stated that the participants had lost an old T-shirt that they had borrowed from their best friend, representing a symmetrical and close relationship but with a high rank of offence. Context 3 ("Lost notes") showed a context in which participants had lost the notes of a classmate with whom they did not have a close relationship, indicating a symmetric relationship with a high rank of offence and considerable social distance. Context 4 ("Metro") asked how they would apologise if they bumped into a stranger on the underground, a situation with considerable social distance but low rank of imposition. Context 5 ("Parents") asked how they would apologise after arguing with their parents about the curfew, representing an asymmetrical relationship with short social distance and a variable rank of offence depending on cultural norms. This is summarised in Table 5:

CONTEXT	DEGREE OF R	DEGREE OF P	DEGREE OF D
C1: Spilt coffee	High	High	Distant
C2: Lost T-shirt	High	Low	Close
C3: Lost notes	High	Low	Distant
C4: Metro	Low	Low	Distant
C5: Parents	Low	High / Low (depends on the culture)	Close

Table 5. Disposition of the sociological factors present in the DCTs

To analyse the data, responses were categorised into head acts and strategies following Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) taxonomy. Additionally, Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness was applied to determine whether the Spanish group was

more positive politeness-oriented, as shown by previous studies. To quantify the results more efficiently and analyse the data, the software Atlas.ti and Excel were used. Given the relatively small sample size, it was considered ineligible to be subject to statistical tests.

4. Results

Table 6 offers a quantitative summary of the head acts and the frequencies of strategies used by English and Spanish participants. It includes all the components typically found in apologies, as shown in my data, namely the head acts and the strategies.

	NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKERS	NATIVE SPANISH SPEAKERS	TOTAL	PERCENTAGE
Head act	169	140	309	38.33%
Explanation of cause	77	41	118	14.64%
Intensifying expression (IE)	83	32	115	14.26%
Specified offer	40	29	69	8.56%
Mitigating interjection	30	16	46	5.70%
Explicit self- blame	19	5	24	2.97%
Positive politeness	15	11	26	3.22%
Mitigator	12	5	17	2.10%
Repeated apology with IE	10	5	15	1.86%
Negative politeness	8	3	11	1.36%
Expressing feelings	8	6	14	1.73%

Double IEs	7	0	7	0.86%
Fillers	4	0	4	0.49%
Showing concern for hearer	4	3	7	0.86%
Expletive expression	3	1	4	0.49%
Repeated apology	2	7	9	1.11%
Expressing traits of self-deficiency	2	0	2	0.24%
Promise of forbearance	1	8	9	1.11%
Total	494	334	828	100%

Table 6. Overview of the frequency of head acts and strategies used by both groups

English participants used more strategies overall than Spanish participants, except for repeated apology and promise of forbearance. Moreover, three strategies appeared exclusively in the English group: (i) the use of two or more intensifying expressions (double IE), (ii) fillers, and (iii) expressions of self-deficiency.

This section is divided into three subsections. Subsection 4.1. presents the head acts used by the participants, subsection 4.2. provides an overview of the strategies, and 4.3. briefly summarises the results regarding the use of positive and negative politeness.

4.1. Head acts

Figure 7 illustrates the distribution of head acts among English participants. Out of 169 instances, *sorry* accounts for the vast majority –152 occurrences, 89.94%–, followed by *excuse me* (3.55%), *apologise* (3.55%), *pardon me* (0.59%), *perdón* [sorry] (1.77%), and *forgive me* (0.59%).

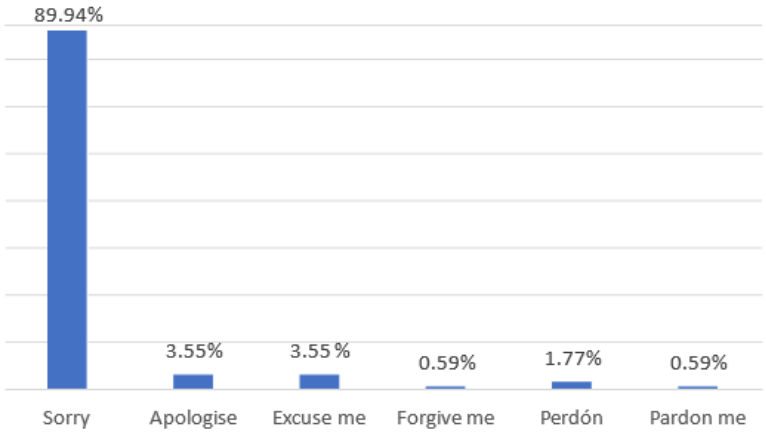

Figure 7. Employed head acts by English participants

Figure 8 demonstrates that Spanish participants use *lo siento* [I am sorry] more frequently –65.71%–, followed by *perdón* [sorry] (17.85%) and its variants: *perdona* [sorry] (7.85%), *perdóname* [forgive me] (4.28%) and *perdone* [sorry with T/V distinction[3]] (0.71%) –amounting to 30.69%. Less frequent head acts include *disculpa* [sorry], *disculpe* [sorry with T/V distinction], and *lamento lo ocurrido* [I regret what has occurred] (0.71% each). Additionally, *sorry* and *barkatu* [sorry], which are in English and Basque languages appear once (0.71% each).

[3] From the French pronouns *tu* (T) and *vous* (V).

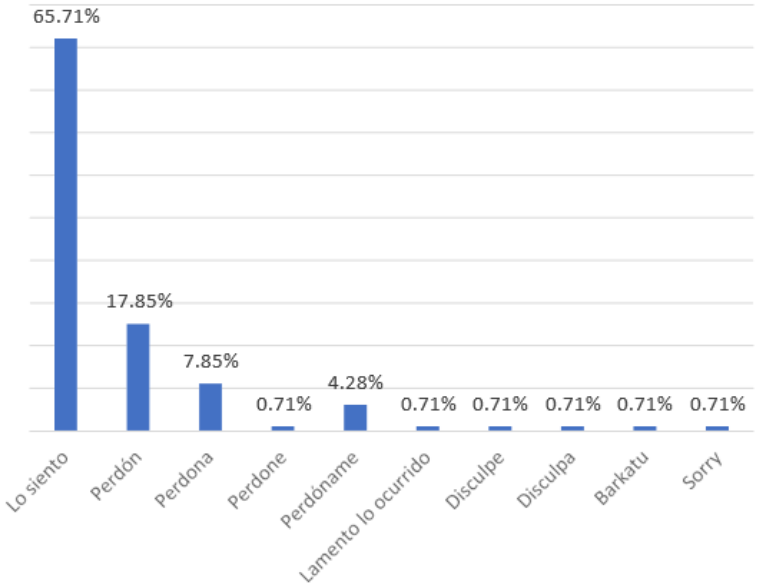

Figure 8. Employed head acts by Spanish participants

Regarding participants who did not apologise, English participants omitted apologies in 10 instances, whereas Spanish participants did so in 6 instances. Among the English participants, most apology omissions occurred in context 5 ("Parents"), with 8 instances, followed by context 2 ("Lost T-shirt") and context 4 ("Metro"), each with 1 instance. In the Spanish group, the majority of apology omissions were observed in context 5 with five instances, and context 4 with one instance.

4.2. Strategies

Figures 9 and 10 display the distribution and frequency of apology strategies used by English and Spanish speakers. A total of 17 strategies were identified in the data.

In the English group (Figure 9), the most frequently used strategies were intensifying expressions (25.53%), explanation of cause (23.69%), and specified offers (12.30%). Other strategies such as mitigating interjections (9.23%), self-blame (5.84%), and

the use of positive politeness (4.61%) also appeared with less frequency. Less common strategies included the use of negative politeness (2.46%), expressing feelings (2.46%), and the use of fillers (1.23%), as in example (4). Certain strategies, such as double intensifying expressions (2.15%) and expressing self-deficiency (0.61%), were exclusively employed by the English group.

(4) Hmm remember that shirt you lent me?

As mentioned in section 2.1., although these strategies are not originally included in Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's taxonomy, they serve to further elaborate the apology and are therefore included as apology strategies.

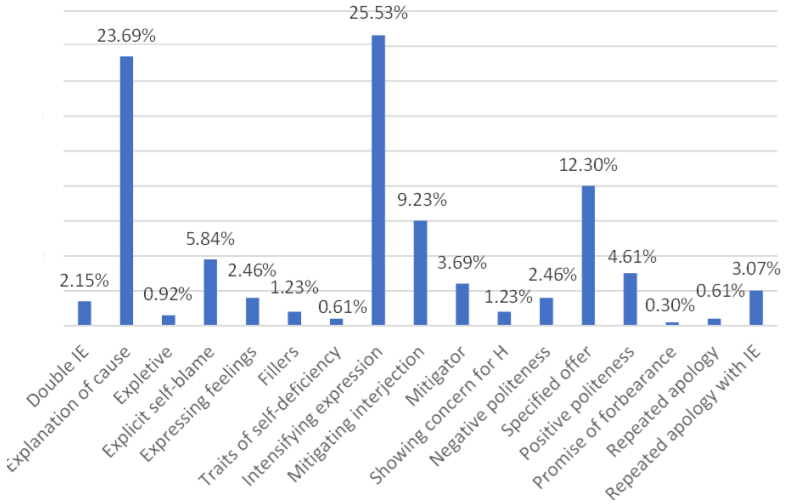

Figure 9. Employed strategies by native English speakers

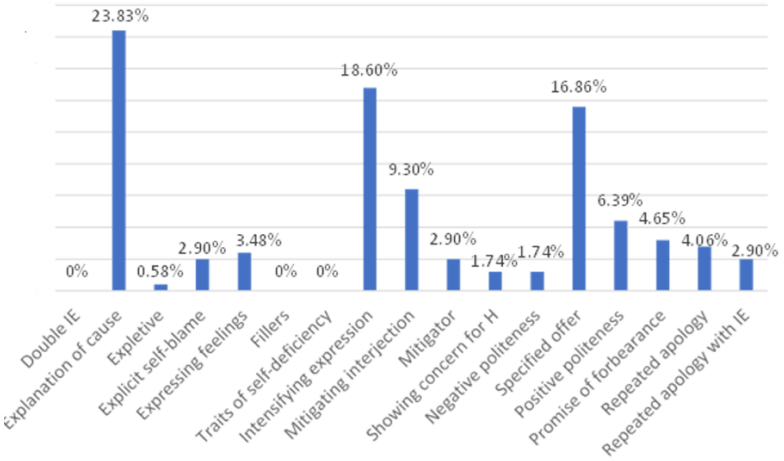

Figure 10. Employed strategies by native Spanish speakers

In the Spanish group (Figure 10), the most frequently used strategies were explanation of cause (23.83%), the use of intensifying expressions (18.60%), and offering (16.86%). Other strategies included the use of mitigating interjections (9.30%), positive politeness (6.39%) and repeated apologies (4.06%). Expressing feelings, which involves conveying one's emotional state in order to elicit empathy from the hearer, emerged as a recurrent strategy, amounting to a 3.48%, as illustrated in example (5).[4]

(5) Sorry, I feel terrible.

Offering was the fourth most commonly used strategy by both groups, accounting for 12.30% in the English group and 16.86% in the Spanish group. Self-blaming emerged as another notable strategy, showing striking differences between the two groups.

Among the English group, mitigators include (i) the hedge *I think*, (ii) rhetorical questions such as the one in example (5), (iii) statements followed by the conjunction *but*; and (iv) attitudinal

[4] All the examples in this paper are real and unedited responses provided by participants.

adverbs, e.g., *unfortunately*. The same applies to mitigating interjections such as the one in example (6).

(6) *Ops*, sorry about that.

It is noteworthy that mitigators were predominantly used in contexts 2 ("Lost T-shirt") and 3 ("Lost notes"), both of which evolved either a high rank of offence or significant social distance.

4.3. Positive and negative politeness

Figures 11 and 12 present the distribution of positive and negative politeness strategies across the English and Spanish groups. Among the English participants (Figure 11), positive politeness strategies were more frequent, with 15 instances (65.2%), while negative politeness strategies occurred 8 times (34.8%). Similarly, Spanish participants (Figure 12) employed positive politeness strategies more frequently, with 11 occurrences (78.6%), compared to 3 occurrences (21.4%) of negative politeness.

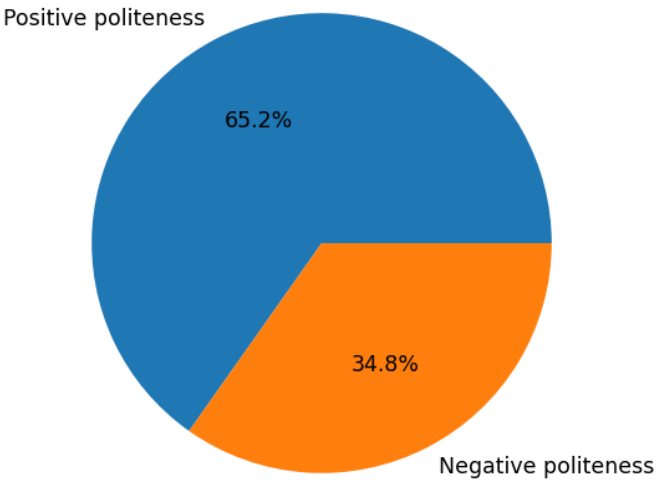

Figure 11. Positive and negative politeness strategies in the English group

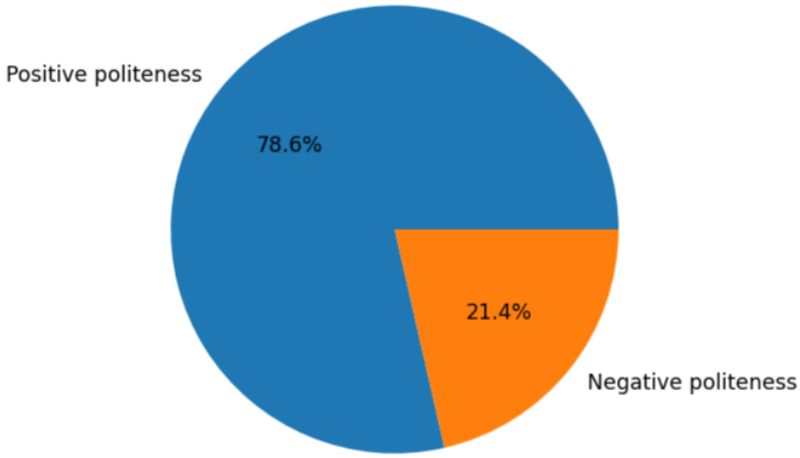

Figure 12. Positive and negative politeness strategies in the Spanish group

These figures suggest that, in both groups, positive politeness was more commonly used than negative politeness. However, the proportion of negative politeness was higher among the English participants than among the Spanish participants.

5. Discussion

This section delves into the observed differences and similarities in the use of head acts and strategies such as mitigating interjections and expressions of feelings. The analysis highlights the contextual, cultural, and linguistic factors influencing these patterns.

The predominant use of *sorry* across all contexts by English participants suggests that, although they have a variety of head acts to choose from, *sorry* is the most prototypical. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) similarly noted that "in English, the most common form is '(be) sorry'" (206). Therefore, *sorry* can arguably be considered the most neutral head act; while different head acts convey the same semantic meaning, each one carries distinct connotations. For example, *forgive me* is more formal and may even imply power distance between interlocutors. Notably, some English

speakers (7.89%) decided to code-switch, using head acts in Spanish.

Comparing English and Spanish head acts, it could be said that the latter head acts are generally more neutral and interchangeable, regardless of the context. Nevertheless, Spanish speakers often include their perspective –also referred to as mood–, as in *lamento lo ocurrido*, which reflects the speaker's emotions and conveys a deeper sense of concern compared to *perdón*. In contrast, English expressions like *I am sorry* are less emotionally explicit and more impartial. Another remarkable difference is the use of the T/V distinction in Spanish, such as in context 4 ("Metro"), where it functions as a politeness marker. English lacks an equivalent distinction, reflecting differences in linguistic –and cultural– perspectives (see Wierzbicka, 1985). However, the T/V distinction is used sparingly in the data.

Focusing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) sociological factors, the results suggest that apologies are often deemed unnecessary in situations with a minimal rank of offence, such as context 4, or in scenarios involving close social distance, as in contexts 2 and 5. In such cases, participants often chose alternative strategies, such as giving an explanation, rather than using a head act. Conversely, more elaborate apologies were employed by both groups in contexts where the rank of offence and power distance were significant, such as contexts 1 and 3.

Turning to strategies, the data revealed that mitigating interjections are more frequent in situations involving accidents. In fact, interjections such as *oh my god!* –often implying surprise– amounted 56.55% of the mitigating interjections that the English group used. Notably, all these instances appear in context 1 ("Spilt coffee"), where the social and power distance, and the rank of offence are significant.

Spanish participants used a narrower range of mitigating interjections, with *¡ay!* [oh!] and *¡uy!* [oops!] being the most frequent, comprising 62.50% of tokens. These were observed primarily in contexts 1 ("Spilt coffee") and 4 ("Metro"). Similar to their English counterparts, these interjections signal surprise and are likely spontaneous reactions to accidental offences, which explains

their limited contextual usage. This suggests that such interjections can be used either when the offence is significant, as in context 1 – indicating genuine concern– or when the offence is a minor unexpected accident, as in context 4. Additionally, fillers were exclusively used by English participants, which may indicate that they hold a more salient position in English; even though Spanish speakers also use fillers in spoken communication, they did not think of them when writing the responses.

The strategy of expressing feelings appeared in both groups, though with different frequencies and patterns. English speakers employed this strategy slightly more frequently (57.14%) than Spanish speakers (42.85%). Example (7) illustrates its use. The results suggest different patterns between the two groups: while the Spanish group primarily expressed feelings in context 5, the English-speaking group had only one occurrence in the same situation. Furthermore, English speakers employed this strategy across almost all contexts, whereas Spanish speakers used it only in contexts 3 and 5. The presence of this strategy in contexts 3 and 5 suggests that it serves as a means of seeking the hearer's pardon through partial expressions of regret.

(7) Sorry, I feel terrible.

These results also indicated that the tendency of Spanish speakers to use this strategy in specific situations, particularly when there is close social distance between interlocutors, may reflect a cultural preference toward emotional expression in more intimate scenarios, or in other words, when interlocutors trust each other. By contrast, the English group's results suggest that expressing feelings serves as a general mitigation strategy, regardless of the context.

Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984, 208) framework categorises context-sensitive strategies, such as an explanation of cause, an offer of repair, and a promise of forbearance. As mentioned in section 2.1., these strategies are closely tied to the type of offence made. Explanation of cause, as the name suggests, involves providing an explanation of what happened, as in example (8).

(8) I'm really messed up but *I lost your notes*.

Spanish participants gave explanations as a strategy more consistently across all contexts, while English speakers employed this strategy more selectively, particularly in contexts 2 ("Lost T-shirt"), 3 ("Lost notes"), and 5 ("Parents"). These results suggest that Spanish speakers view giving explanations as a common strategy for mitigating the offence, whereas English speakers perceive it as more context-dependent. This is also in line with Wierzbicka's (1985) statement that "speech acts are not language-independent but culture-specific communicative routines" (173).

The strategy of offering, as illustrated in example (9), involves proposing a remedy for the offence. In the English data, it appeared most frequently in contexts 1 ("Spilt coffee"), 2 ("Lost T-shirt"), and 3 ("Lost notes"), which involved large and reparable offences. Spanish speakers exhibited similar patterns. Interestingly, English participants preferred phrasing offers as questions, whereas Spanish speakers used imperatives more often, which is consistent with Wierzbicka's (1985) observation that English avoids imperatives in polite interactions.

> (9) I'm so sorry, but I lost that T-shirt. Is there some way that I can make it up to you?

Self-blame, as in example (10), was used by English speakers across all contexts, even in low offence scenarios such as context 4 ("Metro"). By contrast, Spanish participants primarily used it only in context 3 ("Lost notes"), where both the offence rank and social distance were high. This difference implies that Spanish speakers use this strategy in more serious offences. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1986) also argue that self-blame is more dependent on personality (52).

> (10) I'm so sorry but I lost your T-shirt. *This was completely my bad.*

When comparing offering and self-blame strategies, English participants used both more frequently than Spanish speakers. According to Cohen and Olshtain (1985, 183), offering depends more on the situation than on culture and "is only appropriate when actual damage has occurred". On the other hand, self-blame depends

more on the personality, operating along a spectrum with explicit self-blame at one end and denial of fault at the other (1986, 52).

Promise of forbearance –a commitment not to repeat the offence (e.g. *I'll be aware of next time*)– is another culturally different strategy. This strategy was used predominantly by Spanish participants, and mostly in context 5 ("Parents"), reflecting its relevance in familial relationships, which are to some extent culturally dependent. English participants rarely used this strategy, suggesting that its use may align more closely with cultural expectations in the Spanish group.

The fact that fillers were exclusively used by English participants, which may indicate that they hold a more salient position in English; even though Spanish speakers also use fillers in spoken communication, they did not think of them when writing their responses in the DCTs. This suggests that fillers may be more conventionalised in written apologies in English than in Spanish.

This difference can be further contextualized through Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) framework, which distinguishes between different strategies for intensifying apologies (see section 2.1.), specifically, three primary types are distinguished: intensifying expressions within the head act (see example (11)), explicit concern for the hearer (example (12)), and intensification through adverbials and/or repetition. As mentioned (see section 3.2), specific labels were created to account for such strategies, namely intensifying expressions (IE) and double intensifying expressions (double IE). The latter refers to instances where intensifiers are repeated for a greater emphasis, as seen in example (13).

> (11) I'm *so* sorry, but I lost that T-shirt. Is there some way that I can make it up to you?
> (12) I'm so sorry! *Are you ok? Did you get burned?*
> (13) I am *so so* sorry, is there anything I can do like pay for the dry cleaning or something to fix it?

Spanish participants used intensifiers less frequently than English speakers, reflecting cultural differences in how regret is expressed. Remarkably, English speakers employed double IEs exclusively, particularly in sensitive contexts such as 1 ("Spilt coffee") and 3 ("Lost notes"). This pattern indicates that double IEs are used

specifically in situations involving both a serious offence and considerable social or power distance.

Regarding positive and negative politeness, previous studies, such as those by Hickey (2001) and Iglesias-Recuero (2001), concluded that Spanish speakers tend to be positive politeness oriented, while English speakers favour negative politeness. However, the data from the English participants in this study challenged these findings (see Figure 11 and Figure 12), as a significant number of responses showed a preference for strategies typically associated with positive politeness, such as using inclusive language. This suggests that, at least in the context of apologies, English speakers may also rely on positive politeness to mitigate the offence. In contrast, the results for the Spanish group aligned with earlier research, suggesting that positive politeness remains central in Spanish communication.

The high frequency of positive politeness in both groups could indicate a broader cultural shift, possibly as a result of globalisation. Maurais and Morris (2003, 1) suggested that "ongoing globalisation affects linguistic diversity or the fate of lesser languages". The results of this paper may reflect such change, where English speakers showed a greater inclination towards positive politeness strategies. Despite this, English participants still used negative politeness more frequently than Spanish participants.

6. Conclusions

This paper aimed to conduct a linguo-cultural analysis of English and Spanish apology strategies, employing the taxonomy developed by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984). By examining the head acts and strategies, the findings reveal both similarities and differences in the apology patterns of the two languages.

The analysis of the head acts indicated differences between the groups. English speakers predominantly used *sorry* (89.94%), often combined with IEs for larger offences. This aligns with Cohen et al.'s (1985, 71) finding that native English speakers use "forms for expressing apology such as 'excuse me' and 'sorry' and between

intensifiers such as 'very' and 'really'". In contrast, Spanish speakers displayed more variety in the use head acts. *Lo siento* [I am sorry] was the most frequently used expression (65.71%), followed by *perdón* [Sorry]. This variety reflects the contextual nuances of Spanish, where expressions such as *lamento lo ocurrido* [I regret what happened] carry deeper implications of concern for the hearer.

In terms of strategy use, both groups employed similar apology strategies, but differences emerged in the frequency and application of these strategies. For instance, while Spanish speakers applied certain strategies across all contexts, the English group was more selective in their choices. Additionally, English speakers used fillers sparingly (1.23%), whereas Spanish speakers did not use them at all. This finding aligns with Wierzbicka's claim that English has a "preference for a hedged expression" (1985, 162).

The findings underscore the influence of cultural norms on strategy selection, even though both groups share a similar apology repertoire. Strategy selection also depends on the context, more specifically, on social factors –rank of offence, social distance and power distance–, and how individuals face these social factors is also influenced by culture. For example, an action (e.g. being late) may be a serious offence in some cultures and insignificant in other cultures.

Regarding positive and negative politeness strategies, the results point to a correlation between positive politeness and close social distance in both groups. In fact, the context in which positive politeness was most prominently used by both groups was in context 2 ("Lost T-shirt"), where social distance was close. This contrasts with the results of previous studies (see Hickey 2001; Iglesias-Recuero 2001) that argued that English speaking cultures are primarily negative politeness-oriented, a view supported by Wierzbicka (1985, 175), who argued that "English cultural norms […] favour 'indirectness' in acts aiming at bringing about an action from the addressee". However, the results of this paper show that both groups use similar positive and negative politeness strategies. Notably, the English group employed more positive politeness, a trend that may be attributed to the homogenisation of communication in the context of globalisation. This suggests a shift

in the norms of English speakers, who are increasingly using positive politeness, especially in contexts of close social distance.

All in all, rather than evaluating speakers or cultures as more or less polite, this paper highlights the need to examine the preferred linguistic strategies and their contextual motivations. As Blum-Kulka and Olshtain (1984) observed, individual personality also plays a role in apologies, independently of cultural norms.

Finally, it is crucial to recognise that languages and cultures are dynamic. Globalisation has likely contributed to a convergence in apology strategies within Western culture, as exemplified by the increased use of positive politeness among English speakers. Future studies should further explore these evolving trends to deepen our understanding of the complex relationship between language, culture, and communication.

7. Limitations and further research

The main limitations of this paper are the number of participants and the reliability of DCTs. As mentioned, while DCTs are a widely used tool in pragmatics research, they have faced criticism for their (in)ability to fully capture natural and authentic behaviour or responses. Participants may not always respond as they would in real life situations, either due to a lack of honesty or because they were simply tired, which may lead them to provide quick and unrealistic answers. These factors could have impacted the reliability of the DCTs, as noted by Golato (2003). Despite these concerns, I consider DCTs a valuable tool in pragmatics, especially for examining speech acts.

Another limitation of this study is the sample size, which consisted of 38 participants in each group. This small sample size restricts the generalisability of the findings. Furthermore, the demographic data of the sample reveals that the majority of participants in both groups were female. This demographic imbalance highlights an area for future research: employing larger, more representative, and balanced samples could provide deeper insights into the phenomena under study. It would also be valuable

to ask participants about the region in which they live, particularly to determine whether they reside in bilingual areas, a factor that not considered in the present study. This could be relevant for future research, as living in a bilingual environment might influence the extent of the linguo-cultural differences observed. For example, bilingual English-Spanish speakers might show fewer pragmatic differences from native Spanish speakers than monolingual English speakers would.

Future research could also explore the impact of sociodemographic variables, such as gender or age on the realisation of apologies or other speech acts. Moreover, a different methodological approach could also strengthen findings. For example, combining DCTs with interviews may help address some of the limitations of DCTs. Interviews could provide richer data, as face-to-face interactions often lead to more engaged and authentic responses.

Finally, expanding the scope of crosslinguistic pragmatics presents another potential direction for future studies. Researching other speech acts and additional languages could produce valuable insights, broadening our understanding of pragmatic phenomena across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts.

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