

Direct Apology Strategies and Their Lexicogrammatical Realizations in English Conversations: Implications for EFL Students

Ngo Thi Hien Trang^{1*}, Luu Quy Khuong¹

¹ University of Foreign Language Studies – The University of Danang, Vietnam

*Corresponding author's email: nthtrang@ufl.udn.vn

*  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6949-6505>

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ABSTRACT

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One of the most prevalent speech acts across languages and cultures is apologizing. It plays an important role in conversations which helps maintain social relationships. Many researchers in this field have proposed several apology strategies; however, this article aims to examine the direct apology strategies and the lexicogrammatical realizations of utterances, including apologies in English conversations. This is a descriptive qualitative study that gathered data from conversations extracted from romance and family film scripts. This study was also supported with quantitative information in order to seek the answers to three research questions. The findings show that *expression of regret* was the most prominent direct apology strategy, which the characters took advantage of in English-language conversations in film scripts. In terms of lexicogrammar, the utterances with the occurrence of *sorry* and its other realizations appeared most frequently.

Introduction

In everyday communication, people utter and exchange information through the occurrence of grammatical structures and words, and they also act via what they utter, which are known as speech acts. It seems that there is a great number of speech acts which comprise of the acts of suggesting, thanking, complaining, inviting, responding and et cetera. Apologizing, one kind of speech acts is a common activity in communication playing an important role in social relationships. When we make a mistake or hurt others unintentionally or deliberately, we will do apologetic actions to express repentance as well as take responsibility for hurting the listener.

Recently, a great amount of research has been conducted to have a deeper insight into apologies and apology-related issues. Awedyk (2011) revealed that Norwegian had a tendency to exploit *direct strategies* the most; however, which subcategory was mostly used was not mentioned. Sienes and Catan (2022) used the theory of speech act to find out that offering a repair was the dominant apology strategy taken advantage of by 90 call center representatives. Speech acts, implicatures, politeness, discourse, pragmatic failure in communication, and sociolinguistics

were all used in prior studies to investigate apology techniques in light of cross-cultural and intercultural pragmatics. However, not many research studies on lexicogrammatical realizations focusing on direct apologies were conducted. It is for this reason that the article entitled “*Direct Apology Strategies and Their Lexicogrammatical Realizations in English Conversations: Implications for EFL Students*” was conducted. It aims to examine direct apology strategies and figure out the realizations of utterances containing direct apologies in English conversations. The researchers carried out this article in order to answer the three research questions as follows:

1. What are direct apology strategies which are taken advantage of in English conversations?
2. What are the realizations of apology utterances in English conversations?
3. How often do direct apology strategies and their realizations occur in English conversations?

Review of Previous Studies

Research by Trosborg (1987), House (1988), Garcia (1989), Sugimoto (1997), Hussein and Hammouri (1998), Brown and Gullberg (2008), and Nguyen (2010) look into how people apologize in separate languages. Various data collection methods, such as the Discourse Completion Task (DCT), role play, film scripts, and questionnaires, have been used in prior research on contrastive or cross-cultural pragmatics.

There are a lot of researchers who employ a DCT to collect data for their studies. House (1988) analyzed apologetic realizations of German students learning English and found that German-speaking English learners changed their communicative styles from German to English only by employing less common apology terms, namely *sorry*. Nguyen (2010) investigated apology creation in relation to strategy preferences using a DCT and the analysis in the field of socio-cultures.

Together with using DCTs for earlier cross-cultural studies on apologies, some researchers used roleplay to collect data. Trosborg (1987) investigated the apologetic realizations among Danish English learners and found that there was little differentiation among the negative first language (L1) pragmalinguistic transfers from Danish learners of English. Garcia (1989) contrasted the similarities and differences of the apologies among non-native English speakers from Venezuela and native English speakers. He discovered that the Venezuelans utilized positive politeness strategies more often. For example, Venezuelans uttered something nice to show their hospitality, intimacy, or positive energies feelings. However, the native speakers used negative styles more often, and self-effacing was among the negative strategies. Brown and Gullberg (2008) had an investigation into L1 and second language (L2) English usage and looked at how monolingual Japanese and English speakers differed from each other in the way they acted and used body language in the domain of way of motion. They also conducted a cross-cultural pragmatics study on refusal, examining the similarities and differences in request refusals

among Australian native English speakers.

Besides, a collection of questionnaires is considered to be one of the tools to gather data by many academics, in addition to roleplay and DCT as methods of investigating the speech act of apologizing. Sugimoto (1997), for example, compared the apology strategies of American and Japanese pupils. Hussein and Hammouri (1998) did another study on apology strategies using a questionnaire that analyzed apology strategies that were employed by Americans and Jordanian English speakers. The results revealed that Jordanian utilized more apology strategies than Americans. *Expression of apology, offer of repair, acknowledgment of responsibility, and promise of forbearance* were used by both Americans and Jordanians; however, praising their God of Allah for what had happened, the attack on victims, the minimization of the offense degree, and interjection were used by the latter only.

Abdi and Biri (2014) and Mecheti and Hudson (2014) employed film scripts and subtitles as an instrument to collect data. They utilized films as authentic video materials, which were regarded as a source of languages used in daily life conversations, cultural exchange, and entertainment.

Those studies mentioned above conducted different data collections. The researchers made a decision to use film scripts to observe this apologizing act. Different theories also approached these studies; however, this research made use of lexicogrammar as one of the theoretical frameworks, which could be different from the aforementioned studies.

Theoretical Backgrounds

The speech act of apologizing is appealing to a great number of educators, learners, linguists, and researchers in the field of sociolinguistics. Leech (1983) stated that interlocutors often apologize with the hope to restore and build up the relationship between the apologizer and the apologizee which could be broken due to the apologizer's offense against the apologizee. For him, the act of apologizing is not enough; the apologies must be effective if the apologizer is in the needs to be forgiven by the apologizee, and thereby restore the equilibrium. According to Olshtain (1989), the speech act of apologizing is implemented in order to show the support for the apologizee who a transgression has directly or indirectly influenced on. In the definition proposed by Holmes (1990), an apology is utilized with the intention to eliminate the offense and shows that the apologizer takes responsibility for what he/ she had done which may cause the offense to the apologizee; hence, to maintain the social contact among the apologizers and apologizees.

The speech acts were categorized by Searle (1969) into five groups of *commissive, directive, representative, declaration, and expressive*. He confirmed that based on structure and purpose, a distinct method to separate sorts of speech acts could be taken; we have a direct speech act. An indirect speech act occurs when there is a syntactic form in an utterance that does not match its apparent illocutionary power. In reality, communicative issues related to the untranslatability of an utterance's illocutionary force are particularly obvious when indirect speech acts are used.

In English, indirect speech acts are usually associated with more civility than direct speech acts. Apology strategies are people's techniques to execute the verbal act of apologies, such as the proclamation of remorse and compensation.

This article is based on the apology strategy taxonomy, which was developed by Trosborg (2011), and this taxonomy is regarded as the framework to investigate direct apology strategies, despite the fact that a variety of perspectives on the category of apology strategies was discussed. Trosborg (2011) classified apology strategies into five main groups and 15 subcategories, namely *direct strategies* (expression of regret, request for forgiveness, and offer of apology), *evasive strategies* (querying precondition, minimizing, and blaming someone else), *indirect strategies* (explanation or account and acknowledgment of responsibility), *remedial support* (expressing concern for the hearer, offer of repair, and promise of forbearance), and *opting out* (implicit denial of responsibility, explicit denial of responsibility, justification). However, the researchers decided to investigate direct strategies or explicit strategies, which are demonstrated through explicit illocutionary force-indicator devices (IFIDs) such as *sorry*, *pardon*, *apologize*, *fault*, *excuse*, *regret*, and *apology* in English.

Language is studied in three different methods in systemic functional linguistics, which include semantics, phonology, and lexicogrammar. A great number of linguists regard grammar and lexis as distinct ideas; by contrast, Halliday and Matthiessen (2013) defined lexicogrammar, also entitled lexical grammar, as a term that is used to make an emphasis on the mutual connection between lexis and grammar. The three characteristics could be listed as follows: (1) Lexis is the key to language description, (2) grammar originates from lexical patterning, and (3) lexical and grammatical patterns are in lexical cores. Lexicogrammatical research cannot be one-way; therefore, grammar and lexis are involved at every stage of the investigation.

This research applied the speech act theory by Searle (1969) on apologizing, the taxonomy of apology strategies classified by Trosborg (2011) to clarify apology strategies in English conversations, and the lexicogrammar by Halliday and Matthiessen (2013) to specify the lexical, grammatical realizations of utterances consisting of apologies.

Methods

Data Collection

In order to collect the direct apology strategies in English conversations, this article employed only one source of data which was the film scripts with the contexts of romance and family. Fifty films in English were produced during the period of 7 years from 2015 to 2021 with the hope that the data collected to some extent can represent the most updated methods of apologizing and catching up with the communication trends in society. The researchers collected these English films created in the United States of America, where English is spoken as a first language. American English was chosen but not others or English used by various

English-speaking countries since the researchers aimed to explore the direct apology strategies by a single country; therefore, a deeper insight into the use of apologies could be provided.

Regarding a conversation consisting of direct apology strategies with different performative parts of speech, 227 utterances were collected and included performative markers of apologies, namely *regret, afraid, excuse, apologize, apology, apology, forgive, fault, and sorry* in English. The researchers used Microsoft word 2019 in order to find these performative markers of *direct strategies* in film scripts in English. The utterances which comprised of these performative markers were then collected for the analysis to identify their realizations.

Data Analysis

The data analysis procedure of this research has the following steps. Initially, film scripts in English were downloaded, and films with English subtitles were watched. Based on the apology strategy taxonomy by Trosborg (2011), the researchers selected 227 utterances of direct apology strategies, which matched the direct apology taxonomy in Table 1. The apology strategy taxonomy by Trosborg (2011) was adapted to identify explicit apology strategies.

Table 1. Trosborg's direct apology strategy taxonomy

Direct apology strategies	Examples
Expression of Regret (EOR)	<i>Sorry, Maria. I regret to inform you that you failed the exam.</i>
Offer of Apology (OOA)	<i>My apologies.</i>
Request for Forgiveness (RFF)	<i>Please forgive me for what I have done.</i>

Subsequently, the researchers grouped the utterances to each apology marker in order to identify its lexicogrammatical realization based on the theory of lexicogrammar developed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2013).

The latest version of the Microsoft Excel program was chosen to analyze the data, which is known as the Microsoft Excel 2019. This version covers every single characteristic of previous versions of Excel and even more. The data statistics were, definitely, processed more exactly and were not time-consuming any longer.

Findings and Discussion

Explicit Apology Strategies in English Conversations

Direct strategies or explicit apology strategies include three categories such as *expression of regret* (EOR), *request for forgiveness* (RFF), an *offer of apology* (OOA), which made up 59.03%, 28.64%, and 12.33%, respectively. As can be seen evidently, the results were that the most frequently used strategy was EOR which was more twofold as opposed to the top two of RFF and in the region of fivefold compared to the bottom of OOA.

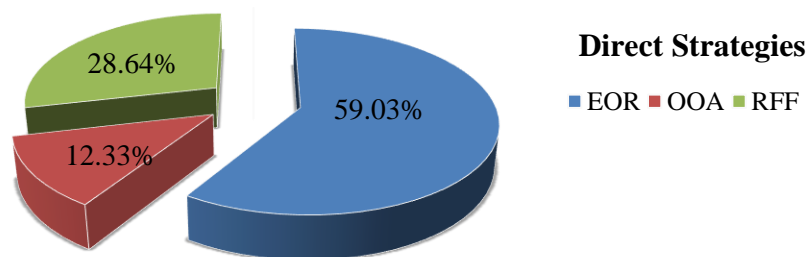


Figure 1. *Frequency of direct apology strategies in English conversations*

Figure 1 reveals that characters in English films took advantage of *expression of regret* the most among three strategies in *direct strategies*, which had the same results as investigated by prior research by Holmes (1990), Sari (2009), Shariati and Chamani (2010), and Nikmah (2012). According to Holmes (1990), the high frequency of this apology strategy was assumed to be related to not only its utility and effectiveness but also its simplicity when being used by apologizers. This was in accordance with Sari (2009), indicating that film characters in *Pretty Women* utilized *expression of regret* most frequently. Additionally, Nikmah (2012) found out that *expression of regret* and *offer of apology* ranked the top apology strategies in the film of *Twilight* series. It was acknowledged that *expression of regret* is a straightforward apologetic strategy where the apologizers expressed their regret for their wrongdoings. It is beneficial because it allows the apologizers to make apologies and repair destroyed relationships. Shariati and Chamani (2010) discovered that *requests for forgiveness* and *expression of regret* respectively ranked the first and bottom common apology strategies.

The next three subsections analyze instances to provide clear knowledge of direct apology strategies.

Expression of Regret

The apologizers employed performative expressions and verbs, namely *regret*, *afraid*, and *sorry*, to show their regret to the apologizees. The conversation below demonstrates how regret is expressed in conversation.

(Example 1). Michael: *I'm sorry...*

Michael's girlfriend: *I don't want to hear you say sorry again.*

The phone conversation was between Michael and his girlfriend who have just quarreled. Michael said explicitly *I'm sorry* to his girlfriend since he thought he might make his girlfriend depressed after the quarrel. His girlfriend did not accept the apologies he made by uttering implicitly *I don't want to hear you say sorry again* and she then claimed the phone down. Michael did not call me back and at that point of time, the girl felt that he did not even care about her, and the apologies were not really sincere as it should be. She even thought about the breakup with Michael.

Request for Forgiveness

When the apologizers requested the apologizees' forgiveness, they used performative phrases or verbs including *forgive*, *pardon*, and *excuse*.

(Example 2). Nicky: *Forgive me for not being able to bring you happiness but I will become your angel and always look out for you. Don't cry, honey!*

Judie: *How can I not cry? What you wanted was just impossible.*

The conversation occurred between the two lovers when Nicky and Judie were in the hospital, where Nicky stayed for several months for the treatment. Nicky asked his girlfriend Judie to forgive him since he could not bring her happiness by uttering *Forgive me for not being able to bring you happiness*. The girl seemed to be extremely upset and cried.

Offer of Apology

The apologizers utilized the last type of *direct strategies* when they apologized to the apologizees for their mistakes or offenses. *Apologize* and *apology* are examples of performative phrases which show an *offer of apology*.

(Example 3). Amy: *You are right! I apologize.*

Amy's younger sister: *Don't apologize. Just let me go!*

The conversation was between Amy and her younger sister. Amy's parents asked her to keep their eyes on her sister and supervised her study. During the tutorial, Amy shouted at her sister since her sister did not understand the lesson even though Amy had explained it several times. After her shouting, she offered an apology to her sister by uttering *I apologize*.

Lexicogrammar Realizations of Direct Apology Utterances

This section clarified the lexico-grammatical realizations of utterances, which included the direct strategies in English conversations. It is defined by Olshtain and Cohen (1983) that *direct apology strategies* or *explicit apology strategies* are named since they employ a collection of performative expressions of apology, apology markers, or IFIDs, namely *afraid*, *apologize*, *apology*, *excuse*, *forgive*, *pardon*, *fault*, *regret*, and *sorry*.

What stands out from Table 2 below is that *sorry* was the most predominant word used by the characters in English films, which occupied 64.32% (n=146). *Sorry* as the most-frequently performative apology markers comprised of 9 lexico-grammatical realizations comprising of [*Sorry*], [*Sorry, proper name*], [*Sorry for noun phrase/ gerund*], [*Sorry to verb phrase*], [*I'm sorry*], [*I'm sorry that Clause*], [*I'm really sorry*], [*I'm truly sorry for what happened*], and [*I'm sorry about/ for noun phrase/ that Clause/ Gerund*]. This occurrence was approximately 1.8 fold in comparison with the total proportion of the rest at 35.68%. Looking at the figure in more details, the three following performative phrases including *pardon* at 9.25% (n=21), *apologize* at 8.81% (n=20), and *excuse* at 7.05% (n=16) scored between 5 % and 10%. It is clear that *pardon* stood at the second-highest rank with four lexicogrammatical realizations, namely [*pardon*], [*Pardon me*], [*Pardon me for Gerund/ Noun phrase*], and [*I beg your pardon*]. On top 3 was *apologize* with 7 realizations of [*I apologize*], [*I apologize that Clause*], [*I apologize if Clause*], [*I apologize for noun phrase/ that Clause/ Gerund*], [*I want to apologize to proper name/ pronoun*], [*I do apologize*], and [*I Modal verb apologize for NP/Gerund*]. *Regret* and *fault* came in the second and third place at 0.44% (n=1) and 0.88% (n=2), respectively.

Table 2. Occurrence of lexicogrammatical realizations of direct strategies

No.	Performative phrases	Lexicogrammatical realizations of direct strategies	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Sorry	Sorry	26	11.45
		Sorry, <i>proper name</i>	15	6.61
		Sorry for <i>NP/ gerund</i>	10	4.41
		Sorry to <i>VP</i>	7	3.08
		I'm sorry	39	17.18
		I'm sorry that <i>Clause</i>	5	2.2
		I'm really sorry	24	10.57
		I'm terribly sorry for what happened	1	0.44
		I'm sorry about/ for <i>NP/ that Clause/ Gerund</i>	19	8.37
			146	64.32
2	Apology	My apology	2	0.88
		My apology to <i>pronoun/proper name</i>	1	0.44
			3	1.32
3	Apologize	I apologize	3	1.32
		I apologize that <i>Clause</i>	7	3.08
		I apologize if <i>Clause</i>	1	0.44
		I apologize for <i>NP/ that Clause/ Gerund</i>	5	2.2
		I want to apologize to <i>proper name/ pronoun</i>	2	0.88
		I do apologize	1	0.44
		I Modal verb apologize for <i>NP/Gerund</i>	1	0.44
	20	8.81		
4	Pardon	Pardon	8	3.53
		Pardon me	7	3.08
		Pardon me for <i>Gerund/ NP</i>	1	0.44
		I beg your pardon	5	2.2
			21	9.25
5	Excuse	Excuse me	14	6.17
		Excuse me for <i>Gerund/ NP</i>	1	0.44
		Would you excuse me?	1	0.44
			16	7.05
6	Forgive	Forgive me	4	1.76
		Forgive me for <i>Gerund/NP but Clause</i>	3	1.32
		Forgive me this but <i>Clause</i>	1	0.44
		Forgive my <i>NP</i>	1	0.44
		I forgive you	1	0.44
		You can forgive me	1	0.44
			11	4.85
7	Fault	My fault	2	0.88
8	Regret	I regret that <i>Clause</i>	1	0.44
9	Afraid	I'm afraid that <i>Clause</i>	7	3.08
Total			227	100

Conclusion and Implications for Teaching and Learning

The research found out that in American English, *the expression of regret* was the direct strategy that ranked the top since the occurrence of this apology strategy was most frequently recorded. Of the performative markers for *direct strategies*, the category of *sorry* reached the top used marker.

The results of this article could be applied in teaching grammar, email writing, or cross-culture for EFL students in general. An example could be taken from the Faculty of English at Danang University of Foreign Language Studies (FE-UFLS) in particular. According to Ngo and Tran (2021), the last year students at FE-UFLS, Vietnam, had to meet the outcome standards of English language proficiency certificates, considered to be the Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency (VSTEP). VSTEP is designed and stipulated by the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam (MOET) with six levels from Level 1 to Level 6, which are equivalent to 6 levels from the lowest level of A1 to the highest level of C2 based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The VSTEP writing format includes two tasks. To make it specific, task 1 requires students to write letters or emails accounting for a third of the test score, and students have to write an essay of different types in task 2. The objective of the first task is to examine test takers' interactive writing skills comprising of letters or emails of requests, applications, complaints, asking and giving information, response, and apology. This proves that verbal interactions in English, either through writing or speaking, are taken into consideration. Therefore, based on the core curriculum by MOET, FE uses commercial English materials, namely the Preliminary English Test (PET) and First Certificate in English (FCE), and compiles internal writing materials to develop interactive writing skills for first-year, second-year, and onwards, respectively. This article provides EFL students at FE a more insight into explicit apology strategies and their lexico-grammar realizations of apology utterances. Related to explicit apology strategies, knowing how to write formal and informal emails or letters to apologize and which apology strategies should be made use of when communicating in English could, to some extent, assist students not only in their study assessment but also in daily real-life interactions with people from English speaking countries. However, international tests in the English language demand a higher intellectual level than the language used in films, which is the language of everyday life.

Furthermore, there are several distinctions between the spoken and written forms of language. Therefore, when students write an informal email, they can utilize the movie language in their emails. That being aware of appropriate apology strategies when speaking in English contributes to better communication and more understanding among interlocutors. In terms of lexical and grammatical realizations of apology utterances, because grammar is one of four writing criteria, students have additional alternatives to make their writing structures diverse with a great degree of flexibility. American Culture is another course that can benefit from the findings of this study in sociopragmatics. Students have a better understanding of how people from English-speaking nations apologize in different situations based on their genders and

social status in order to behave responsibly. This research provides students with knowledge of speech act theory to improve their awareness of linguistic communication because much of a person's social life is concerned with the pragmatic act of apologizing.

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Biodata:

NGO Thi Hien Trang has more than 10 years of teaching experience at Faculty of English, UFLS-UD, Vietnam. She got her MA in 2013 and is currently a Ph.D candidate in the English Language. Her expertise and interests include language teaching methodology and English linguistics. She has published papers in conference proceedings and WOS and SCOPUS journals.

LUU Quy Khuong (Assoc. Prof. Dr.) is a high-rank lecturer of English at Faculty of Foreign Language Teacher Education, UFLS-UD. He got his Ph.D in Linguistics & Literature in 2009 and was awarded the title of Associate Professor in Linguistics in 2009. He has been working in the field of TEFL and teaching Vietnamese culture and language as a foreign language.

Appendix 1. Adjacency pairs in English conversations

No.	Year	Film titles	Adjacency pairs	Page no.
1	2017	Loveless	Michael: <i>I'm sorry...</i> Michael's girl friend: <i>I don't want to hear you say sorry again.</i>	17
2	2018	Can you ever forgive me	Nicky: <i>Forgive me for not being able to bring you happiness but I will become your angel and always look out for you. Don't cry, honey!</i> Judie: <i>How can I not cry? What you wanted was just impossible.</i>	45
3	2020	The father	Amy: <i>You are right! I apologize.</i> Amy's younger sister: <i>Don't apologize. Just let me go!</i>	72