

APOLOGIES BETWEEN MARRIED COUPLES

Apologies Between Married Couples: Iraqis and Americans

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Abstract

This study aims at examining the apology behavior of married couples; Iraqis and Americans. Gender- based differences are taken into consideration. The data is collected by means of DCTs (discourse completion tasks). The findings show that both American and Iraqi couples are in favor of long apologies. Yet, more Iraqi wives than Americans used long apologies. The American and Iraqi husbands used long apologies at the same rate. As to gender differences, they are more obvious in the American than Iraqi data. However, it is hard to say that women are more apologetic than men. The findings are interpreted and discussed according to several different factors.

Introduction

The focus of the current paper is the speech act of apology and that is because of the interesting way in which this speech act is being used by people. Unlike compliments, requests or refusals which people usually make voluntarily and have control over them, apologies tend to be more imposed on a person even when s/he chooses to apologize of his/ her own accord.

Apologies and apology strategies have been defined by several researchers. For Holmes (1990), apologies are not restricted to certain expressions. She states that even if it is possible to numerate the expressions that work as direct apologies, it will be impossible to do this with the indirect expressions used by native speakers to express this speech act. For her “An apology is a speech act addressed to B’s face- needs and intended to remedy an offence for which A takes responsibility, and thus to restore equilibrium between A and B (where A is the apologizer and B is the person offended)” (p. 159). She elaborates on the point of ‘taking responsibility’ saying it does not necessarily mean that A is the doer of the offence as in some situations when parents apologize for their children’s behavior. Building on the work of other researchers and her own, Holmes listed four major apology strategies that can be combined to produce hundreds of strategies as in the 183 strategy given in her study:

- “An explicit expression of apology”.
- “An explanation or account, an excuse or justification”.
- “An acknowledgement of responsibility”.
- “A promise of forbearance” (p.167)

Unlike Holmes, Fraser (1981) tends to be concerned with providing a precise frame for apologies and a constant group of apology strategies, though he doubted if there can really be a finite number of basic strategies. According to him “To apologize is to do two things: take responsibility for the offensive act, and express regret for the offense committed, though not necessarily for the act itself” (p. 262). Fraser further states that one’s acknowledgement of committing the offensive act and regretting it “are certainly contained in the meaning of the words apologize or apology” (p. 264).

Apologies tend to vary a lot depending on several factors. According to Brown and Levinson, apologies are face- threatening acts that may cause a damage to the apologizer’s positive face. They proposed a framework for studying apologies depending on the factors of social distance, relative power and absolute ranking (cited in Jaworski, 1994). Holmes (1989, 1990) and Fraser (1981) point out that the type and length of this speech act vary according to the relationship between the interactants (intimates, friends, colleagues, or strangers), the type of the situation where the apology is taking place, the type and weightiness of the offense, and the sex of the apologizer. Whether it is a face- threatening act for the speaker or face- saving act for the

hearer, all of the above-mentioned factors seem to affect an apology (Bataneh, R. & Bataneh R. F., 2006).

The current paper is concerned with two points; the sex of the apologizer and the length of the apology between intimates; married couples. As to the latter, the reason behind this choice is the statement made by Fraser (1981) that apologies between husband and wife tend to be short and sometimes do not even give an explicit expression of apology such as 'oops', 'no good' and 'I am an idiot'. He explains this by claiming that their understanding and familiarity make them work "on the assumption that the other will 'fill in' the missing parts" (P. 269). Fraser (1981) and Wolfson (1988) say that the need to provide long apologies decreases by the increase of the familiarity of interactants. However, Holmes (1990) reported a completely opposite conclusion than that of Fraser and Wolfson. Depending on the results of her own study, she states that instead of simple explicit apologies, intimates used long apologies by combining more than one strategy (usually giving an explanation and then apologize). Yet, she concedes that the offenses in her study might have been more serious than those of Fraser's. Given the above disagreement, the first research question we need to address is: do married couples tend to use short apologies or non apology expressions between each others as stated by Fraser?

Concerning the sex of the participants, on which there is a great deal of debate among researchers, it is said that there is no significant differences in the patterns of apologies men and women use. But, what is observed is that women make more apologies than men. This behavior is explained by hypothesizing that women and men view apologies and their function differently. For women apologizing is a way to maintain social relationships, while men consider it as a face-threatening act for the speaker and tend to use it less or only when its absence causes more damage to the addressee (Holmes, 1989, 2013 & Tannen 1994). However, Schumann and Ross (2010) argued that despite the widespread acceptance of the idea that women apologize more than men, there is no strong evidence of such differences. They added that researchers who believe in gender differences in apology behavior often support their claims with interesting incidents rather than systematic research. Thus, the second research question we would like to raise is: do women really apologize more than men?

Methodology and Subjects

The method used is that of 'discourse completion tasks' DCT's. Two tasks are designed¹. The first is designed to elicit data for the first research question; do married couples tend to use short apologies or non apology expressions between each other as stated by Fraser? The task consists of a

¹ See appendices 1 & 2 on page (15-18).

scenario and seven possible answers. The answers range from short and non apology expressions to long apologies that combine more than one strategy of those mentioned by Holmes (1990). The first three choices (Oopse, no good, and am an idiot) in this task are the exact expressions that Fraser (1981) claimed are the answers between intimates; married couples. The second task described a different situation but without giving any multiple choices or answers. It is the participant's role to provide the answer they want. Though this task can work for the first research question but it is formulated without multiple choices in an attempt to elicit data for the second research question which is whether women really apologize more than men.

The tasks are administrated to sixteen participants in two groups. The participants are married couples; native Americans and native Arab Iraqis. The age factor for both groups ranges from 24 to 38 years old. Since all the American couples are in the US, the DCT's are administrated via email. All the participants were informed, before sending them the tasks that the purpose of these tasks is scientific research and they offered their help willingly. The couples in each group are treated individually. In other words, the e-mails are sent to the husbands and wives separately each to his/ her email and at different times in order to get as natural an answer as possible without having them affect each others' answers in any way. Only one Iraqi couple I was not able to contact them separately.

The data is analyzed according to three frameworks. The first framework aimed at interpreting the data for the first research question. In this framework the data is related to one of two categories: long apologies, where the married couples combined more than one strategy, and short or non apology, where they used either non apology expression or short apology. The second framework aimed at interpreting data for the second research question. Here I worked mainly on the data obtained in situation number two, which was designed for this question, in addition to the data collected from situation one of the discourse completion task. The apologies stated by both husbands and wives are counted to see who apologize more men or women. The third framework by which the data is analyzed is the Brown and Levinson framework which is used whenever it is found to be applicable on the couples' answers.

Findings and Discussion

Looking at the data collected from situation one, we can find that almost all the husbands and wives chose one of the long apologies of the multiple choices where more than one strategy of Holmes is combined. The American data showed (%63) long apologies (choices number 5 and 6) and (%37) short apology (all were choice number 4). Both husbands and wives provided short apologies. Yet, a wife went beyond her short choice to add:

F: "I pick #4 BUT... there would certainly be an argument about the purpose of a cell phone".

The wife here is negotiating the relative power (P) in an attempt to shift the blame from her being late to make it her husband's fault to forget his cell phone in the car. In contrast to this example, another wife was convinced of her full responsibility of being late and showed that by combining two choices in her apology:

F: "I think I would actually start with 3, followed by 5".

The following table summarizes the American data:

Table 1

Summary of the American Data Distributed According to the Length of the Apology and Sex of the Apologizer.

Apology	Percent %	Wives	Husbands
		Percent %	
short	37	50	25
long	63	50	75
Non apology expression	-	-	-

The Arabic Iraqi data showed different rates, (%87) were long apologies and only (%13) short apology (choice number 4) and a husband was not satisfied to use it alone and added to it:

M: "اني اعتذر نسيت الوقت خو ما زعلتني؟ العفو"

"I apologize, I forgot about the time. Do not get upset, are you? I am sorry".

In this example the husband was trying to maintain solidarity by asking his wife "not to be upset" but it seems that he knew that she was upset as he followed his plead with "are you?" and another apology. The rest of the data were long apologies with a great prevalence of choice number five. The following table summarizes the Iraqi data:

Table 2

Summary of the Iraqi Data Distributed According to the Length of the Apology and Sex of the Apologizer.

Apology	Percent %	Wives	Husbands
		Percent %	
short	13	-	25
long	87	100	75
non apology expression	-	-	-

Given the above mentioned data, the first research question can be answered by saying that all couples Iraqis and Americans provided apologies

mostly long ones and no one ever chose any one of the first three choices, i.e. the non apology expressions taken from Fraser (1981). In addition to Brown and Levinson's relative power (P) in the above mentioned example, other factors 'familiarity' and the 'type of situation' also might have an effect on the couples' choices. We can see that the increase of familiarity between the interactants did increase the length of the apology. As to the type of situation proposed in the first scenario, it put the spouse in a position where s/he had to wait for over an hour. Waiting this long with no previous notice from the person you are waiting for, I think, requires a good apology and a justification. This holds true especially for the Iraqi couples if they, while filling in the DCT, took into consideration 'waiting' along with the current security issues in the country. So, the findings do not support Fraser and Wolfson's generalized statement that intimates are brief, but they do support Holmes' that married couples combine more than one strategy in apologizing.

Even though both Iraqi and American couples were in favor of long apologies, a closer look at the results shows some striking gender and cultural differences. American wives used short and long apologies at exactly the same rate whereas American husbands were in favor of longer apologies. All the Iraqi wives, on the other hand, used only long apologies. Iraqi husbands, like American husbands, used both long and short apologies with more use of the longer apologies. Here "culture" is definitely an effective factor. According to Chamani (2014), men and women are socialized differently in different cultures. Unlike most of the western cultures where husbands and wives seem to have equal power, in the Middle East, in spite of some calls for equality between men and women, still women are looked at as possessing lower status/power (P) than men. They are expected to provide good services and take care of family members at home and to please their boss (who is usually a man) at work. In addition to this cultural difference, the weightiness of the offense might have affected the choice of the Iraqi wives. In other words, the wives probably felt greater responsibility towards their husbands because in Iraq it is not usual for wives to drive their husbands to work. It usually is the husbands' responsibility to do so.

The data which was elicited by the second scenario showed some differences. Here, the data is accounted for according to the rate or reoccurrence of an apology expression regardless of the length of the apology. Looking at the findings of the Iraqi couples, husbands and wives tended to apologize with almost the same rate as illustrated in the following examples:

ولله اسفة مو قصدي بس ما اعرف اشلون وكع. زين ميخالف تملي باجر تجيب نسخة " F: "ثانية و تملي عنه؟ اسفة"

"Oh God, **sorry** I did not mean it. I do not know how this happened. Can you get another copy? **Sorry.**"

M: "اني اسف جدا جدا، ما ادري شلون صارت. اكو نسخة اضافية من الاوراق؟ المعلومات مهمة؟"

"I am *so so sorry*, I do not know how this happened. Is there an extra copy? Is the information important?"

F: "اسفة ما انتبهت"

"*Sorry*, I did not mean it".

M: "اني اسف. انطيني الاوراق اشرها بلكي تنشف"

"I am *sorry*. Give me the papers let me dry them for you."

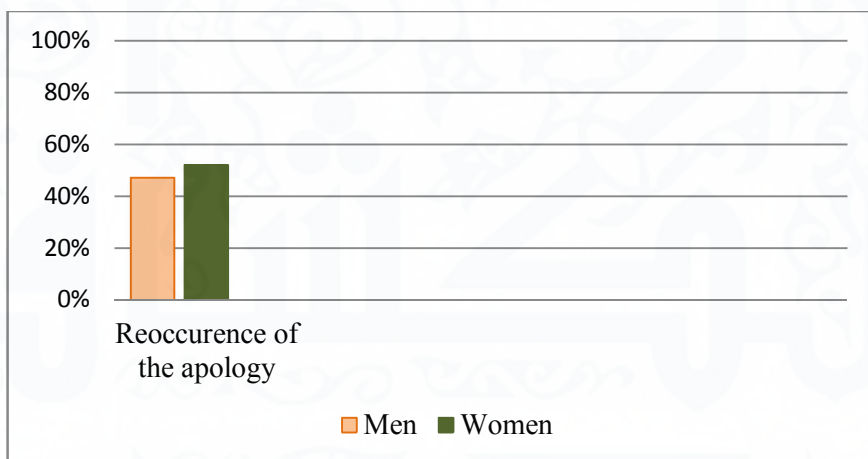


Figure 1. The distribution of the Iraqi couples' answers according to the reoccurrence of an apology.

Holmes' (1989) claim that women apologize more than men applies more to the American data. The data showed a difference in the rate of the apology between the husbands and wives. Women tended to both apologize and offer more remedial actions than men. Here are some examples:

F: "**Apologize profusely.** Run for paper towels to try and clean up the mess. **Apologize some more.** Probably try to shift blame a little, suggesting coffee should not be so near the computer? Try to figure out if replacements can be found for the draft documents. Offer to drive to work to get them if possible. Offer to sit down and help make out the words on the documents. Offer to make a new cup of coffee."

M: "I say 'Oh no! **I am sorry**'. And try to clean up the spill."

F: "**I'm so sorry.** I feel like an idiot. Oh my gosh -- here, I'll clean it up, let me try and read the information to you through the spill, so that you can type it. **I'm so sorry!**"

M: "I really wouldn't say much at all - **"Sorry, that was clumsy"** or something like that".

Only one husband gave a non apology expression:

M: "Couldn't tell what I had for options".

The husband in this example was working on the relative power (P) by trying to shift the blame on the wife for putting the coffee near the papers, or he was trying to win his wife's forgiveness by implying that he did not mean it and thus maintain solidarity.

As we can see from figure 2 below, American wives tend to apologize more than Iraqi wives in the second scenario. We can also see that in this scenario, unlike the first scenario, American husbands apologized less than Iraqi husbands in addition to a non apology expression that was provided by an American husband.

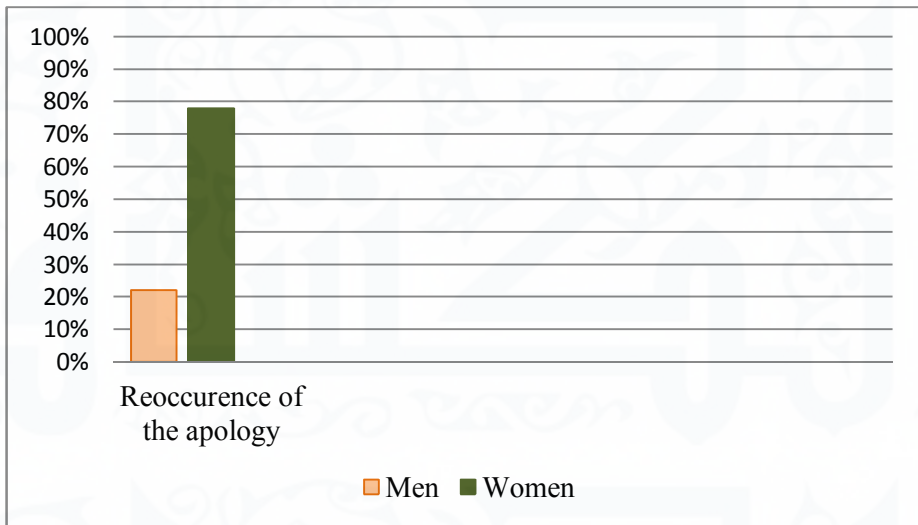


Figure 1. The distribution of the American participants answers according to the reoccurrence of the apology.

So, do women really apologize more than men? Some researchers like Holmes (1989), Engel (2001) and Lazare (2004) suggest that women apologize more than men. They explain these gender differences in terms of how men and women view apologies. Women are both more concerned with showing courtesy and willing to take responsibility of their offensive acts. Men, on the other hand, relate apologies with weakness and have difficulty admitting their wrong doings. Other researchers including Holmes (1989), Deutschmann (2003), and Chamani (2014) found out that men apologized more than women in situations related to time offenses, space intrusion, and social gaffes.

The findings of the current study seem to suggest that women apologize more than men, but a closer look at the data of the two situations reveals that this may not be the case. The fact that more husbands, than wives, used long apologies should not be neglected only for the reason that the first scenario was used to examine the length of the apology. In the second scenario, as was mentioned earlier, Iraqi husbands and wives apologized almost in the same rate whereas American wives apologized way more than their husbands.

Conclusion

Given the results of previous studies along with those of the current study, I don't think it is wise to generalize and say that women apologize more than men or vice versa. It is better to phrase it this way: several factors affect the question of who apologizes more, men or women. These factors include, but are not limited to, Brown and Levenson's social distance, relative power, and absolute ranking. Some other factors that were suggested by researchers are the relationship of the interactants, the type of the situation, the weightiness of the offense and, of course, the gender of both the apologizer and the receiver of the apology. Another factor that, I believe, needs to be added here is the cultural background of the interactants. This factor, as is shown in the findings of the current study, indeed has an effect on the apology behavior of both men and women.

As to the length of the apology, we have seen that intimates are not brief. On the contrary, the length of the apology increases with increase of the familiarity of interactants. We have also seen that the results varied according to the participants' cultural background.

Finally, the results gained in this study can not be considered definitive because of the relatively small number of participants. They can motivate a same future study but with a much larger number of participants and natural data.

Appendix 1

Situation One:

You took your spouse to his her meeting and promised to come and pick her/him up at four o'clock. She/ he forgot her/ his cell phone with you in the car. After you dropped her you went to see some friends. It passed four now!! You suddenly remembered and rushed to pick her/ him up. She/ he has been waiting for more than an hour. Once she/ he gets inside the car, you:

1. Ooops
2. No good
3. I am an idiot
4. I apologize
5. Ahh... I did not notice the time, I have not seen my friend for a long time but it is my fault. I am sorry, it will never happen again.
6. I did not notice that I was late, I apologize. It will never happen again.
7. Ahh... my watch was not working the right way, I did not realize that it passed four already. I am sorry.

Situation Two:

Your spouse has a file of draft work documents from which he/ she is taking information and printing them into the computer. You walked nearby to talk to him/her and incidentally you dropped his/ her coffee on the draft documents. They are damaged and now he/ she can hardly see the words on the papers.

You:

Appendix 2**السيناريو الاول:**

اوصلت زوجك الى الاجتماع ووعدت بان تعود لتأخذه عند الساعة الرابعة. هي\هو نسي هاتفه الخليوي معك في السيارة. بعد ان اوصلته\ اوصلتها ذهبت للقاء اصدقاءك. تجاوزت الساعة الرابعة!! سرعان ما تذكرت وهرعت مسرعا لتقلها\تقله. مضى على انتظارها\انتظاره لك اكثر من ساعة. حال صعودها\صعوده الى السيارة، انت قلت:

١. ياااااه^١
٢. مو خوش شغلة
٣. اني مطفي
٤. اني اعتذر
٥. اه ه... ما انتبهت عالوقت، صار مدة ما شايف اصدقائي بس اني غلطان\ غلطانة. اني اسف\اسفة بعد ما تتكرر مرة ثانية.
٦. ما حسيت انه الوكت تاخر اني اعتذر، بعد ما تتكرر.
٧. اه... ساعتني كانت تخربط ما عرفت انه الساعة عبرت الاربعة. اني اسف\اسفة.

السيناريو الثاني:

كان زوجك يدخل معلومات الى الكمبيوتر من ملف عمل (مسودة). اقتربت منه\منها للحديث معه\معها واذا بك وبدون قصد توقع فجان القهوة على الاوراق المسودة. اتلفت الاوراق والان زوجك يجد صعوبة في قراءة الكلمات من الورق لادخالها الى الكمبيوتر. ماذا ستقول:
انت:

^١ The colloquial Iraqi dialect is used to provide as natural an atmosphere as possible for the participants in an attempt to elicit natural data.

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