

Apology Strategies Among British And American Teenagers: A Politeness-Theoretic Corpus Study

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Abstract: This article studies the linguopragmatic features of apology strategies in the speech of British and American youth based on corpus analysis. The main purpose of the study is to identify the structure of apology acts in English, their relationship to politeness theory, and cross-cultural differences. The study is based on the model of Olstein and Cohen (1983) and the politeness theory of Brown and Levinson (1987). Based on the corpus data, various pragmatic forms of apology formulas in the speech of British and American youth and their relationship to social, cultural, and communicative factors were analyzed. The results show that while British youth use more cautious, gentle expressions, American youth prefer simple, informal, and humorous forms.

Keywords: Apology strategies, linguopragmatics, politeness, English language, corpus analysis, intercultural communication, corpus data, American and British young people.

Introduction: Although English is used within the same grammatical system across different parts of the world today, notable lexical and stylistic variations can be observed between British and American cultures. These cultural distinctions within the English language become particularly evident in the youth communication, where language serves as a dynamic reflection of the social changes and innovations. Young speakers tend to integrate linguistic forms that mirror the transformations and trends taking place in modern society, thereby revealing how language evolves alongside culture.

In contemporary speech culture, apologizing serves as one of the key means of restoring social balance, maintaining mutual respect and softening the communicative environment. Among the younger generation as well, this speech act plays a particularly significant role, as it contributes to preserve harmony and solidarity within the community.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs the approach of corpus linguistics, namely a comparative analysis of apology strategies in the speech of British and American youth. The COLT (The Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language) and COCA (The Corpus of Contemporary American English) corpora were selected as the primary sources of data,

including samples of spoken discourse produced by teenagers aged 15 to 19. Furthermore, the analysis was grounded in the speech act model of apology proposed by Olshtain and Cohen (1983) and the politeness theory developed by Brown and Levinson (1987) which together served as the theoretical framework of the research.

Besides, the methodology combines corpus linguistics, speech act theory and politeness pragmatics to provide a systematic and empirically grounded account of how apology strategies reflect both linguistic variation and cultural value in British and American youth discourse.

DISCUSSION

Apology, as a speech act, reflects not only linguistic competence but also the underlying cultural norms and values that govern interpersonal communication. The strategies people employ to express apologies vary considerably across cultures due to the differences in social expectations, politeness conventions, and communicative traditions. As Wierzbicka (2003) observes, even languages that share a common origin—such as British and American English—display notable variation in the pragmatic use of apologies. This variation stems from the culturally specific understanding of politeness, self-image, and social distance in each society.

According to Muhammad Ashraf Kaloi, Nawaz Ali, and Kamar Abbas (2021), apology strategies in British and American English differ significantly at both the linguistic and sociocultural levels. Their comparative study demonstrates that British speakers tend to favor indirect, mitigated apology forms that maintain social harmony and minimize confrontation. Typical expressions include “I do apologize”, “I’m terribly sorry”, or “I must apologize for that”, which function as markers of restraint and respect. Such formulations reflect the British preference for negative politeness strategies, as outlined by Brown and Levinson (1987), emphasizing deference and the avoidance of imposition.

In contrast, American speakers generally employ a more straightforward and relaxed approach to apologizing, which aligns with their cultural mindset that values personal responsibility and equality in communication. Phrases like “I’m sorry”, “My bad”, and “Sorry about that” often appear in casual conversation, serving to acknowledge fault quickly without overemphasizing social hierarchy or emotional distance. Leech (2014) and Tannen (2017) point out that such directness is deeply embedded in the American communicative discourse, where clarity, efficiency, and openness are prioritized over indirect politeness.

The findings of Kaloi, Ali, and Abbas (2021) further reveal that while British apologies frequently perform a phatic function — maintaining smooth social relations — American apologies are generally transactional, focused on the immediate resolution of interpersonal tension. This distinction illustrates how cultural frameworks shape the pragmatic role of apologies: British communication values restraint and implicitness, while American communication values transparency and immediacy.

Ultimately, cross-cultural differences in apology strategies underscore the intricate relationship between language, culture, and social interaction. The contrast between British and American English mirrors that even within a shared linguistic system, cultural attitudes toward politeness, responsibility, and interpersonal harmony can lead to distinct pragmatic realizations of the same speech act.

Aijmer argues that in teenage speech, apologies often minimize social distance and emphasize equality rather than hierarchy. They are used to reinforce solidarity and signal mutual understanding within peer groups. The expression “my bad”, for example, performs a mild acknowledgment of fault without invoking emotional weight or formal remorse. Similarly, “sorry” may function as a discourse marker that smooths

conversational transitions, rather than as a sincere admission of guilt.

The comparison between the apology expressions “I’m sorry” and “My bad” reveals how linguistic behavior reflects deeper cultural orientations within British and American English. From a pragmatic perspective, “I’m sorry” functions as a conventionalized marker of politeness and empathy. It typically signals an awareness of social hierarchy and a desire to restore interpersonal balance through sincerity and formality. In contrast, “My bad” carries a more casual and egalitarian tone. It minimizes emotional gravity while still acknowledging personal responsibility, which corresponds with American society’s emphasis on directness and efficiency in communication.

The emergence of “My bad” from African-American Vernacular English and its subsequent diffusion through mass media demonstrates how popular culture and globalization contribute to linguistic innovation. Its adoption by younger speakers, particularly in digital spaces, signals a shift toward informal apology norms that prioritize solidarity and ease of interaction over strict politeness conventions. In this way, “My bad” reflects a generational and cultural tendency to simplify communicative rituals while maintaining interpersonal connection.

By contrast, British English continues to use “I’m sorry” and similar expressions, preserving its traditional concern for tact, restraint, and social decorum. This linguistic choice aligns with the British communicative discourse, where politeness and understatement remain key indicators of civility. Thus, the pragmatic divergence between “I’m sorry” and “My bad” not only illustrates linguistic variation but also encapsulates two distinct cultural philosophies — formality and restraint in British English versus openness and practicality in American English.

This section presents examples of apology expressions as used by British and American teenagers, based on data from the COLT (The Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language) and the COCA (Corpus of Contemporary American English – spoken section). The examples illustrate how age, culture, and formality shape the linguistic realization of apologies.

British teenagers often express apologies in ways that maintain social harmony and mitigate interpersonal tension. Their speech typically contains softeners, address terms, and a preference for indirect or semi-formal expressions.

Minor accident at school

Liam: Oi, watch it, mate! You just knocked my bag over.

Harry: Oh, sorry, mate — didn’t see it there.

Liam: It's fine, no worries.

Harry: Still, my bad — I'll pick it up.

The phrase "sorry, mate" signals mild regret while preserving friendliness. The speaker softens the apology with a casual tone and reparation ("I'll pick it up"). This reflects positive politeness through solidarity and social balance (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Being late

Sophie: You're late again! We've been waiting for half an hour.

Ellie: Yeah, I know, I'm really sorry. The bus was a nightmare.

Sophie: Ugh, typical.

Ellie: I'll make it up to you, promise.

"I'm really sorry" demonstrates sincere self-blame. The speaker's justification ("The bus was a nightmare") and promise to compensate reveal a multi-step apology structure: apology → explanation → repair.

American teenagers tend to use short, direct, and informal apology forms that fit the culture's emphasis on individual accountability and relaxed social norms. Humor and emotional openness often accompany their apologies.

Casual situation

Jake: Dude, you spilled soda on my hoodie!

Ryan: Oh shoot, my bad, bro! Didn't see your cup there.

Jake: It's all good, man.

The expression "My bad, bro" is a typical American informal apology used to quickly acknowledge fault without emotional heaviness. It demonstrates directness and camaraderie.

Social misunderstanding

Emily: You totally forgot my birthday.

Hannah: Oh man, my bad! I swear I thought it was next week.

Emily: It's okay, I forgive you — just buy me coffee.

It is obvious from the context that the apology "My bad!" functions as a humorous act of restoration. Instead of expressing deep regret, the speaker uses casual humor to rebuild rapport — typical of positive politeness in American youth culture.

This study set out to explore how British and American teenagers use language to apologize — not just to correct mistakes, but to connect with each other. What became clear throughout the analysis is that the simple act of saying sorry carries much more than words; it reflects an entire way of seeing and managing social relationships.

British teenagers tend to rely on expressions such as "I'm sorry", "Sorry, mate", or "I'm really sorry" — phrases that sound soft, thoughtful, and socially aware. Their apologies show a desire to maintain harmony and to avoid sounding intrusive or overly emotional. In contrast, American teenagers often prefer quick and easy phrases like "My bad", "Oops", or "Sorry", especially in casual or digital communication. These forms reveal a different mindset — one that values honesty, directness, and equality over formal politeness.

What is fascinating is how much these small language choices tell us about the cultures behind them. British English continues to protect its sense of tact and subtlety, while American English evolves toward openness and informality. The digital age has blurred these boundaries: phrases like "My bad" now travel freely across social media platforms, used by teenagers from London to Los Angeles.

Ultimately, apologies among young people are not only about saying the right words — they are about maintaining friendship, saving face, and expressing identity in a fast-changing world. As media, technology, and global interaction continue to shape how we speak, new forms of politeness and connection will surely emerge. Future research might look more closely at how these shifts unfold across genders, social media platforms, and global youth communities.

Apologies, in the end, remind us of something deeply human: our need to stay connected, to repair what's been broken — and to say, in our own way, "I still care."

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