

A Study of Apology Speech Act in Sitcoms: Implications for Language Teaching and Learning

Reza Abdi *

Associate Professor at ELT Department, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran

Aso Biri

MA in TEFL at Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran, Iran

Abstract

Because of their utmost importance in communication and interpersonal relationships, apologies have been widely studied and discussed thus far. In line with the same view and in order to introduce a clearer image of apology strategies to nonnative language users, this study investigated the apology exchanges used in a popular English situation comedy (sitcom) namely "The Simpsons", aiming to determine the apology strategies, the types of offenses, and the factors leading up to the choice of apology strategies. To achieve these purposes, 8 seasons of The Simpsons were selected and used as the corpus, the conversations containing apology expressions were transcribed and used for analysis based on the frameworks proposed by Trosborg (1995) and Fraser (1981). The results of analyzing apology expressions revealed that expression of regret, acknowledgement of responsibility, and explanation were the most frequent apology strategies. Also, in some cases speakers resorted to using mixtures of apology strategies among which expression of regret mixed with explanation was the most common combination of apology strategies. It was also found that I'm sorry and excuse me were the most frequent apology forms. Additionally, although the situation and the familiarity between the interlocutors were effective in choosing apology strategies, the nature and the severity of the infraction were found to be the most influential factors. The findings of this study have implications for L2 learners, helping them become more aware of cultural differences and thus apologizing more effectively.

Keywords: apology, apology strategies, apology factors, sitcom, language learning.

* Associate Professor at ELT Department, University of Mohaghegh Ardabili, Ardabil, Iran

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Email: reabdi@uma.ac.ir

1. Introduction

Individuals communicate with each other to achieve a certain number of functions among which developing and maintaining personal relationships or exchanging information are just a few to mention. In order for communication to be successful we need to take other people's feelings and emotions into account. This is where apology comes into play. Apology which belongs to expressive illocutionary speech act (Yule, 1996) is a clear indication of our concern for our addressees when we speak with them. It is the key to solve conversational conflicts and its main purpose is to maintain good relationships and harmony between participants. That's why we employ apology to compensate for whatever mischief that has been done. Holmes (1992) defines apology as a speech act used to restore social relations following an offence. According to Olshtain and Cohen (1983), individuals apologize to express their regret for a behavior that has violated some social norms. Fischerbacher and Utikal (2013) refer to apologies as remarkable in the sense that they are strong and at the same time cheap devices used by speakers in order to restore and enhance the social relationships that have been disturbed. In a more recent definition, Hatfield and Hahn (2011, p. 1306) in their study defined apology as following:

“Verbal or non-verbal behavior (1) occurring after and offense and either (2) involving at least one lexical item directly signaling apology or (3) expressing regret and responsibility even though lexical items associated with apology are not included.”

One of the factors that makes apology an important aspect of successful communication, as long as maintaining relationships is concerned, is its relation with politeness and face. Both apology and politeness are performed by speakers in order to mitigate the unpleasant effect of face-threatening acts as well as to show awareness of another person's face (Mills, 2003). Furthermore, apology as referred to by Coates and Cameron (1988), is directed to the addressee's negative face. It is a politeness strategy which has the effect of paying attention to the addressee's face by acknowledging a potential imposition.

In apologizing speakers apply a wide range of apology strategies. These strategies which could vary from one person to another are methods by which speakers perform the speech act of apology, helping them to successfully perform the apologizing acts and maintain the relationship between the apologizer and the offended person. Apart from apology strategies, there are different factors such as the severity of the

infraction or the context in which the offense occurs that cause speakers to select a particular type of apology strategy. These apology strategies and factors alongside with the types of offenses that trigger the use of apologies will be investigated in this study.

Due to the crucial importance that apologies have in communication, it is worth looking at them from a language learning perspective as well. It is believed that apologies are likely to be a difficult speech act for language learners (Kim, 2008). Unlike other aspects of language (other speech acts) which can be easily practiced by learning and using new words and expressions, apologies are demanding and challenging for L2 learners (Ellis, 2008). This is due to the fact that they involve feelings of humiliation and a need for compensations on the part of the speaker/language learner (Kim, 2008).

This study takes a corpus-based approach toward investigating apology. The corpus employed in this study is an English situation comedy. Situation Comedy (sitcom), as defined by Mechetti and Hudson (2014), refers to a specific genre of television programs with a plot and recurring characters that are involved in common situations such as a group of friends, a group of colleagues, a family, etc. It centers around humorous situations where characters develop tensions and try to resolve it during the half hour (Butsch, 2005). Lewis (1996) perceives the quantity and the quality of the input presented to learners as the most crucial element in language learning process. In line with this view and taking into consideration the studies (Csomay & Petrovic, 2012; Kaiser, 2011; Yuksel, 2009) that have investigated the effects of video and other audiovisual programs on language learning/teaching, it can be said that authentic audiovisual materials, in particular sitcoms, have the potential to be of considerable help and use in language learning situations.

Regarding the usefulness of sitcoms as authentic video materials, Mechetti and Hudson (2014) stated that sitcoms are a source of real life language, cultural information, and enjoyment, viewing them as means of bringing real world into the classroom. Sitcoms have also been said to provide L2 learners with an entertaining and relaxing learning atmosphere where they can learn not only new lexical items but also culture, body language, and other aspects of language learning experience (Chiu, 2006). With respect to the advantages that sitcoms can bring about for L2 learners as well as teachers, Mechetti and Hudson (2014) added that sitcoms provide learners with authentic and contextualized instances of language use, offering them the opportunity

to notice and acquire language. In addition, they assist teachers to contrive various tasks and activities and thus exploit that language from other perspectives.

By examining and analyzing apologies in the selected corpus, the current study attempts to call to attention the implications that they could have for language learning and teaching purposes.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Apology Taxonomies

A number of different taxonomies have been proposed for apologies in the literature. One of the earliest taxonomies is the one proposed by Olshtain and Cohen (1983) that divided apologies into two main categories according to whether the offender perceives the apology as necessary or not.

- The offender sees it necessary to apologize
- Expression of regret
- Explanation of the situation
- Acknowledgement of responsibility
- Offer of repair
- Promise of forbearance
- The offender does not see it necessary
- Denial of the need to apologize
- Denial of responsibility

The above taxonomy was later modified by Holmes (1990) who broke down apologies into four main categories as follows:

- Explicit expression of apology
- Offer of apology
- Expressing regret
- Requesting forgiveness
- Explanation
- Acknowledgement of responsibility
- Accepting blame
- Expressing self-deficiency
- Expressing lack of intention
- Offer of repair
- Promise of forbearance

Trosborg (1995) presented another taxonomy which is consisted of 4 categories and 16 subcategories:

- Evasive apologies
- Minimizing
- Blaming someone else
- Querying preconditions
- Indirect apologies
- Implicit acknowledgement
- Explicit acknowledgement
- Expression of lack of intention
- Expression of self-deficiency
- Expression of embarrassment
- Explicit acceptance of the blame
- Explanation
- Direct apologies
- Expression of regret
- Offer of apology
- Request for forgiveness
- Remedial support
- Expressing concern for the hearer
- Promise of forbearance
- Offer of repair

One point that should be borne in mind regarding these taxonomies and categorizations is that they are, as pointed out by Suszczynska (1999), culture-specific and cannot be applied to all cultures. It must be noted that due to its taking into account both explicit and implicit apologies, Trosborg's taxonomy (1995) was utilized in order to analyze apology expressions in this study.

2.2. Empirical Studies

In a study on the factors affecting the perception of apologies, Edmundson (1992) examined how native speakers of English judged apologies in terms of their appropriateness and acceptability. The results revealed that Sincerity and Length of the apology were the most important criteria in perceiving apologies as appropriate. In addition to these two factors, Butler (2001) found context to be crucially important in evaluating the appropriateness of apologies, suggesting that it is the context that determines the choice of a particular apology strategy.

Long (2010) studied apologies in Japanese gratitude situations and found regret and expectedness to be the factors influencing the use of

apology. He also concluded that apologies are called for when acts fall outside of the expected relationship between individuals.

Suszczynska (1999) compared apology expressions in English, Hungarian and Polish. The results showed that 'I'm sorry' was the overwhelming expression of apology in English while 'Don't be angry' and 'I apologize' were the most frequent ones among Hungarian and Polish speakers. It was also found that since distance is a valued socio-cultural norm in English community, English speakers mostly prefer a simple way of apology (Sorry) so as not to threaten the distance between individuals.

Shariati and Chamani (2010) carried out a study on the frequency and combination of apology strategies in Persian. Having collected and analyzed 500 cases of naturally occurring apology exchanges, they discovered that explicit expression of apology with a request for forgiveness (forgive me) was the most frequent apology strategy in Persian. Furthermore, acknowledgement of responsibility was found to be the most repeated mixture of apology strategies among Persian speakers.

More pertinent to the present study, are the studies which have used movies as their corpus in their analyzing apology exchanges (Anam, 2010; Nikmah, 2012; Sari, 2009). Sari (2009) conducted a socio-pragmatic study investigating the apologizing expressions on the basis of the types of apologies, the factors determining the choice of apology and the functions of apologizing acts in a movie entitled "Pretty Woman". The results of data collection showed that seven types of apology strategies were used in the movie among which expression of regret, offer of apology and request for forgiveness were the most recurring ones. In addition, with regards to factors determining the choice of apology the nature and the severity of the infraction were the most frequent factors.

In another study, Anam (2010) selected the movie "Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason" in order to analyze its apologizing acts. The transcribed utterances were analyzed and revealed that five of the seven types of apology strategies occurred in the movie. The occurring apology strategies were:

- 1) Type 01: There are elements of regret and promise not to repeat the offense.
- 2) Type 02: Contains a bit of regret and certainly lacks a promise not to repeat the offense.

- 3) Type 04: Implies neither regret nor promise. Similar with the second type but it is used in different situation.
- 4) Type 06: Does not imply any apologizing but it is rather such as verbal aggression.
- 5) Type 07: No regret or promise in which the speaker does not apologize but wants the hearer to repeat their message.

Using Olshtain and Cohen's taxonomy (1983), Nikmah (2012) analyzed apology expressions of the characters of the movie "Twilight". In the 22 cases of apologizing acts in the movie, characters made use of 3 strategies of Expression of regret, Offer of apology and Explanation. Regarding factors determining the selection of apology strategies, degree of the offense, context, social status and the relationship between characters were the most significant ones.

Given the introduction above, it can be said that apology as one of the most important speech acts has been widely investigated thus far. However, its potential for language teaching/learning purposes has not been touched upon adequately. Taking a corpus-based approach, this study examined apology expressions in an English sitcom and analyzed them in terms of the types of apology strategies used by the characters involved, the types of offenses triggering the use of apology strategies, and factors affecting the choice of apology strategies. Having done so, it sought to shed light on the implications of apologies for language teaching and language learning. The present study was set to answer the following questions:

- 1) What types of apology strategies are used by native speakers in the corpus?
- 2) What types of offenses do motivate the performance of apologies?
- 3) What factors do cause native English speakers to choose a particular type of apology strategy by native speakers in the corpus?
- 4) What types of apology mixtures are used by native speakers in the corpus?
- 5) What types of apology forms are used by native speakers in the corpus?

3. Method

3.1. *Corpus*

The corpus of this study was the American sitcom entitled “The Simpsons”. This popular sitcom was aired in 1989 for the first time. Since then, 25 seasons of this sitcom have been successfully produced and broadcast, amusing and entertaining millions of viewers throughout the world. The decision to choose The Simpsons as the corpus of this study was mainly due to its popularity and attractiveness. Another reason was the fact that it does not contain obscene images or profanities. This can make it easier and recommendable to use either in or outside the classroom. As pointed out by Mechetti and Hudson (2014), two characteristics of sitcoms, including simplicity and brevity, have rendered them user-friendly for language learners. To fulfill the goals of the current study, 8 seasons of The Simpsons (from season 9 to 16) were selected. These 8 seasons consisted of 178 episodes which had a total running time of 3916 minutes, with an average running time of 22 minutes for each episode. It needs to be mentioned that all the conversations containing apology exchanges were transcribed and were analyzed afterward.

3.2. *The Models*

First, in order to analyze apology expressions in the selected corpus, the taxonomy put forward by Trosborg (1995) were employed. In this taxonomy 16 types of apology strategies were specified as follows: 1) minimizing, 2) blaming someone else, 3) querying preconditions, 4) implicit/explicit acknowledgement, 5) expression of lack of intention, 6) expression of self-deficiency, 7) expression of embarrassment, 8) explicit acceptance of the blame, 9) explanation, 10) expression of regret, 11) offer of apology, 12) request for forgiveness, 13) remedial support, 14) expressing concern for the hearer, 15) promise of forbearance, and 16) offer of repair

Second, in analyzing the offenses that motivated the use of apologies the categories suggested by Holmes (1990) were utilized. These types of offenses include: 1) space offenses, 2) talk offenses, 3) time offenses, 4) possession offenses, 5) social gaffes, and 6) inconvenience offenses.

Third, in order to analyze the factors affecting the choice of apology strategies, Fraser’s theory (1981) was used. This theory mentions four factors that lead to choosing apology strategies namely as: 1) the nature of the infraction, 2) the severity of the infraction, 3) the

situation in which the infraction occurred, and 4) the familiarity between the interlocutors.

3.3. Data Analysis

After having determined the criteria for analyzing the apology expressions, we started to watch *The Simpsons*. Given that examining apology exchanges only through the related subtitles was difficult, we watched all the episodes with their English subtitles displayed on the bottom of the screen in order to examine the conversations more thoroughly. All the dialogs containing apology exchanges were transcribed and used for later analysis. Afterward, the transcribed apology exchanges were analyzed on the basis of the types of apology strategies, the types of offenses and finally the determinant factors in the selection of particular apology strategies via the taxonomies mentioned earlier.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

This study aimed to investigate the apology expressions used in an English sitcom namely *The Simpsons*, seeking to find out the types of apology strategies used by the characters and the factors that led them to select the apology strategies. Moreover, the types of offenses which motivated the choice of apology strategies as well as the apology forms were determined. It was believed that the findings of this study could have implications for language learning and teaching. In doing so, Trosborg's framework of apology strategies (1995), Fraser's model (1981), and Holmes' (1990) categories of offenses were utilized in order to analyze the apology expressions.

Based on the aforementioned models, 1126 conversations containing apology expression were found in the corpus. In other words, characters of the sitcom made use of 1126 apology strategies in their apologizing acts and 1126 factors determined their choice of these apology strategies. Out of the 16 types of apology strategies used in this study based on Trosborg's model (1995), 11 types were used by the characters of *The Simpsons*. These apology strategies were expression of self-deficiency, acknowledgement of responsibility, acceptance of the blame, expression of regret, explanation, expression of embarrassment, blaming someone else, request for forgiveness, promise of forbearance, offer of apology and finally expression of lack of intention. However, all

four factors determining the selection of apology strategies, according to Fraser's model (1981), were used by the characters. The determinant factors were the nature of the infraction, the severity of the infraction, the situation in which the infraction occurred, and the familiarity between the interlocutors.

Question 1: What types of apology strategies are used in the corpus?

Table 1 illustrates the frequency of the apology strategies used in the specified sitcom. As the table demonstrates, Expression of Regret was the most frequent apology strategy in the sitcom which has been used 351 times (31.17%) by the characters. Table 1 also shows that Acknowledgement of Responsibility with 184 times of occurrence (16.34%) and Explanation with 171 times of occurrence (15.18%) were the other most frequently used apology strategies in the corpus. According to the table, promise of forbearance with only 15 times of occurrence was the least frequent apology strategy. The following examples show how these apology strategies were employed by the characters of *The Simpsons*.

Table 1
The Frequency of Apology Strategies

<i>Apology strategies</i>	<i>NO</i>	<i>%</i>
Expression of regret	351	31.17
Acknowledgement	184	16.34
Explanation	171	15.18
Request for forgiveness	139	12.34
Offer of apology	70	6.21
Blaming someone else	58	5.15
Acceptance of the blame	40	3.55
Expression of lack of intention	39	3.46
Expression of self-deficiency	35	3.1
Expression of embarrassment	24	2.13
Promise of forbearance	15	1.33

Examples 1-3 (Expression of Regret)

Marge: Look, I knew private school would be expensive, but I was hoping we could get a scholarship of some sort.

Principal of a private school: Sorry. I don't have anything to offer you unless you're a member of a minority group.

Marge: Homer, I don't want you driving around in a car you built yourself.

Homer: Marge, you can stand there finding fault, or you can knit me some seat belts.

Marge: Sorry, sorry.

Marge: What I mean is, to me you're just a stranger pretending to be something he's not. Oh, I'm sorry, but that's just how I feel.

Examples 4-5 (Acknowledgement of Responsibility)

Seymour: I wrongfully usurped Sergeant Skinner's position and I suggest you consider him to replace me.

Marge: Please, Lisa. I don't know exactly what's gonna happen. But I really wish we could make peace before sunset.

Lisa: Nothing is going to happen, Mom! I hate to disappoint you, but the world is not coming to an end.

Examples 6-8 (Explanation)

Bart: Dad, I got some bad news.

Homer: Oh, your mother's not pregnant, is she?

Bart: No. I got hit by a couple of cars. I won't be able to play today.

Lisa: Milhouse, did you steal the food?

Milhouse: Nuh-uh. No way.

Lisa: Could anyone else have taken it?

Milhouse: Well, I guess you could have.

Lisa: Milhouse, I am defending you.

Milhouse: Oh. Sorry. I'm just saying, it was either you or the monster.

Agnes: I'm sorry, Seymour. It's nice you're alive, but you're just not what I'm looking for in a son. I'm glad you understand.

Example 9 (Request for forgiveness)

Marge: Excuse me, Mr. Szyslak. Have you ever considered selling your home?

Moe: What? No. Why? What? Why? What have you heard?

Examples 10-11 (Offer of apology)

Homer: Hello, Son. I want to apologize. I just got so caught up trying to encourage you I was blinded to your stinky performance.

Apu: Oh. I must apologize for the inconvenience, Marge. You are a real sport.

Example 12 (Blaming someone else)

Government guy: Mr. Simpson, this government computer can process over nine tax returns per day. Did you really think you could fool it?
Homer: No, sir. I'm really sorry, sir. An older boy told me to do it.

Example 13 (Acceptance of the blame)

Seymour: Don't judge her too harshly, Sergeant. She was a lonely old woman. If you must blame someone, blame me.

Examples 14-15 (Expression of lack of intention)

Marge: But it doesn't look safe. And the guy running it looks a little seedy. No offense.

Stranger: None taken.

Marge: So, Renee, it looks like you've taken quite a shine to Moe. Do you mind if I ask why?

Homer: Marge!

Marge: I didn't mean any disrespect. I just can't figure it out.

Examples 16 (Expression of self-deficiency)

Seymour's boss: Will someone remove that crazy man, please?

Seymour: No. No. He's not crazy. It's true. I'm... an impostor. That man is the real Seymour Skinner

Examples 17-18 (Promise of Forbearance)

Homer: If you forgive me, I promise I'll never encourage you again.

Lisa: I should have known I wasn't old enough to take the bus alone, but I really wanted to see that exhibit. I'll never take another stupid risk like that again.

Question 2: What types of offenses do motivate the performance of apologies?

Table 2 demonstrates the frequency of the different types of offenses in the corpus. It shows that inconvenience offenses with 344 times of occurrence and talk offenses with 260 times of occurrence were the most frequent types of offenses. To put it another way, nearly 65% of the apologies in the selected corpus were motivated by committing offenses related to inconvenience and talk.

Question 3: What factors do cause speakers to choose a particular type of apology strategy in the corpus?

Table 3 displays the frequency of the factors determining the choice of apology strategies by the characters of The Simpsons. As it is clear from

the table, 45% of the apology strategies have been influenced by the nature of the infraction, indicating that nearly half of the offenses were simple ones. Furthermore, severity of the infraction as the second most frequent factor was responsible for 22.91% of the apologies.

Table 2
The Frequency of the Types of Offenses

<i>Types of offenses</i>	<i>NO</i>	<i>%</i>
Inconvenience	344	30.55
Talk	260	23.09
Time	197	17.49
Possession	142	12.61
Space	98	8.70
Social gaffes	85	7.54

Table 3
The Frequency of Apology Factors

<i>Apology factors</i>	<i>NO</i>	<i>%</i>
Nature of the infraction	502	44.58
Severity of the infraction	258	22.91
Familiarity between the interlocutors	232	20.60
Situation	134	11.9

Question 4: What types of apology mixtures are used in the corpus?

From 1126 apology expressions examined in this study, 143 cases included a combination of two apology strategies. These mixtures of strategies are shown in Table 4. As the table represents, 7 different mixtures of apology strategies were used in the corpus among which Expression of Regret mixed with Explanation (72 times of occurrence) and Expression of Regret mixed with Acceptance of the Blame (18 times of occurrence) were the most frequent apology mixtures.

Table 4
The Frequency of Apology Mixtures

<i>Strategy mixtures</i>	<i>NO</i>	<i>%</i>
Expression of regret/Explanation	72	50.34
Expression of regret/ Acceptance of the blame	18	12.58
Explanation/Expression of self-deficiency	15	10.48
Expression of regret/Blaming someone else	14	9.79
Acknowledgement/Acceptance of the blame	11	7.69
Expressing concern/Explanation	8	5.59
Explanation/Promise of forbearance	5	3.49

Question 5: What types of apology forms are used in the corpus?

The following table illustrates the frequency of apology forms in the specified sitcom. Overall, 728 apology forms were found in the selected corpus. According to the Table 5, “Sorry” was the most repeated apology form in the corpus. Moreover, “My fault” and “I didn’t mean any disrespect/offense” as the table shows, were the least repeated apology forms in the corpus with only 17 and 14 times of occurrence respectively.

Table 5

The Frequency of Apology Forms

Apology forms	NO	%
I’m sorry	248	34.06
Sorry	191	26.32
Excuse me	159	21.48
I apologize	42	5.76
Sorry about sth	32	4.39
Forgive me	25	3.43
My fault!	17	2.33
I didn’t mean any disrespect/offense	14	1.92

4.2 Discussion

The first question of this study was ‘What types of apology strategies are used in the corpus?’ Based on the results of this study, Expression of regret was found to be the most frequent apology strategy in the corpus. The high frequency of this apology strategy in the corpus is assumed to relate to its usefulness and effectiveness and also the fact that it is less demanding for speakers (Holmes, 1990). It is more preferable because it provides offenders with the possibility of making things right and restoring the relationships that they have disturbed with the least cost possible (Nikmah, 2012). This was in line with Sari (2009) who reported that expression of regret was the most common strategy used in his corpus which was a movie entitled *Pretty Women*. Moreover, Nikmah (2012) in another study of analyzing apology in the *Twilight* movie found expression of regret and offer of apology as the most frequently used. It should be noted that expression of regret is a direct apology strategy in which the offender explicitly expresses that he or she is sorry for his or her misbehavior.

In addition, Acknowledgement of responsibility and Explanation were the other two frequent apology strategies in the corpus. These two

apology strategies are different from each other in the sense that in acknowledgement of responsibility the offender tries to compensate for what he has done by admitting and shouldering the responsibility of the offense committed, while in explanation strategy the apologizer strives to justify his action or misbehavior by presenting an explanation.

Moreover, Promise of forbearance was the least frequent apology strategy in the corpus. Vollmer and Olsthain (1989) also found the same strategy to be the least common among German speakers. They also discovered that acknowledgement of responsibility was the most common strategy. However, in their study of apology expressions in Persian, Shariati and Chamani (2010) came to this conclusion that request for forgiveness and expression of regret were the most and the least recurring apology strategies respectively. It is worth mentioning that promise of forbearance is a type of apology strategy in which the speaker, in addition to shouldering the responsibility for what misdeed he has committed, gives a promise of never committing that offense again. The reason for the scarcity of this strategy might be to its nature which requires two conditions: First, the offense committed must be of a serious one and second, the apologizer himself needs to come to this understanding that the severity of the offense makes promise of never doing it again the only and the most effective alternative to repair the damage and redeem himself.

Related to the second question of this study ‘What types of offenses do motivate the performance of apologies?’ inconvenience and talk offenses were reported to be the most recurring types of offenses in the corpus, taking up more than 50% of the entire offenses. Shariati and Chamani (2010) in their investigation of apologies in Persian also reported that inconvenience offenses were the most common types of offenses. The other types of offenses reported in their study were space offenses, possession offenses, talk offenses and finally time offenses.

The third question of this study was ‘What factors do cause speakers to choose a particular type of apology strategy in the corpus?’ The findings related the apology factors could explain why in 15.18% of the apologies (Table 1) characters involved in the sitcom have resorted to providing the offended person with an explanation in an attempt to compensate for what they have done wrong. The findings also imply that most of the apologies have taken place in informal occasions between the interlocutors that were familiar with each other.

The fourth question used in the current study was ‘What types of apology mixtures are used in the corpus?’ According to the results, seven types of apology mixtures and a total of 143 apology mixtures were found in the corpus. It is worth pointing out that in case of severe offenses speakers tend to resort to mixtures of two or more apology strategies in order to compensate for the damage in a more effective way. The choice of a complex form of strategy in apologizing is determined by the severity of the offense or infraction. The higher the seriousness of the offense committed, the more complex apology strategies will be used. Holmes (1990) in her investigation of apologies in New Zealand English found strategy combinations to be as equally important as single strategies. It is argued that the reason why sometimes speakers opt for mixed apologies is that they seem to be more polite than single apologies (Holmes, 1990). In other words, by choosing strategy combinations speakers demonstrate their concern and respect for their interlocutors in a more obvious and explicit way. Complex strategies reveal the speakers’ determinedness to apologize as well as a deep regret felt on their parts (Soesilowati, 2009).

The last question of this study was ‘What types of apology forms are used in the corpus?’ The findings indicated that four apology forms were used by the speakers in the corpus among which I’m sorry and Forgive me were the most frequent ones. In the previously conducted studies “I’m sorry” (Expression of regret) has been found to be the most common apology form in English (Holmes, 1990). In addition, Wouk (2006) and Shariati and Chamani (2010) found “Forgive me” (Request for forgiveness) to be the most frequent apology form among Indonesian and Persian speakers respectively.

As it is implied from the tables 1 and 5, the number of apology forms does not match with that of apology strategies. This mismatch results from the fact that speakers not necessarily use apology forms all the times. In some cases and depending on the type of offense committed, they might resort to explanation, or indirect ways of apologizing such as facial expressions, gestures and other forms of body language which can be as equally effective as the direct apologies.

Based on the findings of the current study two other points are in order. First, speakers of different languages employ various types of apology strategies and apology forms. These different preferences in the use of apology in different languages, as pointed out by Shariati and Chamani (2010), is due to the fact that different languages have various cultural norms and values influencing the way individuals behave. Some

of these apology strategies are unique to a particular language. A case in point is the use of expression of shame (*sharmandam* or *I'm ashamed*) as an apology strategy by Persian speakers which is not common among English speakers (Shariati & Chamani, 2010). Another unique type of apology strategy, as reported by Kotani (1999), is *feel-good* apology that is used in situations in which the speaker, despite being responsible for the offense committed, sympathizes with the offended person intending to make him feel better. Other studies also lent support to these cross-cultural differences in the realization and preference of apologies (Chamani & Zareipur, 2010; Hatfield & Hahn, 2011; Nonaka, 2000). Second, individuals employ high and low tones in their apologies. Whenever they feel that they have committed an offense unintentionally, they prefer to apologize with a high tone, while in other circumstances which involves feelings of guilt and regret an apology with a lower tone is preferable.

This study investigated apology speech act in an authentic sitcom which reflects the lives of English speakers in the best way. Given that apology is a difficult speech act to acquire for L2 learners (Kim, 2008) and the fact that using videos can be very worthwhile for language learning purposes (Harmer, 2001), paying attention to how native speakers apologize in their real life can be of considerable help and use for language learners and teachers. L2 learners can look at them as a useful input from which they can learn a great deal of words and expressions about how to apologize effectively in English. Furthermore, their performance of apology speech act is to some extent affected by their L1 (Ellis, 2008) in that they tend to apply their L1 apology strategies in their L2.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Having selected an English sitcom entitled as *The Simpsons* as the corpus, the present investigation aimed at examining apology expressions in an attempt to determine the apology strategies used by the characters, the factors leading to the choice of apology strategies and also the types of offenses triggering the apology strategies. Overall, 1126 apology exchanges were found and analyzed. The results showed that expression of regret and inconvenience offenses were the most frequent apology strategy and type of offense. Moreover, nature of the infraction was found to be the most common factor in the choice of apology strategies.

I'm sorry and excuse me were also found to be the most recurring apology forms.

It needs to be reminded that this study was limited to an American series. Another limitation of this study is the fact that more or less apology than normal by a person could backfire. That is, it may pose threats to face in another way and corpus studies cannot determine this. Since different languages have different preferences in their use of apology, future studies can work on other languages. It is also suggested that future studies focus on written corpus in order to examine and analyze how apologies are used in written language, e.g. in formal and informal letters, newspapers, etc. Furthermore, future studies can investigate apology both as an interpersonal and intrapersonal challenge.

The results of this study and other comparable ones which indicate a clear image of the most common and frequent types of apology expressions and apology forms, etc. in English, are likely to assist L2 learners to lower their L1 effect and apologize in a more English-like way. This is highly important especially in EFL contexts where learners do not have access to the native speakers. By seeing language as it is used in its real context, language learners become more aware of the cultural differences and thus apologize more effectively in the target language. In addition to the above points, it can be said that the variety of different contexts and situations involved in the sitcoms will benefit learners in recognizing how to apologize appropriately in different contexts and situations. Likewise language learners, language teachers can also profit from sitcoms by emphasizing the more frequent apology expressions and apology forms in their teaching. They can draw their students' attention to the cultural differences in apologizing and provide them with real instances of apology expressions from various series and sitcoms. In their teaching, it will worth their while to emphasize those apology strategies and expressions that are more frequently used among English speakers.

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